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Ranger 26

A swift, sweet, and well-mannered all-rounder

by Richard Smith

Dave Gow's Ranger 26, *Bandit*, was built in 1973 and he's owned her since 2006. Over the years, the boat's several skippers have won a lot of races and the plaques are there to prove it, proudly displayed on her main bulkhead. As well as keeping to an active racing schedule, Dave and his wife, Roberta, together with daughters Kathy and Becky, Becky's husband, Josh, and their two small children, take turns forming various crews to cruise Puget Sound and the island groups beyond.

Design

Gary Mull was an exceptionally prolific, able, and successful designer of outstanding sailboats, including the Santana 22, 27, and 37; the Ranger 22, 23, 26, 29, 32, 33; and the SORC-winning Ranger 37. Gary also designed the Newport 30 and 33; the Kalik 44; the Freedom Independence 28, 30, 36, 42, and 45; the successful Half Ton, *Hotflash*, and the 12 Meter, *USA*. He also designed several 6 Meter match racers, including *Ranger*, raced by Ted Turner. The list continued until Gary's death in 1994 at the age of 55. For an extended article on his life and legacy see "Gary Mull in Retrospect" in the November 2002 issue of *Good Old Boat*.

The Ranger 26 is sometimes confused with another boat of the same name. Our review boat, built in Costa Mesa, California, is sometimes called the California Ranger 26 to distinguish it from the Ray Richards-designed Kent Ranger, built in Kent, Washington. Ray Richards' boat is a more traditional design with a clipper bow and a very shippy sheer.

Gary Mull's Ranger 26 was conceived as the ideal compromise between racer and small family cruiser. Two long portlights along the cabin side light the saloon while a smaller port forward marks the location of the head and hanging locker; they are purposely placed and well proportioned. There is neither too much nor too little freeboard and the proportion of cabintop to foredeck and cockpit coamings seems right. There is nothing about the profile that seems forced or otherwise contrived to achieve headroom or a more modern appearance.

***Bandit*, a Ranger 26 owned by Dave Gow, shows off the pleasing proportions of her 40-year-old design.**

> **“The Ranger 26 is undeniably fast and looks it. In 1970, one of these boats won the North American IOR Half Ton Cup.”**

Whereas today underwater appendages are generally vertical, the thinking in the late 1960s and early ’70s was to rake them aft, as seen in the Ranger 26’s “swept back” keel and rudder. Looking at the Ranger 26 in profile, the canoe body is relatively shallow. The displacement/length ratio, at 254, and the sail area/displacement ratio, at 15.9, are moderate.

The Ranger 26 is undeniably fast and looks it. In 1970, one of these boats won the North American IOR Half Ton Cup.

Construction

Construction of the Ranger 26 employed technology common in the 1970s. The hull is hand-laid fiberglass with an inward-turning flange along the sheer. The solid edge of the balsa-cored deck laps the hull flange. Both are topped by an extruded aluminum toerail and mechanically fastened by bolts at 6-inch centers.

The Ranger 26 incorporates an interior fiberglass pan molding that simplifies the construction of furniture. Horizontal surfaces of the pan, such as the settee and forward-cabin berth supports, are reinforced with a plywood core. A padded-vinyl headliner covers the overhead and continues down to cover the cabin sides.

Deck hardware is fastened conspicuously through the headliner and finished off with washers and cap nuts that, however convenient, could result in some scraped heads. A larger concern is the suitability of the washers as backing plates. Dave lost the bow pulpit in a racing accident. The nuts and washers securing the bolts that held down the base fittings tore through the deck, indicating the need for better backing. He replaced the washers with stainless-steel backing plates. It’s good practice to reinforce through-bolted hardware with proper backing plates or larger diameter washers. (See “Better Backing Blocks” in the March 2010 issue.)

The 1-ton iron keel is bolted to the hull and requires periodic inspection and maintenance. Recently, all 10 of *Bandit*’s ½-inch galvanized bolts were found to be badly corroded and were replaced. At the same time, Dave had the keel sandblasted to bare metal. He filled pits and faired surfaces with an epoxy filler, painted it with coal-tar epoxy, and added a barrier coat before applying antifouling bottom paint. The hull is free of blisters.

On deck

Sidedecks on the Ranger 26 average about 12 inches wide and hardware such as chainplates, genoa tracks, and blocks can be obstacles to crew moving forward. Lifeline stanchions are angled outboard, which helps a little, and the aluminum toerail is an advantage in a seaway, but with a sea hood, raised forward hatch, and sundry other protuberances, the deck must be negotiated carefully to avoid tripping or rolling a foot over the various items of running rigging.

Dave stows the anchor in the forepeak with the anchor rode, which is led there through a hinged deck pipe. He carries the anchor on deck when cruising and plans to add a bow roller. A hatch is located just forward of the mast on the cabintop. The non-skid pattern molded into the deck is about average in effectiveness.

A close inspection of the deck moldings revealed a large amount of crazing in the gelcoat, especially at tight radiuses. These cracks are usually more of a cosmetic than structural problem and often result when the builder sprays the gelcoat too thickly. The small stress patterns arise as a result of expansion and contraction with temperature changes. Repairs can be made, but after almost 40 years of hard use, a good old boat is entitled to show a few wrinkles here and there.

The companionway has a low sill for easy ingress and egress, at left, but in rough conditions the bottom weather board should be locked in place. The red lines running along the cabin sides are part of Dave Gow’s boom vang/preventer system. The cockpit has high coamings for comfortable backrests, at right. Dave says the 8-hp outboard has always been more than adequate power, even against Puget Sound’s notorious currents.

The galley in the Ranger 26 is quite minimal. The small sink is hard against the aft bulkhead on the port side, at left, and the stove is opposite on the starboard side, at right. The starboard settee extends under the stove, and shelves above it provide storage for sundry items.

The cockpit

Seating along the full length of the large 7-foot 2-inch cockpit makes for smooth crew movement when tacking and jibing and a creates a spacious area for dockside socializing and comfortable cruising. The width between the benches seems about right for leg bracing when heeled, but the seats may feel a little low for long-legged crew. Rather than quarter berths, Gary Mull designed generous stowage areas under both cockpit seats. The starboard seat locker is large enough to fit an outboard and one or two 6-gallon gasoline cans. The port-side locker is identical, and the locker covers are secured by lines leading below and forward to jam cleats in the galley.

The outboard motor is mounted in a transom notch, and a low bulkhead forward of it helps keep the cockpit dry. The traveler is just forward of the engine where it's handy to the helmsman and the mainsheet is out of the way of the crew. A long tiller provides good leverage and helps locate crew weight forward and nearer the boat's center of gravity (weight in the ends of a boat induces hobby horsing). A compass, knotmeter, and depth sounder are located on the after bulkhead. Dave has a GPS chart plotter on a hinged mount in the galley (that he swings out for cockpit viewing) and an Autohelm tiller autopilot.

The rig

The Ranger 26 is a masthead sloop with an aluminum mast stepped on deck and supported by a headstay, a backstay (with a tensioning bridle), two upper shrouds, and four lowers. A topping lift supports the boom. In addition to the mainsail, *Bandit* sails with a 130 percent genoa on a Harken furler. Dave plans to replace the primary winches, currently two-speed Barient 21s, with Harken 32 self-tailing two-speed winches. The main and spinnaker halyards are handled by two Lewmar 6 winches.

Belowdecks

A small bulkhead with an opening separates the forepeak and its anchor rode from the forward cabin V-berth. The berth, which is 6 feet 6 inches long by 6 feet wide at the head (and narrow at the foot, as always with such berths), provides adequate room for a couple. Shelves run the full length along either side. There is considerable storage below the mattress supports and a convenient access drawer pulls out into the adjacent area to the rear

***Bandit*'s racing honors, garnered under several owners, adorn the main bulkhead, at left. Forward is the small head compartment and spacious (for this size boat) V-berth. The dinette in the saloon, at right, is well lit by the fixed ports in the cabin trunk and converts to a double berth.**

of the berths. This space also houses a portable toilet to port and a storage locker to starboard. A well-placed deck hatch provides light over the berth and the toilet area, and a door in the main bulkhead provides privacy.

Aft of the main bulkhead, on the port side, is a dinette that converts into a small double berth. Stowage areas are located below the benches and behind sliding doors outboard of the table. Opposite to starboard, a settee provides a berth (larger than a single but smaller than a double) with shelves along its length and good stowage below.

The boat has 5 feet of headroom throughout and a generous 3 feet 4 inches of headroom over the seats. The idea is to get below and sit down right away — trying to move around in most 26 footers is hard on the back.

Bulkheads are plywood finished with teak veneer and the trim is solid teak. The plywood sole lifts to reveal the keel bolts. The bilge under the cabin sole is too shallow for a bilge pump but Dave reports that the only water that gets below comes from the little spray she takes aboard when hard pressed — and perhaps a little condensation — which he takes care of with a sponge. A large diaphragm bilge pump removes water from the space below the cockpit.

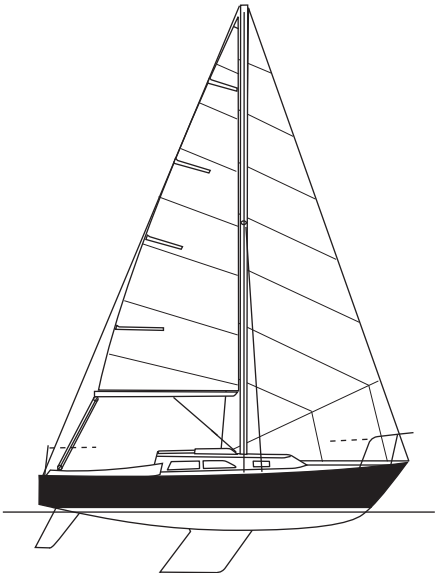
A two-burner Dickinson propane stove is located to starboard aft of the settee, with a VHF radio mounted directly overhead. A hinged counter, about the same size as the stove, can be used for additional space at mealtime. A sink and small counter are opposite to port with the swing-out GPS chart plotter above.

A low threshold separates the cockpit from the cabin, and a box, which also serves as an icebox and is conveniently located between the sink and stove, provides a step. Companionway dropboards are stowed on either side of this niche, held in place with bungee cords. A fire extinguisher is mounted in one corner. Forward of the step and just above floor level is an electrical panel on one side and the sink's foot pump on the other — it's a good place for the pump; for the electrical panel, not so much.

Accommodations in the Ranger 26 are minimal but well thought out and practical, with priority given to a crew lounging below with coffee and sandwiches rather than sitting down to formal meals. The galley is about as small as it could be but there is good specialized stowage. Additional stores may be kept in the copious cockpit lockers. Provisioning for three or four over a weekend or more may prove a challenge, but not beyond the means of a well-organized crew.

The engine

Dave says that in several years of racing and cruising in the tidal waters of the Pacific Northwest, with its narrow passages and swift-running currents, *Bandit*'s Yamaha 8-hp four-stroke outboard with 6-amp alternator is up to the task. Dave and Josh reckon they average about 5½ knots cruising while consuming a half gallon of gasoline per hour. Fuel is carried in two 6½-gallon tanks stowed in the starboard cockpit locker. It's a quiet engine, convenient to use and to remove for servicing. The throttle and gear shift are on the handle along with a power-tilt lever to get its 25-inch shaft down deep where the prop is less likely to be lifted out of the water by following seas.



Ranger 26

Designer: Gary Mull
Builder: Ranger Yachts
LOA: 26 feet 3 inches
LWL: 21 feet 9 inches
Beam: 8 feet 8 inches
Draft: 4 feet 4 inches
Displacement: 5,860 pounds
Ballast: 2,050 pounds
Sail area: 322 square feet
Disp./LWL ratio: 254
SA/disp. ratio: 15.9
Ballast/disp. ratio: .35

Under way

Dave started the engine before lifting and swinging the tiller 180 degrees. This reversed the rudder direction fore and aft, allowing precise maneuvering as we backed out of the slip. With the rudder back in its normal position, Josh hoisted the mainsail, shut down the engine, and we sailed away in 8 to 10 knots of wind into Puget Sound. *Bandit* handled very well under the main alone, pointing relatively high and moving in a lively manner.

When Becky rolled out the genoa, we heeled slightly and quickly picked up speed. The overriding sensation was one of a boat much heavier than 5,860 pounds but very responsive to the tiller. We made about 5 knots close-hauled in the light wind; a little faster when reaching. The Ranger was beautifully balanced with just a small amount of weather helm on various points of sail on the wind. She came about surely and settled nicely into the other tack.

Under the PHRF formula, the standard boat with spinnaker and 150 percent genoa is given 207 seconds per mile; *Bandit* sails with a spinnaker and 130 percent genoa and rates 213. The Southern California fleet races at 198. Other hot boats of that era, the Cal 25 and Pearson 26, rate 222 and 216 respectively.

Conclusion

The Ranger 26 is a well-built, stable, and forgiving boat that shows a good turn of speed when sailed well. After 38 years of hard use, including an enviable racing record, *Bandit* is as sound and agile as when she was new, attesting to continuous and careful maintenance by her several owners. All that and she's very pretty to look at too.

A check with Google shows several 1972 to 1976 Ranger 26s with asking prices from $3,000 to $5,800, which suggests that a boat as good as *Bandit* should be a very good buy indeed.

Richard Smith, a contributing editor with Good Old Boat, *is an architect. He specializes in designing and building very small houses and has built, restored, and maintained a wide variety of boats. These days, he and his wife, Beth, sail their Ericson Cruising 31,* Kuma, *on the reaches of Puget Sound.*