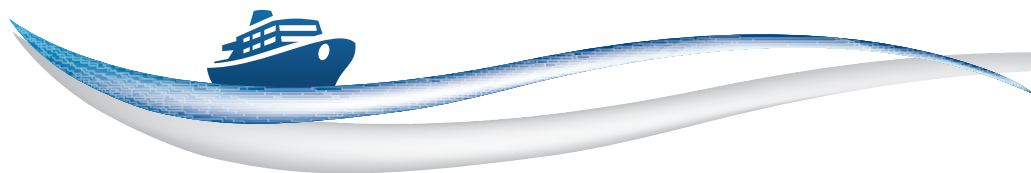


THE ART OF SAILING



By Alex Fox

Good Crew

Over my racing career of close to ... heavy sigh ... 40 years, I've had the opportunity to both skipper and crew on a lot of different boats and boat types. During that time I've formed some strong opinions about what makes for a what I call "good crew." There are qualities and attributes that I've come to appreciate and aspire to. Here's what I think good crew should bring to a racing program:

If the email says we're meeting at the boat at 8:30 a.m., then that should apply across the board. Hey, stuff comes up, we all have the odd small crisis to deal with, but being on time and helping to share the load of rigging the boat, moving sails, and general prep is always appreciated. Prima donnas need not apply.

Sailboat racing for the most part is a recreational activity, but even with the

out of their precious time on the water. This might sound a bit idealistic, but so be it. Grumpy-pants need not apply.

GETTING ENGAGED

Being engaged and involved in what's happening is another good crew quality. One might call it focus. If everybody is paying attention and working hard at being aware, it just makes life so much better aboard any race boat. Sure, you've got your own specific job to do and that's really important, but don't

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Good crew work together to make the boat dance. Knowing what your job is and what's expected of you is high priority, but reliability and a good attitude are key.

Paring this down to the most basic quality, it's certain that good crew must be reliable. There needs to be an expectation of commitment to the skipper and the other people showing up to the race. Other skills aside, this is by far the most desirable trait one can possess. Not just showing up, but showing up on time.

most serious race program it's important to remember what the song says: "We're here for a good time." Bring the most positive disposition you can muster aboard with you. Good crewmembers leave their personal woes behind at the dock. It's only common courtesy to allow the rest of the crew to get the most

get caught operating in a vacuum. Every movement aboard a sailboat makes a difference. The foredeck crew should be as aware of the boat trim as the cockpit crew or the mainsheet trimmer. The crewmember who thinks and operates as part of a collective will be of the most value aboard the boat.

Good crew aren't just passengers; they are indeed participants in a cooperative dance, along with their crewmates. Knowing what your job is and what's expected of you is of top

priority. A willingness to take on whatever task is required at any given time is also key. That means making yourself familiar with the workings of the boat. Also, knowing how your job interacts with the other jobs onboard should be an automatic learn. If you are taking on the pit job, for instance, timing is really important. Releasing a halyard early or late can have a profound effect on the outcome of a rounding. Understanding the complete manoeuvre will give you better insight into the subtleties of your own job. Good crewmembers communicate and coordinate with their teammates. No man is an island. Loose cannons need not apply.

KEEPING THE FAITH

A bunch of people thrown together on a sailboat for a race is no different than any other activity that involves more than one person. All parties involved need to agree upon and buy into a decision-making structure. Good crewmembers know when their expertise and opinions are required, and when they are not. There are hundreds of decisions to be made in every race. Some are simple no-brainers, others are more complex. Good crewmembers provide as much information and input as possible through observation but recognize and accept that the final decision falls with the skipper or tactician. Good crew will not second-guess this process or undermine it by neglecting or underperforming at whatever their primary job is aboard the boat. Like it or lump it, there can only be one person who makes the final call. You'll find yourself getting pretty frustrated if you expect that call to be right every time. Hindsight makes everyone a genius.

Have faith in your fellow crewmembers. Let them do their jobs, and if they're having problems, help them become better by brainstorming solutions. A good crewmember shares what they've learned about techniques for trimming, halyard jumping, hiking, wind spotting and so on, and is also open to

learning and improving. Get stuck in the rut of doing only one job and you won't

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be doing yourself any favours. The very best teams utilize the skills of everyone onboard and the best skippers know they must keep things fresh and keep their crew challenged by offering varied opportunities. If you've been asked to perform a task that you're not familiar with and you're unsure or confused by it, please don't feel bad about asking for help or clarifying the job. I guarantee you'll get a better reception from the skipper by sorting it out before the required action or manoeuvre.

ADDING VALUE

Then there's valued-added stuff: Retaping a pin that's about to fall out; retying a figure-eight that's come undone from the end of halyard or sheet; pulling a sheet out of the water; keeping their eyes forward and noticing a big clump of speed-robbing kelp; relaying information about other boats, pressure on the water, current lines, calling puffs and shifts, identifying marks. These are all things that a good crewmember thinks of. Knowledge is king in sailboat racing and listening to the weather forecast and generally being prepared for the day is very important.

Being under or overdressed not only makes you uncomfortable, it also affects your performance. I've seen many situations where a crewmember can't physically get around the boat because they've got too much gear on. Conversely, if you're freezing cold it's unlikely that you'll be thinking about much else other

than getting warm. Believe me when I say that nothing aggravates a keen skipper more than seeing a huge gear bag full of clothing and stuff come aboard only to be left down below unused and then taken off then boat again after the race. You may as well be bringing a bag of rocks aboard. Beer and treats, on the other hand, are generally acceptable extra ballast. Remember: "We're here for a good time."

Now, I have to say we can all aspire to being good crew. No reasonable skipper would expect their crew to entirely conform or to possess all of the aforementioned skills and qualities. That would make you "super crew," not good crew. Okay, maybe there are a few skippers who might expect this. Though it has been my experience that the average skipper's wish list is actually very simple: show up, do the best you can, enjoy the boat, and have a great time. That's a pretty good deal.

I know I've been guilty of taking for granted the opportunities I've had to sail on some really fun boats and I'm still working on being a good crewmember. Writing this article has reminded me that maybe I can try a little harder in some areas. How about you?

Good luck and I'll see you on the water. ⚓

*Alex Fox is a lifetime sailor and regular contributor to the **Boat Journal**.*

