



# Skip Novak

Skip pitches into the Great Lifejacket Debate with his own views on when to don a personal flotation device

**H**aving felt I should be keeping my head down about the topic of lifejackets, I was pleased to see readers' letters in the October issue defending the use in this magazine of pictures showing people not wearing one. Never one to avoid sticking my neck out, I might as well have my say on this one.

I first realised there was something amiss when, several years ago on a visit to the Hamble River during a dead calm weekend afternoon, I noticed that every-one on every craft (and they were not racing) was wearing a lifejacket. I took note of this revelation and

when an old boy and a local river rat rowed a dinghy up to the jetty, I struck up a conversation and asked if lifejackets were now legally mandatory here. "No," said the old boy, hanging his head down sadly, "but that's the way it's gone."

Let me make it clear that if duty of care – eg, sailing schools, organised programmes, class rules – stipulate that lifejackets are required as soon as you hit the water, I have no argument.

It is rather on a purely personal level that it is cause for concern when I get the impression that various authorities and pundits are advocating – no, almost demanding – that we all wear personal flotation devices (PFDs) on every floating object known to man.

Well, how do we surf? How do we swim? Does this mean after swimming out to a raft on a lake or off a beach we have to don a PFD to 'be safe'? In short, how do we have a bit of fun on the water, unencumbered? Sailing in the raw, a very pleasurable experience – with a PFD on?

What I am driving at here is what I perceive as a move to instil a fear of the ocean in people, and a sense of reliance on one's own abilities is the collateral

damage. In my not-so-humble opinion it is all about judgement about when safety equipment is required – and we are on the verge of losing this ability to judge.

Not only individuals are being brainwashed, but I also think some skippers can be at fault for making the use of PFDs or lifejackets a given in various benign situations. If they can't judge the times when it is safe enough to be on deck without a PFD they are not doing their job in an educational sense. I mean, to see a crew motoring out into the Solent on a hot dead calm day, all clad in PFDs and harnesses, seems strange and unnatural, let alone uncomfortable!

To put this way of thinking into a bold perspective I will use my own examples. Even in the Antarctic with water at 0°C, I don't require nor encourage people to wear a lifejacket on deck in settled weather nor in the inflatable when going ashore. I don't expect them to suddenly fall over backwards, or throw themselves into the sea without notice – this just does not happen. If it gets tricky, though, lifejackets go on – harnesses more to the point than lifejackets on deck – and maybe survival suits for rough beach landings in the dinghy. It's a judgement call.

My kids sail Optimist dinghies in a sailing school and, of course, PFDs are required by the organisation. Fine. We also bomb around on my Laser in our own time. If the wind is light neither I nor the kids wear PFDs. As the wind comes up, they put one on, but not me. When it really blows, I put mine on. I do this on principle to make very sure they do not get the idea that it is impossible to be on the water without flotation protection.

This is a commonsense approach, but has serious implications if we get it wrong. Why? When the day comes when some bloke in the harbour urgently asks one of my kids to give him a hand with that boat that just broke free from its mooring ("Jump in, kid, I need help!") – and my kid says: "Sorry mister, I'm not allowed to be on the water without my lifejacket." Well, there could be nothing sadder than that.

OK, dear readers, bring it on!

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