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Get Learning

Before you start to race you'll need to know the basics. **Rupert Holmes** looks at your options for learning and building up time on the water.



Dinghy sailing

The RYA National Sailing Scheme is a series of two-day sessions for those wanting to learn dinghy, multihull or small keelboat sailing. It's designed to help participants enjoy whichever aspect of the sport appeals most, with the two-day format of each element making it relatively easy to fit into even the busiest of schedules. Alternatively, several elements can be combined to create a longer intensive programme, or each one can be spread out over a series of summer evenings.

Levels 1 is an introduction to the sport covering the minimum knowledge needed to get afloat under supervision, while Level 2 covers the basic skills that form the grounding of becoming a competent sailor in light winds.

The courses may be taught in a variety of boats – some are larger crewed dinghies in which three or four students will sail with an instructor in the boat, while others are smaller dinghies that you sail on your own. The latter may at first sound daunting, but it's actually relatively easy to gain the fundamentals of controlling a boat in this fashion, and you get to spend longer actually on the helm. You will also tend to be closer to the water, will be likely to sail faster and will be more liable to get wet – but that's no problem if you're wearing the appropriate gear – and it can certainly add to the adrenaline factor.

Young people under the age of 16 normally start learning through the RYA's Youth Sailing Scheme. This has four stages, with the first two being roughly equivalent to Level 1 of the adult scheme. Youth Stage 3 corresponds to Level 2, while Youth Stage 4 is an additional course to give those who have trained in singlehanded boats the opportunity to sail a crewed dinghy.

After completing Level 2 (or Stage 4 for those on the Youth Sailing Scheme), there are five further options. Sailing with Spinnakers introduces how to rig the boat, gybe and recover either a conventional or asymmetric spinnaker (two courses are therefore needed to cover both types). Start Racing is an introduction to club racing, covering starting procedures and the essentials for getting around the course, including an introduction to the racing rules of sailing. Performance Sailing provides coaching to improve your handling and confidence in planing dinghies – and is an obvious help to those who intend to race.

The two remaining options may be less appealing to those who primarily intend to race, but they nonetheless will help to increase your skills base, especially if you sail on the sea. Seamanship Skills covers boat handling and solving problems afloat, enabling you to build your skills so that you can sail independently, while Day Sailing looks at planning and decision making for small boat cruising.

Keelboats and multihulls

If getting wet doesn't appeal and you'd prefer your time to be spent exclusively on the water, rather than occasionally in it, learning in a keelboat is worth serious consideration. These are larger than dinghies, and have a weighted keel for stability and resistance to capsize, but are lighter and

The Royal Yachting Association, the UK's national governing body for all forms of recreational and competitive boating, has a comprehensive training scheme covering most aspects of the sport. To appreciate the scale of this operation bear in mind the fact that close to 200,000 people complete an RYA training course at one of over 2,200 affiliated training centres each year. These RYA-recognised teaching establishments include dedicated sailing schools and yacht charter operators, sailing clubs, and holiday companies. Although most of the centres are in the UK, it's becoming increasingly popular to take a sailing course while on holiday abroad and RYA courses can be undertaken in 20 countries around the world.

Readers in Ireland should look to the Irish Sailing Association, which co-ordinates a similar training scheme to that run by the RYA.

easier to handle than yachts. There are plenty of opportunities for racing keelboats on many larger lakes and reservoirs, as well as around the coast, with popular classes including Squibs, Flying 15s, X One-Designs and Laser SB3s.

The National Sailing Scheme may be taken in a keelboat, with the same elements as for dinghy sailors. The same applies for those wanting to try the faster-paced action of multihull sailing,

although fewer establishments offer this option, so many people start with the basic levels of dinghy sailing courses, before transferring to multihull courses.

Yacht options

There is a very comprehensive RYA training scheme for cruising under sail, starting with a two-day basic introduction course, and leading ultimately to the internationally recognised Yachtmaster (Offshore), which is awarded following a minimum of 2,500 miles of offshore experience and an 8-11 hour examination at sea. However, there is no parallel scheme for those who want to race yachts. Keelboat sailing experience can be a good initial move for those whose ultimate aim is to race larger boats – most people will gain a feel for the boat and the wind more quickly if they're learning in a smaller boat. In addition, as keelboats are sailed by a smaller crew than all but the smallest of yachts, you'll be much more involved in the action.

Racing opportunities onboard yachts sailing in both inshore and offshore events are offered by a number of sea schools to those of all abilities and sailing experience. For instance Southampton-based Sailing Logic offers an Introduction to Racing course over two weekends, which is a perfect springboard for those with no previous racing experience. The company has developed its own structured set of courses for those who want to pursue their big boat racing to intermediate and advanced levels. Like many others, the company also offers combined training and racing weekends. During the Raymarine Warsash Spring Series (March 16 - April 27, 2008), for instance, you can book either the whole series, with race training on the Saturday and racing on the Sunday, or just book by the weekend. Warsash-based Five Star Sailing will tailor programmes to suit each individual, with elements of both practical tuition afloat and classroom instruction. They suggest Competent Crew or equivalent sailing experience as a minimum before starting race training.

A good self-made programme that would give a solid springboard might be to do some keelboat training relatively local to where you live, followed by a Competent Crew course on a racing-oriented yacht (most are taught on cruising designs, which offer a more comfortable experience – you'll be living on board – but the sail-handling systems are likely to be very simplified compared to those of a raceboat). After this, an introduction to racing course will get you well on the route to being a useful crew member on a raceboat and being able to build successfully on your existing knowledge as you gain additional experience.

Other routes in

In the past sailing with friends was the route through which most people were introduced to sailing. It has a number of obvious advantages: it's sociable, you get free instruction, don't need to buy a boat and may well find you're helping out someone who finds it hard to attract the crew they need to race their boat. However, if you don't

The RYA National Sailing Scheme

LEVEL 1
Start Sailing: getting afloat
An introduction to the sport, covering the minimum knowledge required to get afloat under supervision.

LEVEL 2
basic skills:
The foundations of the sport, becoming a competent sailor to light winds.

Level 2 and Stage 3 are at approximately the same standard.

Completion of Level 2 or Stage 3 is the basis from which to develop your sailing. Choose from the courses below.

The RYA Youth Sailing Scheme

STAGE 1
A basic understanding of how a boat sails, with some experience of steering and handling the boat.

STAGE 2
Develop a range of sailing skills and background knowledge and so on – on the way to being a competent and confident sailor.

STAGE 3
Big and blasty! Your boat will be able to sail in any direction. The course is equivalent to Level 2 of the National Sailing Scheme.

STAGE 4
Over the water and a workable boat is sailed. You'll be able to sail in any direction. The course is equivalent to Level 2 of the National Sailing Scheme.

- SEAMANSHIP SKILLS: sail independently**
How to handle the boat in all circumstances and solve problems afloat.
- DAY SAILING: go cruising**
Passage planning and decision making for afloat boat sailing.
- SAILING WITH SPINNAKERS: kites course**
Everything you need to know to sail modern three sailboats.
- START RACING: go club racing**
The best how to starting club racing. All you need to know to get round the course.
- PERFORMANCE SAILING: get coached and sail better**
Improve your boat handling and navigation in performance mode.



PHOTO PAUL WYETH

RYA Practical and Shorebased Navigation and Seamanship Courses

Course									
Suggested minimum pre-course experience	None	None	None	Some practical experience desirable	5 days sea time 100 miles 4 night hours	5 days sea time 100 miles 4 night hours	Day Skipper Shorebased course	15 days sea time (2 days as skipper) 300 miles 8 night hours	Coastal & offshore sailing
Assumed knowledge	None	None	None	None	Navigation to Day Skipper Shorebased and basic sailing ability	Navigation to Day Skipper Shorebased and basic sailing ability	Navigation to Day Skipper Shorebased standard	Navigation to Coastal Skipper Shorebased standard. Sailing to Day Skipper Practical standard	Navigation to Coastal Skipper & Yachtmaster Offshore Shorebased standard
Course content	Introduction to sailing and seamanship	Introduces navigation and safety	Basic seamanship & helmsmanship navigation & meteorology	Basic seamanship & introduction to seamanship & navigation	Basic pilotage, boat handling, watch organisation	Navigation, seamanship & meteorology	Offshore & coastal navigation, pilotage coastal & offshore passages	Skippering techniques for & passage planning	Astro-navigation, ocean meteorology
Ability after course	Basic sailing experience	Basic knowledge of navigation and safety	Useful crew member	Background knowledge to skipper a small yacht in familiar waters by day	Skipper a small yacht in familiar waters by day	Take charge of a watch on a sail training vessel	Background knowledge to skipper a yacht on coastal passages by day & night	Skipper a yacht on coastal passages by day & night	Background knowledge to skipper a yacht on ocean passages
Minimum duration	2 days	16 hours	5 days	40 hours plus exam time	5 days	5 days	40 hours plus exam time	5 days	40 hours plus exam time
Course completion certificate									

RYA one day shorebased courses: VHF radio operation, First Aid (both required for a RYA/MCA Yachtmaster qualification), Radar, Sea Survival and Diesel Engine Maintenance.

* Syllabus is the same for sailing and motor cruising yachtmen

† Different courses for tidal and non-tidal waters

have friends who do the kind of sailing you'd like to try, then clearly this route is not available. In any case, you will almost certainly want to take some basic tuition so that you can be a useful crewmember from the outset.

Joining a club is a very good way to get experience and if your plan is to race dinghies, then it will be essential to do so. Many clubs also run RYA courses, and are often able to offer them at a lower price than commercial establishments.

It's important to realise that sailing clubs aren't generic institutions – they all offer very different experiences. It's therefore important to choose your club carefully – visit as many as you can in your area and assess what they offer to newcomers to the sport.

One aspect that's common to most clubs is that they have helms who are regularly short of crew, so if you have the basic sailing skills under your belt there's no need to buy a boat before you, or your children, start racing. This is a good reason why learning to sail a dinghy at a club maximises the likelihood that you'll continue to sail after completing the course – there's normally a clear and easy progression to club racing.

Learning to sail in the sun is now one of the most popular ways into sailing, and it's easy to see the appeal. But be aware that relatively few people who are introduced to sailing in this way continue with the sport when they return home, so make sure you don't neglect to check out the opportunities near home for racing and further tuition after your holiday.

Get OnBoard

OB (OnBoard) is developed by the RYA as a funky new programme to help introduce young people to sailing and windsurfing, whatever their needs and ability. Over the next 10 years, the scheme will work with clubs throughout the UK to get half a million people into these sports. See www.ruob.co.uk

Route to the top

Whatever aspect of racing you choose, the best way to get to the top is to give yourself as broad and diverse experience as possible, sailing in a variety of places, in different boats and with a range of different people. This will also make it easier when you come to want to change classes. And do as much sailing as possible – practice is enormously valuable – which won't be a hardship if you get smitten by the sailing bug!

As a teenager I was given a piece of advice by John Chittenden, who later skippered the winner of the first BT Global Challenge race, that has stood me in very good stead over the years: 'A good sailor is one who looks back at what they've just done and asks: "How could I have done that better?"' This works on all levels, whether you're a complete novice, or a seasoned professional sailor with a string of medals. To me it also sums up one of the most fascinating aspects of the sport – while it's possible to participate fully with relatively little experience, there are always new things that can be learnt and different approaches to problems with which to experiment, no matter how successful you are. ■

Above You can learn to sail on a yacht with no prior experience, following the RYA's pathway of courses.

Far left Whether you learn at a school, sailing club or on holiday, the RYA dinghy levels scheme gives a logical path of progression.

Further information:

www.rya.org.uk
www.sailing.ie