

SO, YOU WANT TO RACE SAILBOATS!

By Rutter

Racing sailboats is fun. It's physically and mentally challenging and has a strong social element. On any given race day there are boats needing crew, but if you're new you may not know where to start. The purpose of this article is to help newbies get started and stop being newbies. The more you know the more you can contribute. Developing skills can often lead to a permanent position on a boat.

How do you find a boat? Clubs organize events to introduce sailors and skippers, typically at the beginning of the season. Throughout the season a sign-up sheet may be kept at clubs' front desks. Walking the docks before a race (I've done this in a marina where I didn't know anyone) and attending after-race events to introduce yourself are also productive ways of getting aboard. Talk to the club's race organizers, let them know you want to crew.

What should an enthusiastic crewperson bring? You *can* get aboard in street clothes not knowing a thing about a sailing. A better way is to be prepared with gear and knowledge.

GEAR

The right gear says you know what you're doing. Gear starts simple and gets expensive. Skippers appreciate people who pack lightly but bring the right stuff. "Right" depends on where you are. A typical day in Seattle is far different from a day in San Diego, so look at the weather forecast to get a sense of how much weather protection you'll need. Basics include

- Non-skid, non-marking (like basketball or tennis, NOT running) shoes that give you grip on a wet deck and won't leave marks (skippers HATE that)
- A jacket that repels water and wind
- Sun hat (baseball will do), sunscreen and lip balm
- Shorts or pants that dry quickly (Warning: Once cotton clothing gets wet, it stays wet)
- Sailing gloves: There are a lot of lines to handle; if you're going to participate you'll be hauling lines (never call them "ropes"!). Protect your hands with sailing gloves, available for about \$20 at a sailing supply store – lines can chafe and burn your hands with surprising rapidity, and there's plenty of hardware to bang into.
- A small, waterproof bag (like a gym bag) to carry it all.

If the day looks windy or wet add "foulies" (foul weather gear: wind- and waterproof pants and jacket), boots and your own personal flotation device/harness (PFD). You might borrow foulies if you need them occasionally, and the boat is required to carry personal floatation (which are usually bulky, damp and smelly from storage) for every crewmember. Be warned, buying gear is pricy. The right gear pays you back, however, in comfort and safety.

KNOWLEDGE

There are thousands of books and articles that provide details on every aspect of sailing . The more you know about how a boat works the more valuable you are to a skipper and crew. To get going, start with the basics:

- Terminology Sailing has a language all its own. Learn what the key parts of the boat are called, and some of the verbs associated with sailing (e.g. “tack”, “gybe”). There are many books and websites that will walk you through a boat’s actions and rigging.
- Sail Trim There are a lot of sources that explain why sails work and how to adjust them. In the beginning, you’ll spend a number of races watching guys twiddle and tweak various lines, squint up at the sail, grimace, fiddle some more, never satisfied with the result. Conditions at sea are constantly changing, thus the constant twiddling. Learn what the adjusting lines (sheets, guys, backstay, halyards, etc.) do, then you, too, can look up, squint and grimace.
- Sailing Instructions What will the race entail? The Sailing Instructions (called “S.I.’s”) provide instruction to all competitors about procedure, marks, special rules, etc. of a race from pre-start to finish. They’re posted by the Race Committee before the race, often also online. This info is *absolutely necessary* aboard every race boat, but you’d be surprised how many seasoned skippers and tacticians forget to read them. Knowing them, and having a copy in your pocket, can make you a hero. Get a local course chart, too (see *Marks and Flags*, below).
- Weather Forecasts are available from NOAA, Weather.com and smaller, more specific sources (e.g. sailflow.com, weather GRIBS). Know what you’re sailing into, but DO NOT be a know-it-all just because you looked at the weather. Local weather is a beast all its own, and even sailors with many years’ experience in the area can be fooled. Winning sailors can predict what others can’t. Learn to see changes in wind velocity and direction; this is a tricky skill, but read and ask the good sailors about how to do it.
- Rules Rules are the laws of racing, and they can be as complicated as the law in a courtroom. They take time to really understand, but there are some basics that always apply and everyone should know (Racing Rules 1-20 are a good start). Take the time to learn them; again, knowledge can make you a hero. Try *Understanding the Racing Rules of Sailing* by Dave Perry for a clear, enjoyable explanation of them.
- Marks and Flags The club sponsoring the race publishes a list (often online) of the marks it uses for racing, their location and bearing from the typical starting line. Get a copy and keep it in your pocket. Your skipper and tactician will, on occasion, thank you (especially when their GPS goes out). Also, learn the flags. There’s a flag for each letter of the alphabet, and some of these have an additional meaning in racing. There are also flags for the numbers 0 through 9 (if you really want to be fancy, learn the repeater sequence, too).
- Tactics This is usually the province of the Brain Trust (skipper and tactician) in the back of the boat and also takes a while to master. So, start now. Again, there are many introductory books and articles on tactics. Knowing tactics will help you understand why a particular maneuver is happening.

- Knots Knots refer to both speed and ways to secure a line. Concentrating on tying a line, the most basic knot, the “must know” knot, is a bowline (pronounced “bo’-lyn”). There are others, like the bird’s head, reef and anchor, but learn the bowline. It’s most useful (on and off a boat) and most-used.

Once you’re basically conversant in terminology, trim, tactics, weather, SI’s, rules, marks and flags, and knots you immediately graduate from “rail meat” to “Dynamic Righting-moment Specialist”!

One last thing: Be responsible. If you’re offered a crew spot, be on time early to the boat. Watch how it’s rigged out, and ask questions. During the race, stay focused; don’t be a distraction (chattering about current events or other non-race related things). Avoid horseplay (or other unsafe activity) and alcohol on the boat. Stick around after the race to help put the boat away and clean up; it’s appreciated, and you’ll learn stuff from post-race discussions. Support the club by attending the after-race activities.

Have fun and go fast!

RESOURCES

Terminology

- <http://comminfo.rutgers.edu/~elfox/terms.html>
- Colgate’s *Basic Sailing*
- Bookstores and West Marine have sailing instruction sections; thumb through a few copies, see what works for you

Sail Trim

- *The Art and Science of Sails: A Guide to Modern Materials, Construction, Aerodynamics, Upkeep, and Use* by Tom Whidden
- Again, browse bookstores of Amazon.com for ones that make sense to you
- Also read magazines like SAIL and review sailmakers’ websites like www.ukhalsey.com/

Weather

- www.sailflow.com
- nws.noaa.gov
- marinaaquaticcenter.org has a weather station (with cam) on the MdR main channel.
- Ask local sailors for their favorites

Rules

- *The Racing Rules of Sailing: Includes US Sailing Prescriptions* by U. S. Sailing Association. These are the official rules. Also contains flags and their meanings for regattas.
- *Understanding the Racing Rules of Sailing 2009-2012* by Dave Perry and Brad Dellenbaugh

Tactics

- *Sailing Smart: Winning Techniques, Tactics, And Strategies* by Buddy Melges
- *Championship Tactics: How Anyone Can Sail Faster, Smarter, and Win Races* by Gary L. Jobson, Tom Whidden, Adam Loory and Bill King
- *Gary Jobson's Championship Sailing : The Definitive Guide for Skippers, Tacticians, and Crew* by Gary Jobson