



newtosailing



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Go Cat sailing

Catamaran sailors may be relatively small in number, but have huge enthusiasm for their branch of the sport, thanks to breath-taking speed, an amazing selection of events and an enviable spirit of camaraderie.

Rupert Holmes looks at how to get started in multihulls...

Many of the principles for learning to race dinghies are also relevant to multihull racing, although there are some important differences largely due to the greater speed potential of multihulls and their different handling characteristics.

Almost all small racing multihulls are catamarans, although if you're sailing offshore you'll find many trimarans in the fleet as well.

There are two key reasons behind the high

speed potential of multihulls. Firstly, before a conventional boat can get on the plane and start moving at speed it must overcome a speed-limiting 'hump', as it breaks away from the stern wave that's created at displacement speeds. A disproportionate amount of power, that's not directly translated to speed, is needed to overcome this hump.

By contrast, the narrow hulls of a catamaran have no such limitation, so acceleration is more dramatic. In addition, the width of the boat helps create a high degree of stability, which enables a more powerful rig to be carried, especially if the crew are also trapezing. Added to these factors, if the boat is heeled just enough to lift one hull clear of the water, drag is reduced to a minimum.

The additional power means a higher degree of skill is required to sail many multihulls, compared to most monohull dinghies, in addition to the specialist knowledge that is also needed due to their different handling characteristics. It's probably fair to say that most multihull sailors probably learnt the basics in dinghies first, before transferring to catamarans. However, that's not always the case – one friend learnt to sail as crew in a Dart 18, and afterwards always found dinghy

sailing tame compared to blasting at double-digit speeds in a cat. She won the Dart 15 nationals within three years of starting to sail, showing that learning in dinghies first is not necessarily a better route, even if it is a popular one.

Even if you haven't considered becoming a multihull sailor, remember that one of the things that will get you ahead in any racing discipline is to sail as wide a variety of boats as possible. So even if you book a multihull course just for the experience it will be worthwhile. And you never know, you might get hooked! Anyone doubting the benefit of such a varied experience should consider Rob Greenhalgh, currently International 14 national champion and winner of this year's Bloody Mary, who also sails Extreme 40 catamarans, America's Cup yachts and Volvo 70s. Granted, you might not be able to get your varied experience on such a grand scale, but the principle holds good for everyone at all levels of the sport.

Learning in multihulls

The RYA's National Sailing Scheme includes those wanting to sail multihulls, whether you want to start out in cats from the outset, or are an existing dinghy sailor looking to move into multihull racing. Fewer clubs sail multihulls, especially inland, as their high speed and lack of manoeuvrability require a relatively large expanse of water. This also has an impact on training – although all the courses in the RYA's National Sailing Scheme can be taken in multihulls, fewer training centres are able to offer this.

Essential initial skills include all of those required for starting to race dinghies – tacking, gybing, sailing a triangular course, launching and recovering – and the fundamentals of the Racing Rules of Sailing. This level of proficiency can be achieved by completing Level 2 of the National Sailing Scheme, plus the Start Racing course – a total of just three weekends of tuition.

Capsize recovery technique needs to be adapted



PHOTO STEVE BELL

“Due to their high speed, multihulls require a relatively large expanse of water”

Above The Dart 18 and other established designs are fast single-trapeze boats that are tremendous fun, but easier to sail than more powerful models.

from the one you'd learn in dinghies, and needs to be done relatively quickly to prevent the boat inverting. Smaller boats can be righted from inverted reasonably easily by a competent crew, however, larger catamarans, where your crew weight is smaller relative to the size of the boat, can be more difficult. If the boat does invert, it's also important to be sure you don't become trapped underwater beneath the trampoline.

From the outset you'll need an appreciation of the different handling characteristics of a multihull compared to a monohull dinghy. Catamarans have excellent directional stability – in a sense they will run in a straight line on their two narrow hulls as if on rails. This is great for sailing in a straight line, but can cause problems when it comes to turning corners.

Tacking is much harder than for a monohull dinghy and much slower – a huge amount of ground is lost in each tack. This contrasts sharply with monohull dinghies that will exit a tack faster than entering it if expertly sailed, due to crew using their weight to roll it. As a newcomer, you may even find that your multihull starts to be blown backwards during a tack, and you need to steer the opposite way to complete the turn.

A multihull is also not as easy to manoeuvre as a dinghy, in expert hands an onlooker might be hard pressed to notice this. However, a skilled helm will be aware that, for instance, the optimum line that needs to be taken in mark roundings changes in a cat. It's also important to take account of a multihull's very rapid acceleration, especially when bearing away onto a reach in

Right There's nothing to match the thrill of high adrenaline, high performance multihulls.



PHOTO TOM GRUITY/RYA



PHOTO JEREMY EVANS

Above Hobies are the world's most popular cats – the vast range includes beach cats that are designed with high stability and ease of sailing as key priorities, making them ideal for beginners.

close-quarters situations. You'll probably start trapezing, and possibly even twin trapezing at an earlier stage, although the boat is also a more stable platform on which to practice.

You will rarely sail a catamaran directly downwind as doing so reduces the apparent wind so there's insufficient power to fulfill the boat's speed potential. Instead, a series of broad reaches (with the true wind up to roughly 45 degrees off directly astern) will enable a faster speed to be achieved and more than make up for the extra distance sailed. The crew therefore needs to work out downwind gybing angles, which are more important the faster the boat is. Even on a reach, the apparent wind will be further forward than with most monohull dinghies, simply as a result of the additional boat speed.

The next stage

Having gained the initial skills required for multihull sailing, the next stage is to consolidate them, initially with the aim of improving your boat handling techniques and building wind awareness. At the same time you'll also want to extend your appreciation and understanding of rules and

tactics, gradually implementing your additional knowledge as you build your skill level. This can be done through a combination of on the water practical experience, background reading and further training or coaching.

Once you start taking part in long-distance events, some appreciation of navigation, tides and weather forecasting, as well as seamanship and self-reliance at sea, also become important.

Being able to identify the most efficient route up the windward leg is just as important as with a monohull class, but you'll interpret it differently – in particular you'll want to minimise the number of tacks, as so much ground is lost each time. Again, this is a skill that takes time to build, so don't worry if it appears to be black magic at first. Start by observing which side of the beat the leaders choose; if you can't identify why they've made a certain decision, ask a few of them after the race.

In most fleets people are very happy to share their knowledge and this tends to be particularly true of multihull sailors. Asking questions about all elements of racing, whether tactics, rules, boat handling or tuning, is one of the best ways to improve your skills and a constant feed of constructive input can make a huge difference over the course of a single season.

Having made progress with mastering the basics after maybe a season's experience, it's worth attending courses such as the RYA Performance Sailing. After that, look for coaching offered by your club or class, which can be very valuable. In any case, you can mix racing with your own training sessions in which you repeatedly practice manoeuvres, with the aim of perfecting them. If your club doesn't offer coaching, it's well worth considering getting a number of like-minded members together to organise a coach to visit you – this can be enormously beneficial, yet the cost spread between a few people is really quite modest. ■

Further information:

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