



Skip Novak

'The feel' is what separates a good sailor from a so-so one, and you'll never get it unless you've had a good soaking in a tippy dinghy

I started my sailing career as a freshwater pirate in Belmont Harbor in Chicago. As part of the junior programme at the Chicago Yacht Club we started in Lehman 10 dinghies, round-bottomed with little form stability. Some of these were patched up with glass-fibre over many years and I suspect they must have been double the weight of others. The set-up was simple: mainsail, mainsheet and rudder. They were two-man boats, but the crew only provided ballast, sliding port to starboard on the thwart.

The winds in Chicago were never constant, either whistling through the high-rise apartment buildings in a westerly or rebounding off same in an easterly, veering or backing by several points of the compass in an instant. In the blink of an eye you went from a calm to fighting to stay upright.

Given the boats and the conditions, capsizes were common. This certainly sharpened your skills, if not your wits and sense of survival, especially when 'frostbiting' in the autumn and spring. Adults as well as juniors sailed on Sundays until the ice formed near the end of November and we started again on the break-up in March. It was a lot of laughs, thrills and spills.

Looking back on it now, it was that training that set me up with the ability to sail competently on just about any floating object big or small. Over a lifetime these have included a variety of dinghies, windsurfers, Great Lakes racer-cruisers, premier ocean racers including Whitbread maxis, ice boats, Thames Barges, dhows, maxi-multihulls and a few superyachts thrown in. It is all the same in a way, if you have 'the feel' – inculcated long ago by the fear of getting a good soaking.

Acquiring 'the feel' is difficult – near-impossible,

I would say, while learning to sail on the proliferation of instructional programmes for adults based on mid-size racers and cruisers, which certainly includes the corporate entertainment phenomenon that hit the Solent some years ago.

These programmes, along with the events, are desirable to get people on the water, of course, but the dinghy stage for aspiring adults has been grossly neglected in what should ideally be a natural progression of learning to sail.

Start small and go bigger seems so obvious. I understand, though, that being repeatedly thrown out of a Laser can be less than glamorous while you get the hang of it. The ultimate risk is no fun and may turn your thoughts back to the golf course.

What I am talking about is learning to sail by 'cook book' methods, which are the default in mid-life when most people require some scale and comfort. Boat handling under sail and power is another example that is difficult to master on a full-blown yacht, if you have never mucked around on small craft. It all boils down to 'the feel'.

No matter what size of craft, the seasoned sailor will instinctively shift his weight to windward, be alert to easing the mainsheet or traveller and just as instantly snap back into the former aspect when the wind subsides. You can recognise the lack of feel in someone at once when the wind strengthens, as often it will produce little reaction. Sailing continually overpowered is also a classic indicator of someone with a lack of feel, which in extreme case leads to control issues (wipe-outs) and possible damage.

However, it is never too late! To address this fundamental aspect of learning to sail in the truest sense of the word, we should encourage sail training organisations to run parallel programmes on 'tippy' dinghies for debutante sailors to realise the importance of coordinating the fundamentals of wind direction/strength, helming and body weight.

It will make them much better sailors for every kind of craft going forward.

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