

Teamwork Wins Races!

by Nancy Gilreath

The following was reprinted from the District 4 Newsletter.

This is an article about crewing, but you won't find any discussion of what lines to pull or where to sit in the boat. Instead, this is an article about an element of crewing that, in my opinion, is equally important as the physical aspect. The skipper-crew relationship is a delicate one. As in any relationship, each party must learn to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of the other in order to work together effectively. Unfortunately, in the world of Snipe sailing, it is the crew who does most of the accommodating. Some of the first things a crew must assess when sailing with a skipper are:

1. What are my jobs on the boat (i.e. who controls the cunningham, outhaul and jib halyard)?
2. What kind of information does the skipper want to hear? To be a good crew, you need to spend as much time on item 2 as on item 1.

Types of Skippers

Skippers come in all types. In my experience, they can be divided into three groups in so far as the information they want to hear from the crew.

The Strong Silent Type: These skippers can be great sailors, but often they have done most of their sailing in a Laser or a Finn. The ideal crew for them is like the ideal piece of equipment - it works, it's quiet, and you don't need to worry much about it. When you sail with this type, you are expected to be the well oiled machine - silent and efficient. When you open your mouth to warn of an impending collision, you are likely to be met with a stare. "I know, I see it," they'll insist in an exasperated manner as they sharply veer off 90 degrees missing disaster by inches. Your best bet with these skippers is to be economical with your words. They do not want tactical advice, and any excess chatter is likely to disturb them. You may feel as though you are not contributing, but by accommodating them in this way, you are helping them sail at their best.

White Noise: These are the skippers who, when they come home, reach for the remote before the light switch. They can not hear silence; it makes them nervous. These skippers expect their crew to keep up a constant flow of information. They want the location and angle of every boat, puff and wave on the course. Throw in some comments about relative boat speed and a few reassurances about the decisions they are making and they are in heaven. Whatever you do, don't stop talking! When you do, they'll complain "What's happening, why aren't you telling me anything?!" I've gone so far as to say "Nothing is happening. No one is moving. No puffs, no boats. Nothing." Sometimes you'll be tempted to find out if these skippers actually listen to what you say. If you instead fill them in on last night's party will they notice? The answer, surprisingly, is yes. Keep up the talk, but limit it to relevant information on the course. One of the most important lessons I have learned is that you don't need to interpret the information to provide it. Even if you have no idea what is going on, you are still a useful conduit, because you may see things that a skipper does not.

Eyes in the Back of the Head: Most skippers fall into this category. Sailing with one of these skippers requires you to be a mindreader and to have eyes in the back of your head. They want some information, and expect you automatically to know what they want and when. These are the skippers who want you to keep

your eyes glued to the jib telltales during a close reach and at the same time you are expected to call the puffs over their shoulders. The same skippers who says, "Why aren't you telling me about the puffs," will 30 seconds later say, "I see the puffs, look at the jib!" You can not win with these skippers. This is a situation that calls for crew restraint. The easiest thing to do would be to let go of the jib completely and circulate papers to have your skipper committed. Instead, I've found that these situations are best addressed on shore or while practicing. For example, when the crew is trimming the jib by hand on a close reach, it is critical that the crew focuses on the telltales, because the jib is driving the boat. Thus, you should have discussed in advance that the skipper will have primary responsibility for looking around in these situations. Similarly, in mark rounding situations, the skipper is likely to be screaming at you to douse the pole lower the centerboard, put on the outhaul and cunningham, hike and tighten the jib halyard simultaneously. If you have already discussed the order in which those tasks should be accomplished, you will maintain a cool head and not be confused by your skippers ranting.

Being the Sane One: We all get frustrated while sailing. No one gives the skipper exclusive rights to get mad and to scream, pound the deck and stomp around. Unfortunately, this activity is rarely productive. It often takes Herculean efforts on the part of the crew to restore focus. You walk a fine line between being a Pollyanna ("Don't worry, we'll catch them," you say as the centerboard drops from your turtled boat) and exacerbating the problem ("Was that ever a bonehead move on your part.") As a crew you do not have the luxury of expressing your frustrations. In most situations, if you can restore your skipper's focus, you can come back from mistakes. If you have a bad mark rounding try to focus your skippers attention forward - i.e. by calling the next puff- so that he stops dwelling on what has already occurred.

Sailing Etiquette: Hopefully, you and your skipper will still be on speaking terms once ashore. This requires respect on both sides. Face it, every one makes mistakes. For every time that you launch the pole into the forestay the skipper drops the tiller or T-bones a boat while dipping. You need to work through these things as a team. How many times have you finished a bad tack where you end up on your butt on the wrong side of the boat with your foot wrapped in the jib sheet only the hear, "Do you think you could roll a little next time, please?" As if you thought making tourniquets out of the jib sheets in midtack was fast. True sailing etiquette requires much more. For starters, learn the lesson of "WE." You and the skipper are a team, and what happens on the water should stay there. The two of you should share both the glory and the mistakes as a united front. I am grateful for the skippers who announce to the outside world, "We had a bad race," when I know my knot in the pole launcher line was responsible, I try to remember to be an equal partner in the skippers mistakes too. It's not always easy, but your sailing relationship will flourish if you work as a team. No matter the level of sailing skill, the skipper-crew relationship is one that deserves more attention. Neither one of you can wins Snipe race alone, and from my observation, teamwork wins races.

Nancy is a well-seasoned crew, having sailed Snipes since 1987. She sailed collegiately for Brown University was Henry Filter's regular crew for 3 years and has recently qualified for the Western Hemisphere Championships crewing for Steve Burke.

[Return to Snipe home page](#)

[Alex Pline](mailto:pline@en.com) (pline@en.com)

[Steve Keckler](mailto:skeckler@ai.mit.edu) (skeckler@ai.mit.edu)