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There is no activity more varied, with more opportunities to inspire young people to a lifetime's interest, than sailing



t times it seems the debate regarding keeping young people involved in sailing as a lifetime activity goes on ad nauseam. But it is certainly well warranted.

Unless you suffer from severe, life-threatening hydrophobia, it is hard to imagine not taking on board some form of watersports under sail, whether racing or cruising, from babe in arms to the end game.

When I have time to peruse the sailing web forums, which is not that often, I am always amazed at the diversity of competitive yacht racing genres, as well as what

goes on in the cruising world. It is enough to make your head spin how much is out there.

Let's start at the bottom of the scale. We have youth racing starting in the controversial Optimist class, often described as the solution or the problem of lifestyle continuity in sailing. Then regard the various dinghy classes worldwide – does anyone know how many? Take a guess and probably double or treble it.

Now, go collegiate racing, Olympic campaigns male and female, skiff sailing, scow sailing, windsurfing and kiteboarding, club racing in one-design keelboats and racer-cruisers, match racing, premier offshore events – Fastnet, Sydney Hobart, Transatlantic, Transpac to name a few.

There are the elite classes such as TP52s, Melges 32s and Class 40s. You can race single-handed, double-handed, go fully crewed inshore, offshore and round the world (sometimes in the 'wrong' direction) on either multihull or monohull.

Traditional yachts are further divided into original restorations and those classed by age or compromised by the addition of modern materials. Even Thames Barges go racing. Superyacht regattas continue to proliferate

on both sides of the Atlantic. What about sailing record attempts? There are aplenty: 24 hours, transatlantic, Jules Verne and clipper ship routes. Swan regattas, Dubois regattas, Southern Wind regattas and Oyster round the world rallies exist for a rarefied social experience. And let's not forget Tall Ships rallies.

Stadium exhibition racing like the Extreme Sailing Series provides a spectacle for a live audience. Did I mention ice yachting for when the water goes hard? And arguably the pinnacles of the game: offshore the Volvo Ocean Race and inshore the America's Cup. And it is predicted we will be foiling on all things eventually. There is something for everyone either to participate in, aspire to, follow, or dream about.

So back to the life's activity argument, or let's call it a lifestyle. Then compare sailing to other sports that can also be considered a lifestyle activity for some and a burning, all-consuming passion for others. Tennis? Same court with a few variations of surface, same ball, same racquet, same game. Golf, OK, changes of courses, but same game. Equestrian sports? Variations exist, but horses all have four legs last time I looked. Ditto cycling with two wheels. As far as I know, these and especially the ball sports have had almost no or only incremental changes over the years

Dare I say it, motorsport might come close; boats of all kinds, cars (karting to Formula 1), motorbikes – track and motocross, jet skis, monster trucks, snow mobiles... Before I am hoist by my own petard, I better stop there and just say for now motorsports are way back in second place in range and diversity.

When I started sailing over half a century ago (yep, that's right!) most of these boats and events didn't exist. I have been lucky to have participated in many platforms as things evolved and I enjoyed them all.

Conclusion: when it comes to being on the water on anything that floats and is propelled by the wind, there is no parallel. Advice to keep young people interested: beware of a single approach and expose them to what is now an inexhaustible raft of choices.

Surely they will find one they like.

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