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No Barriers

Sailing really is for everyone, whatever your age or disability. **Rupert Holmes** looks at some inspiring sailors, and the opportunities available.

Neither age nor disability need be a barrier to racing boats of many different types. The Squib class is a case in point – this venerable but competitive one-design keelboat attracts large entries to key events, including up to 100 boats at its national championships, with sailors ranging from 10 years old to their mid 80s, and is also used as a training boat for several Sailability groups.

As old as you feel

These are among many inspirational older or disabled sailors who compete against those who are generations younger, or against able-bodied people at the highest level – at the age of 65 foiling Moth sailor Colin Newman regularly beats people of less than half his age, and is showing no sign of retiring from either this class, or the equally demanding International Canoe. Offshore yacht racing also has its senior competitors – Dutch veteran Piet Vroon has picked up more

silverware than most in his string of boats, including the latest 56ft 'Formidable 3', in which he's still competing some two decades after most of his contemporaries have retired.

Of course many people with extensive disabilities are limited in what they can do, but this is by no means always the case. Andy Cassell was born without legs and hip joints, but has enjoyed a lifetime of considerable success competing directly against able-bodied sailors. At the age of 18 he was the youngest person ever to win the Albacore nationals; 45 years later he won the Sonar national championship and helmed 'Winsome' to a Skandia Cowes Week class victory.

For most of his career Andy has competed directly against able-bodied sailors, but as the Paralympic sailing movement grew, he also competed in that arena, winning a gold medal at Savannah in 1996. He set up the Andy Cassell Foundation to encourage other disabled yachtsmen and women to compete in the sport. The foundation aims to assist disabled sailors in winning competitive yacht races, promote racing for the disabled and encourage the integration of disabled sailors into the able-bodied racing community.

Geoff Holt and Hilary Lister are also shining examples of what's possible for those with even severe disabilities. Geoff, who is paralysed from the chest down, sailed a 16ft Challenger trimaran around Britain last summer.

Unexpected freedoms

Over the past 30 years or so the Challenger has enabled many people who otherwise wouldn't get the opportunity to get afloat and sail independently – it was designed as a singlehander for people with disabilities and has been sailed by those ranging in age from 12 to their nineties. Luke Barbanneau, a 19-year-old student, has cerebral palsy, which severely affects his co-ordination and balance, so on land he spends most of his time in a wheelchair. These restrictions disappear when he's sailing his Challenger, and he becomes independent, free and exhilarated. 'When I am sailing I love the freedom, speed, adrenaline and the competition,' he says. 'I also love the community spirit and how friendly sailors are but without a doubt my favourite thing is competing.' He is putting together a campaign for the 2012 Paralympics.

Hilary Lister is more severely disabled – she is only able to move her head, but reports a similar feeling of freedom when afloat: 'When I'm sailing I go into a different world ...it's like flying!' She entered the record books three years ago when she sailed solo across the English Channel, using a 'sip and puff' system of straws to control the sails and tiller. Right now she's part-way through an attempt at sailing around Britain in an Artemis 20 keelboat.

Even if you don't intend to quite so far afield, getting afloat can be a very liberating experience. 'It feels like you don't have any problems when you are on the water,' says Nicola Ewen, a wheelchair user who learned to sail through RYA Sailability at the age of 12.

There are many places where you can start sailing – 200 or so clubs around the UK have a

wide range of special facilities, including hoists, launching ramps and specially-adapted changing rooms. Most are also RYA training centres where sail training is offered. RYA Sailability publishes a 'Where to go sailing guide', which is intended to help you find a local facility that's suitable for you.

Equally, there are many different types of boat you can try, from small dinghies to stable keelboats that allow competition with able-bodied people on level terms. The Sonar, for instance, is a well-regarded keelboat that has also been used for the Paralympics, and the Squib is also used as a training boat by many Sailability groups around the UK.

Like the Challenger and Artemis 20, the Access range of dinghies is specifically designed for those with disabilities, or whose age prevents the agility needed to sail mainstream designs. They range in size from just 2.3m upwards and are sailed at nearly 100 clubs and other organisations across the UK. Worldwide it's estimated they are used to introduce around 250,000 people to sailing every year.

For those who value performance, the Skud is a new design for this year's Paralympics. It's an 18ft long skiff-style keelboat designed by Julian Bethwaite with the aim of bringing hitherto unheard of levels of power and performance to the event. 'It's a skiff-talent boat,' says Bethwaite, 'and we've found that the best way to learn is to have disabled sailors learn from sailors who have lots of experience in skiffs.' Sailed by two disabled crew (one will be classified with an IFDS International Classification 1) with at least one woman on board, the boat will be an exciting addition to competition at this level.

Equally, the 2.4mR (another Paralympic class) and Illusion mini keelboats are designs conceived specifically for racing, but which

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Nicola Ewen



PHOTOS ALAN HENDERSON/FOTOBOAT

Left The Challenger trimaran is one of the most popular boats for Sailability fleets, thanks to its stability and adaptability.



PHOTO ALAN HENDERSON/FOTOBOAT

Above Age is no barrier to sailing high performance classes – at 65 foiling Moth sailor Colin Newman regularly beats helms less than half his age.

enable disabled sailors to compete on level terms with the able-bodied.

Other opportunities

A successful new initiative last year was the first RYA Sailability Multi Class Regatta, which took place at Rutland SC and brought together over 70 competitors in 53 boats from five different classes, ranging from the smallest Access to the Skud.

The climax of the event was a giant pursuit race, which, incredibly, was won by an Access 303, sailed by Andi Dickson and Ian McNair, who became the very first holders of the Ken Ellis Trophy. This year's event will be held at Rutland, from August 8-10, and will be bigger and better than previously.

There is well-established provision for blind sailors, dating back more than 30 years to the first of the sailing weeks for the visually impaired. These are cruising-oriented, with beginners sailing relatively short coastal passages, while those with more experience generally sail cross channel. An audio compass enables blind helms to steer the boat. A recent development is that Poole Sailability members have produced a tactile chart designed to help blind and visually impaired members 'see' a chart of Poole Harbour.

There are also racing events for visually impaired sailors, culminating in the World Blind

Sailing Championships for mixed visually impaired and sighted crews, with three different levels. B1 is a minimal or no vision team, made up of visually impaired helm, a visually impaired crew plus a sighted tactician and crewmember. The B2 team with some vision is made up of visually impaired helm, visually impaired crew, sighted tactician and crewmember. The B3 team has more vision, including a helm with functionally useful sight.

Getting kids afloat

The Ellen MacArthur Trust provides sailing opportunities for children with cancer, leukemia and other life-threatening illnesses. The trust's primary activity is sailing for four-day periods on 38-45ft cruising yachts, staying at a different port each night, with children and crew living and sleeping on board.

'I face challenges out on the water, but these are challenges that I choose to do,' says Ellen. 'They on the other hand don't have this luxury. They battle against something harder than many of us could ever imagine and they do it with the biggest smiles on their faces. To me they are truly inspirational... Sailing is perfect for these children – it gives them a chance to test themselves in a safe and supportive environment.'

'This was a fantastic opportunity for Fran [aged 13] ...beyond her wildest dreams,' her mum says. 'She came back more mature, more understanding, more confident and more prepared to socialise with those in a similar position.' The trust also runs dinghy sailing courses, as well as opportunities to race at Cowes Week and in the Round the Island Race.

Starting point

If you're thinking of organising activities for those with disabilities at your club, Sailability's best practice manual is a good place to start. It's intended for clubs that work with disabled visitors, volunteers and sailors. It has been developed over a three-year period with the aim of covering almost every aspect that a sailing club might need to know about having disabled sailors and members at their club. Hard copies are available, or it can be downloaded from the organisation's website. ■

Right The Ellen MacArthur Trust provides sailing opportunities for children with cancer, leukemia and other life-threatening illnesses.

Further information:
www.sailingforall.com
 (Access dinghies)
www.ellenmacarthurtrust.org
www.theandrewcassellfoundation.co.uk
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