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Up, Down. Basic Spinnaker Launching

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This article will detail a basic launching, jibe, and take down. It's written for a skipper and crew that have not launched their spinnaker, or if they have, have not systematized the launching so that it is automatic. It also includes charts for both the skipper and crew to help each.

As was true in the last article, this is designed for the beginner. It's a basic approach that will work. As you and your skipper/crew develop more skills, you will personalize your approach and learn some of the details that separate the good sailors from the great. But this fundamental approach will get you started.

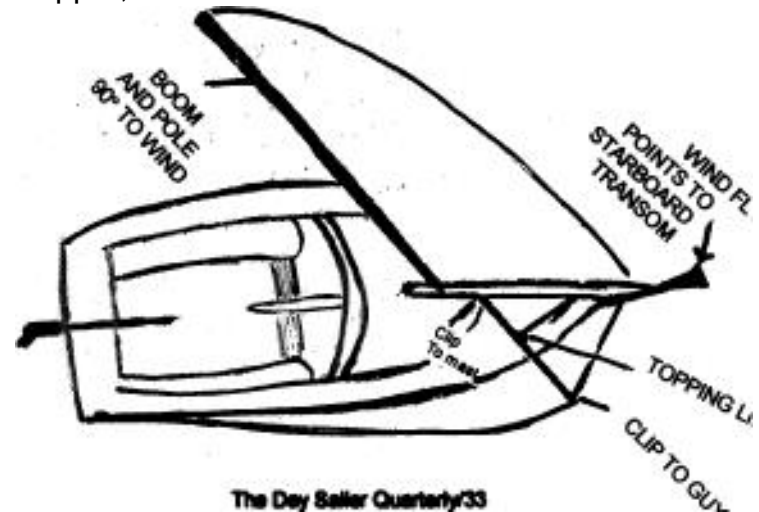
Prelaunch practice.

Jim Skeen and I taught a class in Eugene Yacht Club's "Sail School" and we taught spinnaker launching using Day Sailers. We first practiced the steps on land, using a trailered boat turned with the bow pointed down wind. I recommend this. In fact, completing the maneuvers several times on land is very beneficial. You can work out things (rigging, movement, coordination) that are difficult to fix on the water. Be careful though. Don't practice in strong wind! Watch the spinnaker to make sure it's not getting snagged on any pieces of metal of the trailer or other objects around the boat. When you feel you have the launching, jibing and dousing down pretty well, launch the boat. Practice a number of times in non-racing situations before you attempt to fly the spinnaker in a race.

Step 1. To Fly or not to fly and setting the pole.

Skipper. Give the crew a break. Don't fly the chute in marginal conditions and don't be indecisive. At the beginning stage, you want to build a series of successful launchings. If you have rounded the weather mark, are in reasonably clear air, and the wind is less than 10, consider a launching. Next, look at your wind fly at the top of the mast. The wind should be blowing over your right shoulder, about 20-40 degrees aft (see diagram). Thus, if you are in reasonably sort, clear air, with the wind flowing over your transom, give the command •set the pole.' Say it with confidence. Nothing makes a crew more nervous than a shaky voice squeaking, I think we might wanna, well, lets try to get this thing up, but I don't know....What do you think?"

Crew: Upon hearing the command of your revered skipper (you can tell who's writing this article), clip the tip of the pole on the starboard spinnaker sheet (now called the 'guy'). Remember, 'guys have poles.') Next, dip the topping lift" to the center of the pole. There should be enough tension on this line to keep the pole roughly at right angles with the mast. Third, dip the other end of the pole to the mast. Finally, push the pole forward, all the way to the forestay (diagram). Tell the skipper, "Pole is set."



Step 2. Launch the spinnaker.

Crew: Raise the centerboard. Pull the guy and lift the starboard corner of the spinnaker out along the deck about 3 feet. You may need to push the pole forward again, as poles have a tendency to come aft with the "sheeting" of the guy.

Next, prepare to lift the spinnaker out of the basket, 1 or 2 folds at a time onto the deck, as the skipper sheets the spinnaker halyard. When you're ready, tell the skipper you're "ready to launch." When the skipper says launch, you'll feel tension from the halyard on the spinnaker. Your Job is to keep lifting the spinnaker out of the basket as the skipper sheets in the halyard. Look up to make sure the sail is not getting jammed between the boom and shrouds, or hooked on any other parts of the boat. It should go up easily, but if often finds a reason not to. When the spinnaker is all the way up to the block, push the pole forward again and the skipper will set the pole angle by sheeting in the guy. (Some teams have the crew set the guy, too, but the crew has a lot to do during the spinnaker run).

Next, you'll set the sheet. Don't set it until you're sure everything is okay (spinnaker up, pole set, skipper doing his/her Job.) As long as you control the guy not too much "bad stuff" can happen. Back to the setting of the sheet. This is the line that is attached to the lower left hand corner of the (now flapping) spinnaker. Pull the sheet in until the spinnaker just becomes taut. The skipper will hand you the "guy" next. When you have the spinnaker up, the pole set, and the sheet tight enough (either cleated or held) so that the spinnaker isn't flapping, stop a breath and relax for a few breaths. You need to get ready to trim the spinnaker.

Skipper: While the crew is feeding the chute, you will have two jobs to do, and eventually you'll learn to do them (almost) simultaneously. First, put the tiller between your knees and steer the boat with your knees. Then grab the halyard. Give

the command to "launch." Begin pulling the spinnaker halyard. While doing this, keep an eye on several things: the speed of the launching (you can't go faster than your crew can feed); other boats around you (stay clear!); the spinnaker itself (is it caught on anything? If so, stop sheeting and inform the crew). When the spinnaker is up to the top, sheet the guy until the pole is roughly at the same angle as the boom (diagram). It almost becomes an extension of the boom. When the crew is settled, hand the guy to the crew and steer the boat, as much as possible so that the masthead fly continues to point to the starboard transom corner. Your job is kinda done.

Step 3. Trimming the spinnaker.

Crew: This is where you are in charge and are doing most of the important work. You have 3 things to do in sequence. Play the sheet. Slowly let the sheet out (an inch or two at a time) and clamp your eyes on the starboard edge of the spinnaker at its shoulder. This is most important. Keep your eyes on that windward edge. As you slowly ease the sheet out, you will notice the edge begin to curl or collapse. Sheet in until the curl disappears. You want to stay on this edge of curling. Check pole height. The bottom of the spinnaker should be parallel with water. The spinnaker should look symmetrical and not pinched on one side.

Check pole angle (fore and aft). If the skipper is paying attention (and they almost always are) and you are able to sail the course with the masthead fly in the same position, the pole will not have to be adjusted much. But....often you have to adjust course because of other boats or to fetch a mark more efficiently. The skipper will have adjusted the main sheet and boom position. You need to also adjust the pole position. The more you go into a reach, the more the pole has to go forward. The more you sail on a dead run, the more the pole comes back. As a rule of thumb, the pole should be

adjusted at about 90° to the wind. Some put cassette tape on the shrouds and set the pole so that the cassette tape points right angles with the pole (and into the belly of the spinnaker). I would also recommend that you don't sail with the spinnaker in anything above 8-10 knots on anything above a broad reach until you get more experienced. It's too tough and the payoff is marginal. (I've seen too many Day Sailers without spinnakers pass spinnakered boats on reaches. I think the boat may be faster in a reach without a chute, not to mention the extra problems that dousing, jibing and flying the chute bring to the table).

Skipper: Your main Job during the run is to make things easy for the crew. Stay away from other boats by anticipating and using gradual turns and adjustments in position. For example, if you see several boats coming from behind and preparing to steal your wind, anticipate that action and head up early and gradually or fall off so their shadow will have less of an effect. Keep talking to the crew so they know why and what you're doing. "I'm heading up a little to protect our wind. You'll have to let the pole out a little. Good." (don't forget the praise!) Try to keep the wind over the starboard transom. If the spinnaker collapses, don't panic. Let the crew find the way to get it filled again. Stay on this course as long as possible to avoid jibing. When you're more experienced, you'll want to jibe all over the lake sometimes, but for now, you're trying to build successes.

Step 4. Jibing.

The jibe becomes necessary when the mast head fly is pointing at the rudder and wants to go toward the port corner of the transom. In other words, you've changed directions and need to jibe the main and thus, the spinnaker. It is done most easily dead down wind. Practice this in light wind several times first. It's really not that hard but it needs to be practiced. Generally, what's going to happen is this: the boom will be thrown over to the starboard side. The pole will be switched

to the port side and the sail will be retrimmed for the new course.

Crew: When the skipper is steering dead down wind, she will call a "prepare to jibe" command. Release about 1 or two feet of sheet and grab the boom right behind the vang. The skipper will then command "jibe-ho". The boat will round up gently onto the new course. You will grab the boom and (with the help of the skipper playing the main sheet) throw the boom to the new side. Next you have to transfer the pole. With one hand, grab the old "sheet." Unclip the pole end from the old "guy" (you might need a third hand here, but, alas, you don't have one). Standing on the port side of the boat, unclip the pole from the mast. You should now have the pole end which was clipped to the mast in your right hand. You should have the old "sheet" in your left hand. Clip the pole end onto the old sheet, making it the new "guy," and slide the pole out (in front of the shrouds) and clip the other pole end (the one that used to be on the starboard sheet) to the mast. Push the pole forward. The skipper should again trim the pole and hand you the new guy. You will play the new sheet.

Skipper: Your job is fairly easy here, but very important. When you notice that you need to sail down wind or change directions so that the mast head fly will be pointing toward the port corner of the transom, you'll need to jibe. Offer the command "prepare to jibe." Put the tiller between your legs and begin to sheet the main sheet in. As you do this, gently steer the boat onto 'its new course. Avoid radical jibes in heavy air because this is a favorite time for the wind gods to dump your boat over. As the boom comes inboard it will want to rise and cross over just like a normal jibe. Help it along. Coordinate this with the crew, who should be "throwing" the boom across. As the boom crosses, ease out the main sheet and head down wind on the new course. Again, avoid crowds. Don't attempt a jibe when you will jibe just above one of the top sailors in the fleet as they may force you into maneuvers you're not quite ready for. Trim the pole for the new course,

and hand the guy to the crew, who will be ready to trim the sheet and fine-tune the pole set.

Step 5-Dousing the spinnaker.

All good things must end. You're approaching the leeward mark and a crowd is beginning to bottleneck at the mark. You need to take your spinnaker down and prepare for the beat. Do this earlier than you think you need to. As a beginner, you want to avoid mistakes, not attempt brilliant maneuvers. Many costly mistakes are made with late attempts at spinnaker dousings.

Skipper: Make it easy on your crew by taking the spinnaker down early and by taking it down when you are going downwind. Take the spinnaker down on the port side. First, notify the crew to prepare for the takedown. When the crew is ready, you will once again steer between your knees while slowly dropping the spinnaker halyard and watching for ways in which you may be helpful (often things get tangled or forgotten). You may also be the one to stow the pole. Once the spinnaker is stowed, the crew still has many tasks to do, so your job is to trim the main and sail the boat in a clear path that avoids panic.

Crew: You have a lot to do. When the skipper says "prepare for the take down" you have to remove the pole. First, take pressure off the pole by releasing the tension on the topping lift. Next, you'll need to unclip the pole from the mast. Do this with two hands, pressuring the pole away from your face. (I've seen one serious injury in my sailing days when the pressured pole came back and broke the crew's nose on the take down). With the pole unclipped from the mast, unclip the pole from the topping lift, and finally, unclip the pole from the guy. Either with or without the help of the skipper, stow the pole in its regular position. Prepare now to stow the spinnaker.

When the skipper begins the dropping of the halyard, you will gather the spinnaker by the bottom (with your right hand) and along the port side (with your left hand). Try to pull the spinnaker in without overlapping your hands (or you may end up with a twist on the next launching). You should set the pace. If the skipper is dropping the halyard too fast, the spinnaker may end up in the water. So you communicate to the skipper how fast to drop the shoot. Slight tension should stay on the halyard until the spinnaker is stowed.

Know that everything may be messy at the rounding, but you'll have a long beat to dean up. As the spinnaker comes in, stow it in the laundry basket and let the skipper know when you are done. Next, lower the centerboard. If time, sheet and cleat the spinnaker sheets and stow the tales (this could be done on the beat though, so don't panic about it).

Set the barber haulers and find the jib sheet. Let the skipper know you are ready to round. If everything went well (and sometimes it does!) this will occur right at the point of the rounding. As you round the mark, you'll hike out, trim the jib while the skipper simultaneously trims the main and you'll leave the fleet in your spume. Your skipper will look over to you, and let you know that your sailing success is due mostly to the work of you, the crew. On the beat, look for lines that could be cleaned and help the skipper with adjustments.

Below is a chart that details the jobs of skipper and crew. You can affix this to the deck by using clear contact paper. Happy sailing!

Crew

Set Pole

- Clip tip of pole to sheet.
- Clip topping lift to middle of pole.
- Clip pole to mast ring.
- Push and raise pole.

Launch

- Raise centerboard.
- Pull guy and stretch spinnaker along deck toward forestay.
- Push pole again if needed.
- Upon "launch" command, lift spinnaker out until hoisted.
- Check for pinching, pulling, grabbing, etc.
- Push pole after skipper sets pole.
- Set sheet to fill spinnaker.
- After receiving guy, adjust pole as needed.

Trim

- Ease sheet until curl, then set.
- Check pole height.
- Check pole angle.
- Repeat.

Jibe

- Throw boom across.
- Unclip guy and unclip pole at mast.
- Grab sheet and clip pole to 'new' guy.
- Set pole.
- Trim sheet.

Douse

- Take pressure off pole.
- Remove pole.
- Pull in spinnaker avoiding twists. Communicate.
- Lower centerboard and set barbers.
- At rounding, sheet jib and hike.
- Receive praise and compliments. Critique skipper.

Skipper

Prelaunch and Pole

- soft, clear air?
- wind less than 10?
- wind over starboard transom so you broad reach or run?
- "Set the pole"

Launch

- Tiller between legs and halyard in hand.
- "Launch". Pull halyard. Don't leave crew behind. Talk.
- Check for other boats, snags, etc.
- Set pole angle with boom.
- Hand guy to crew when ready.

Trim

- Stay away from other boats.
- Anticipate and praise.

Jibe

- "Prepare to jibe."
- Sheet in and help throw boom across.
- After jibe, reset pole.
- Give guy to crew.
- Praise the crew

Douse

- Anticipate and plan on early takedown.
- Sail downwind. "Prepare for take down....Takedown."
- Steer with tiller between knees.
- Help stow pole.
- Drop spinnaker halyard slowly, keeping tension.
- Take orders as needed.
- Trim mainsail at rounding.
- Give lots of praise.