



Get Faster

In the latest of our series for novice sailors, **Rupert Holmes** reveals how to improve your skills on the racecourse.

Sailing is definitely one of those activities in which the more effort you put in the more you get out of it – some newcomers to the sport achieve very impressive championship results in their first few seasons.

If you're hooked on the competitive aspect of dinghy racing, you'll want to follow a structured path to improve your skills in as shorter time frame as possible. There's also a tremendous feel-good factor in learning a new skill and doing it well – and learning to race a dinghy is one in which it's easy to measure your progress. But be warned: it can be very addictive!

Essential skills

There are a few key sailing skills you'll initially need to attain before you start racing. You'll need to be able to tack, gybe and sail a triangular course with reasonable efficiency in favourable weather. In addition, you'll need to be able to launch and recover from the shore and know what to do in the event of a capsize.

A basic understanding of the fundamentals of the Racing Rules of Sailing, as well as the start procedures and sailing instructions for racing at your club, are obviously also important, as is knowledge of weather forecasting for watersports. If you're sailing on the sea or an estuary, you'll also need a basic understanding of the local tides.

You can probably get to this level with just three weekends of tuition, the first two for Levels 1 and 2 of the RYA National Sailing Scheme, and the third for the RYA Start Racing course.

This will be enough to launch your hobby, and you'll be able to take part in club racing, although you can't expect to reach the front of the fleet just yet. You may even find that you only complete two laps of the course in the time that the leaders complete three, but don't be disheartened – remember at this stage you're on a fast learning curve and will soon be catching up with the fleet.

Building on the basics

The following are crucial areas which you'll want to work on to propel yourself up the learning curve. By paying attention to each of these it won't be long before you're catching up with those at the back of the pack. Enlist your fellow



PHOTOS ALAN HENDERSON/FOTOBOTAT

Left Club racing is a fantastic way of improving your skills – don't worry about your results in each race, just pick one or two boats near you to race against, then work your way up the fleet over the season!

competitors to help build your skills by bombarding them with questions – this is a very effective way to learn and most sailors are more than happy to share their knowledge.

■ **Wind awareness:** Pay as much attention as possible to the changes in wind strength that can be seen on the water – gusts show as darker patches, while lighter areas indicate a lull. This knowledge helps you to become more in tune with the boat – you'll have advance warning of when you'll need to move your weight, or hike harder to keep the boat flat. A change in wind strength is almost always accompanied by a change in direction, so if you're sailing the windward leg of the course you'll need to adjust your course to suit the new wind direction and in any case you will need to re-trim the sails.

It takes time to develop a high level of wind awareness, so don't worry about nailing it straight off – just start by making sure that it's always uppermost in your mind and be content to slowly build your feel and appreciation of what's going on. In particular, don't make the all-too-common mistake of assuming the wind's still coming from exactly the same direction that it was five or 10 minutes ago.

■ **Windward leg tactics and laylines:** Windshifts are one of the key determinants of the best time to tack when sailing the windward leg – it pays to tack when you are headed away from the windward mark. Also try to establish whether one side of the course appears to be faster than the other. Watching boats ahead can be helpful in working this out – look for which side of the course the leaders took.

An obvious, yet important, point is not to sail too far on the windward leg – judging exactly the right place to tack to make the windward mark is difficult from a distance – so sail a progressively shorter distance on each tack until you reach the mark.

■ **Boatspeed:** It's all very well to point the boat in

the right direction, but if your boatspeed is poor, you'll still trail at the back of the fleet. A common mistake many club racers who are starting out make is to believe that investing in new sails and other kit is the most effective way to improve boatspeed. Granted, these are important elements, but the first investment to make almost always needs to be in your own skills.

Sail trim is perhaps the single most important issue. Learn to use the telltales to indicate the air flow over the sails, then learn about twist and draught (fullness) and how the outhaul, cunningham/halyard tension, and vang can be used to depower and power up the rig. Read all the technique features in *Yachts and Yachting*, plus anything else you can get your hands on!

Correct rig tuning is vital to boatspeed and many sailmakers and classes provide 'standard' tuning guides. You'll need to use one of these, possibly with input from other club members, to make sure your boat is properly sorted in this respect.

■ **And more...** On the water, keeping the boat trimmed correctly fore and aft, and properly balanced, makes a huge contribution to boat speed, yet the number of relatively experienced sailors that fail to pay sufficient attention to this is amazing. The golden rule is to keep the boat flat at all times – heeling may create a sensation of speed, but ALL dinghies are slow when leaning over. The only exception to this is in very light airs (see our 'Troubleshooting' feature on page 18). If the wind is almost imperceptible, heeling the boat away from the wind helps the sails to fill – their own weight helps them to take up the correct shape – and at the same time less of the hull is immersed in the water, so drag is reduced.

Other aspects of boat handling to start working on at this stage are tacking and mark roundings. With tacking, start by making sure you're turning the boat through approximately the correct angle for each tack, so that you always exit the tack at an optimum wind angle. Note that it's very common for newcomers to turn much too far,

Right Keep consolidating your learning by taking the next course for your level, or attending a class coaching session.



PHOTO RICHARD LANGDON/OCEAN IMAGES

which is exceedingly slow.

Mark rounding may sound like a small factor, but neat boat handling will always gain ground at a mark, and with some club races involving up to a dozen marks, there's a lot of scope to gain ground in this area. The key is to approach wide, which enables you to exit the mark close to. This prevents others getting inside you and shortens your windward leg by perhaps half a length, which may just be enough to get an inside overlap at the next mark. At the same time, you can start to build your understanding of the rules and tactics, gradually implementing your additional knowledge as you build your skill level.

If you're sailing a two-handed dinghy it will also be important to work on communication and division of tasks between the crew – it's often more effective for the crew to make the bulk of the tactical decisions, which leaves the helm able to focus as fully as possible on trimming the mainsail and steering the boat fast.

The next stage

One of the challenges of learning a new skill is to keep moving up the learning curve – many people get stuck at a particular level from which they don't progress. Once you've consolidated your initial experience – perhaps after a dozen days' racing – it's worth doing some more training to give you the next jump ahead.

If your class sails with a spinnaker, the RYA Sailing with Spinnakers two-day course will prove very beneficial. There are two versions of this course, one for asymmetric spinnakers, the other for conventional symmetric sails – make sure you book the appropriate one for your boat! Another course that's worthwhile is Performance Sailing, which will help you improve boat handling and sail trim.

This is also time to pay more attention to starting.

It's also no accident that those who are good at starting tend to get excellent results – if they're clear of the fleet on the first beat they'll be sailing in clean air when everyone else is in the disturbed flow off other boats' sails, so if you're always playing catch-up you'll never get to the front.

Mark rounding becomes more complex as you move up the fleet and find that there are more occasions on which you reach the mark simultaneously with other boats. However, if you develop a clear understanding of the appropriate rules, and the boat-handling skills to match, a good mark rounding can gain you several places.

A winning mindset

A few people are natural sailors and will always do relatively well with the minimum of preparation and effort. However, most of us need to develop a structured approach to learning right from the outset. Continually developing your skills will avoid the trap of getting stuck at a particular level that many sailors fall into – it's possible for newcomers to overtake many of these in a relatively short time span.

Review each race to identify what you did well and what you could have improved on – it's hard to over-emphasise how important this process is! Even if you don't write a formal training plan, have clear and achievable targets of what to improve and how to do so. You will also need to regularly review progress and revise your targets as they are achieved. Writing a journal of lessons you learnt during each day's sailing will help consolidate those points, as well as helping to identify priorities for improving.

What next?

Another important challenge is to extend the range of wind strengths in which you're comfortable to sail. This can't be done in one jump – if you try going out in 25 knots when you've previously not sailed in more than 12-15 you'll simply fall over. But if you become accustomed to planing under full control in 16-18 knots, you can then tackle progressively more and more, remembering to source heavy weather tips from books, this magazine or other sailors.

Allied to this is improving your technique at righting from capsize – in particular to dodge the slow RYA method by climbing over the side of the boat and sliding onto the centreplate. It's crucial to be quick, otherwise you'll pull the boat right over until it's totally inverted (hence the RYA method minimises the risk of this).

To progress your skills at the maximum rate, you'll need to do a mix of racing and training in which you repeatedly practice manoeuvres, with the aim of improving and perfecting them. For some of this you can set your own goals, but further coaching throughout your sailing career will help you head towards the top of the field, so look out for events run by your class, club or elsewhere.

A breadth of knowledge is also important, so look out for opportunities to sail different boats, with different people and in different places. Equally, the other RYA National Sailing Scheme courses, Seamanship Skills and Day Cruising, will add to your pool of knowledge and experience. ■

Further information:

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