

20 Long Copse Lane
Emsworth
Hampshire
PO10 7UL
01243 379 444
07967 701 281



Youth and Junior Sailing

How things have changed! As a junior I was taught to sail and to race by being pushed off from the bank in my Cadet and told to get on with it! I remember drifting around for a while and having to paddle back for lunch. Amazingly, looking back, we went out again and completed two races in the afternoon.

To be fair I had crewed for my dad a few times but that was the way of it: you learned by doing it yourself and if you were in a family that talked about sailing you were really lucky. Crewing for a good helm was another way of developing your sailing and racing skills and Cadet sailors, in particular, took on the littlies as crews who would then form the next group of helms.

It took me years to work out the thousands of simple bits of knowledge and experience that allowed me to fulfil my potential as a racer. It is so different now. Youngsters are getting that knowledge and honing their skills, against others of similar ability, in months. It really is unfair but us oldies are going to have to watch out! This new generation of sailors are being well coached and their dedication to achieving success is awesome. Dinghy sailing has never looked healthier.

To take the Topper Class as an example. There is 'beginner-racer' training (called Open Training) in all regions of the Topper Class Association being organised by area reps plus a week of sea training each year at Bradwell. There are 8 RYA Zone Talent Squads of about 12 sailors, the RYA National Junior Squad of 25 a Junior Development Squad of 20 and a Class Association Youth Squad of 50. A total of about 200 sailors under professional training and that's without counting those being nurtured at Champion Clubs who are bringing on huge numbers under all this lot. Emsworth Slipper, for instance, just one club on the South coast, has 175 youngsters under tuition in Optimists and Toppers!



Multiply all this by the number of other recognised Youth and Junior Classes and the picture becomes even clearer. Coaching is the way to go. Most of my generation were self taught and learned through years and years of mistakes. Our children are receiving our collective knowledge in an incredibly short time.

Other sports had coaches; it's our turn now. Professional coaches have been teaching golfers to hit a little ball with a long stick for years. How much more complicated and dangerous is sailing? (I can hear the golfers putting pen to paper even as I tap the keys!)

The remarkable thing about sailing is that it is not rocket science. The superstars are not super-human. With lots of determination, a reasonable amount of talent, lots of practice and some time with a coach, anyone can achieve success. I have seen competent sailors turn into a good racers in a couple of weekends. Three years in the RYA Junior and Youth Scheme is allowing them to fulfil their potential years earlier than their parents did.



Even better than that, these youngsters are appreciating the recognition the scheme brings them. They enjoy the physical and mental challenge of sailing and the social scene is pretty good too (not to mention that they can pose around in their Squad Jackets!). Above all they are having fun – the most important factor if we want them to continue in this great sport of ours.

I heard a telling quote recently. We were discussing concentration and one of the National Squad said, "I would happily work up to 10 (pm) on the theory behind sailing because I want to learn it". This, after a full day on the water. As it is the Topper National Squad work until 8.30pm on theory.

Are we in danger of making this sport of ours really popular or what!

So how do you get on into the system?

It is important to start by mentioning the Royal Yachting Association who governs the sport of sailing in this country.

LEARNING TO SAIL

If you have never sailed before then a week at a Sailing School is a great place to start. They will teach you the basics, in a controlled environment, and start you on the Royal Yachting Association Training Scheme. Alternatively join one of the thousands of Sailing Clubs in the country and get stuck in. Clubs with good training and coaching schemes are now recognised by achieving 'Volvo Champion Club' status and are an especially good bet for juniors.

The RYA will let you have a list of approved Sailing Schools if you approach them. They have developed sail training and race training schemes for both juniors and adults that are used at these schools and by Sailing Clubs throughout the country.

These schemes provide an appropriate syllabus as well as certificates for successful participants.



LEARNING TO RACE

Once you can sail get involved in racing at a sailing club and in the Open Meetings run by the Class Associations. You do not have to be a good sailor to join in. You will be made to feel welcome, just ask for advice. Then find out about the RYA Junior and Youth Scheme, which, in its present form, has only been around for four or five years.

In the 1996 Olympics sailing achieved more medals per competitor than any other sport in the country and this brought in a good amount of money from Sport England. The RYA channels some of this money into the top sailors and the organisation around them and the outstanding success of British sailing in the 2000 Olympics is one of the results. The rest of the grant has been put to developing racing at junior and youth level and getting into one of the 'Squads' is the way to go if you want to move up the ladder.

The RYA support five junior dinghy classes (up to age 15 or 16):

- Optimist, Laser 4.7 and Topper single handed boats
- Mirror and Cadet two handed boats

And four Youth dinghy classes (up to 18 years old)

- Laser Radial and Laser Standard single handed boats
- 420 and 29er two handed boats

Sailing other classes may be fun, as well, but most serious young sailors now choose one of the above to suit their size and interests.

The RYA runs Squads of sailors for each class.

Each Junior class has:

- A Zone Talent Squad (up to age 14 or 15) in each English RYA Zone plus one each from Scotland and Wales.
- A National Junior Squad (up to age 15 or 16) (The Topper Class has had squaddies from as far away as The Scottish Highlands and Guernsey!)

Each Youth Class has:

- A Transitional Squad for those moving from a Junior to a Youth Class.
- A National Youth Squad



The RYA produces a useful booklet on how to get into squads and which class would suit you. They will happily send you a copy or look on the website. All sailing clubs are issued with the booklets as well.

It is important that you join the Class Association for your chosen boat. These organisations often run regionally based training for those aiming to move from sailor to racer. You should also join the RYA. Briefly the important thing is to attend the squad selection events for your chosen class and to get noticed, either through results, or by showing potential. Put in an application form and look forward to a winter of intensive training!

Amongst the highlights of the year there are three big RYA Junior and Youth events. The Zone Championships in September are used for Zone squad selection, the Eric Twiname in June pits the best Zone Squaddies from around the UK against each other and the Youth Championships at Easter are used for Youth Squad selection. The numbers of sailors attending these events is tremendous which is testament, in itself, to the success of the scheme and the wealth of junior and youth sailing talent in this country.

Once you are in the scheme the fun really begins! Be prepared to travel! As a parent of a National Squaddie I reckon it cost me £1500 in accommodation, coaching fees and travel in a year and this does not start to address the time involved or the cost of equipment. Weekends are spent 'on the road' either at training or race events so the commitment of parents is a crucial factor. Fortunately the first steps, into the Zone Talent Squads, are not such a commitment because they are locally based and not residential. As they move into the National Junior Squads sharing the load between two or three families is an excellent way to go.

So why do so many parents put up with this? Partly, I guess, because you get sucked in slowly. Mostly though, even if we grumble occasionally, because we enjoy ourselves and when you see what the youngsters get out of it, you have no doubts. Your son or daughter's inner confidence will begin to shine through: no amount of money or time could count against that. Everyone makes new friends and you can stand back and watch your sons and daughters tremendous progress. I do however recommend leaving the binoculars at home to lessen the stress level of all those involved! I often say to squad parents that it's the bigger picture that counts; a poor result at one event let alone a missed windshift in one race is unimportant – so why

get stressed about it? Over the course of a year you will be amazed at the improvement they make, both in skill level and in results. Remember that sailing is a sport that lasts a lifetime, they don't need to be 'Ben Ainsley or Ellen MaCarthur overnight. As long as they are having fun they will come back for more.



Dave Cockerill