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Start Keelboat racing

Fancy learning to sail larger, faster, and more stable keelboats or Sportboats?
Rupert Holmes shows how.

Sportsboats and keelboats are larger than dinghies, typically being around 20-30ft in length. As the name implies, a ballasted (weighted) keel helps provide stability, but usually there's no accommodation, or at best only a vestigial interior that's mainly used for stowage. Keelboats are often older designs – some popular classes date back to before the Second World War. Their key appeal for most sailors is close one-design racing in large fleets of identical boats – classes such as the XOD and Etchells 22 provide some of the most intensely-fought racing you will find anywhere.

It's perhaps not surprising, given the wide range of ages of design, that there are a very wide variety of keelboat styles. Class rules for Darings and Seaview Mermaids, for instance, insist you must keep your feet on the cockpit floor, so hiking or sitting out is effectively prohibited, which makes them very 'gentlemanly' boats to sail. Etchells have no such rule, so hiking is crucial to boat speed, but there are no toe straps – instead you keep the tail of the sheet taut and tuck your feet underneath!

Sportsboats are more recent designs, many from within the past 10 years, and so are much more modern than traditional keelboats. They make full use of advances in technology and are powerful lightweight boats capable of blisteringly fast downwind speeds. As some Sportsboat fleets are less well established than those for keelboat classes, you'll often find yourself sailing in a handicap fleet. There are of course exceptions to this, the most obvious being the Laser SB3 class, which has large fleets around the country and can muster a very impressive 100 boats for major events.

Sportsboats and keelboats are sailed extensively around the coast of the UK and a good number of clubs across the country sail smaller keelboats such as Flying 15s and Squibs. However, all but a handful of inland waters are too small for larger keelboats and for faster Sportsboats.

Different to dinghies...

The ballasted keel means that neither keelboats nor Sportsboats will capsize in the conventional sense, except in very extreme conditions. Therefore, keelboat sailors don't expect to go swimming, even if they're sometimes a bit tardy moving their weight across the boat – this is an activity that's done on the water, rather than in it. Having said that, on a breezy day you can expect to get thoroughly drenched by spray. Positioning

and movement of crew weight is still vital in a racing sense to extract the maximum performance from the boat.

These boats, and especially older, heavier keelboat designs, are much slower to accelerate than a dinghy. A largish keelboat might have an all-up weight of up to two tonnes, whereas most dinghies are less than 100kg. This means if the boat isn't travelling at full speed – immediately after a tack for instance – you must work hard to build speed in an acceleration mode. There's a parallel here with driving a car – you use different gears for pulling away than the ones you use once up to speed on the open road. With a boat, changing down into acceleration gear involves easing the sheets and pointing a little away from the wind.

Keelboats may not capsize, but some designs do lack positive buoyancy and will sink if they fill up. This is a sharp contrast to most dinghies, which have buoyancy built in so that they will stay afloat even if the cockpit is flooded. Two Dragons, for instance, sank in the Solent in gale-force conditions during the windy summer of 2007. In strong winds traditional designs especially are likely to need near-constant pumping of the bilge – when sailing upwind they tend to plough their way through, rather than over, waves.

Who are the crew?

Who sails these boats? Anyone – a wide variety of people of all ages, from under 10 to those well into their 80s. Many classes are much less physically demanding than dinghies, making them ideal for those who are less active or who have disabilities.

At first sight it might be easy to assume that sailing a bigger boat is more expensive than dinghy sailing. This certainly can be true, if you want to do well in an ultra-competitive class such as the Etchells 22, then a new boat will all the trimmings will set you back over £50,000. On the other hand, you can enjoy very competitive racing in the Squib fleet for an outlay of as little as £3,000.

However, most people who race keelboats and Sportsboats don't own the boat – they sail other people's! With many designs needing crews of three (or four or more for many Sportsboats) there are always owners on the lookout for reliable crew. This is therefore one of the most cost-effective routes into sailing, needing little more than club membership, a good set of foul-weather gear and some training to get you started, and with a typically very modest annual expenditure commitment after that.

So what makes a reliable crewmember? Knowledge and skills are important, but they're not always the most valuable attributes. The most crucial aspects are the basics of being switched on and observant, not backing out of events you've agreed to sail at the last minute, helping fix damage after racing so the boat's ready to go next time, and attending training/tuning sessions.

Communication, including listening skills, is also important – you need to understand your role in the team, identify areas in which you need to improve to be effective in your role and make sure you learn from your mistakes. Most skippers are tolerant of a new crewmember who makes the



PHOTO RUPERT HOLMES

occasional slip, but they won't be impressed if you continuously get the same thing wrong. It's therefore important to have the confidence to ask when you're unsure about anything. It's much better to say, 'I'm unclear exactly what I need to do in this manoeuvre,' when there's time to explain it.

All this may sound obvious on paper, but it's surprising how many competent and experienced people fail to make that degree of effort. This means that even as a newcomer to sailing you can quickly become a valued crewmember just by approaching it with the right attitude.

Two-person keelboats have a very similar division of roles to dinghies, although if sailing on the sea courses may be longer – you won't always be able to see the next mark, so navigation requires more attention. This is particularly true when sailing in an area such as the Solent that experiences very strong tides.

If you're relatively new to sailing and are crewing a two-person keelboat, navigation will probably be shared between you both. However, as you gain more experience you will almost certainly take on more of this role, leaving the helm to

Above Sonars are a four-man one-design keelboat from the drawing board of Bruce Kirby, designer of the Laser dinghy.

Right The 60-year-old Flying 15 is still quick in a breeze.



PHOTO PAUL WYETH



Above The popular J/80 class competing in the annual J-Cup.

concentrate on maximising boatspeed. With three-person keelboats the middle person usually relieves the helmsman of trimming the mainsail, which allows a greater focus on both of these vital tasks.

What about the training that's needed to make you a useful novice crew? Even though you'll only be handling one aspect of the vessel, it's important to have an understanding of the way in which that role relates to those of your fellow crewmembers. As with dinghy and multihull sailing, the keelboat branch of the RYA's National Sailing Scheme Level 1 and 2 weekend courses will give a basic grounding and provide opportunities to both helm and tackle the key tasks of crew.

In addition, almost all keelboats, and certainly all sportsboats, have spinnakers, so even as a novice race crew you'll need to know the basics of

how to use one, so the Sailing with Spinnakers course is important. The Start Racing weekend will give you a grounding on what to expect when you're on the racecourse, as well as helping to build on your core skills.

Getting a sail

One of the best ways is to join a club that sails keelboats and ask around – the class captains are often the best initial contact and will introduce you to boat owners. Even if you don't get any immediate offers, you can offer to assist with race officer duties, which will establish your interest and get you known at the club. You'll learn a lot about racing through being involved, even if you're not actually sailing the first few weekends.

Equally, if there's a specific event you're interested in, the event website or forum will often have a register of owners who are looking for crew (and also one on which you can register your own details). Don't be put off if you have a bad experience – occasionally you'll find an owner who's an ogre, but there are many more who are great people to sail with and will be understanding of your level of skill.

Many of the same principles for progressing beyond the basics in dinghy and multihull racing apply equally to keelboats and Sportsboats. In particular, approaching learning as a continuous process that happens every time you sail, and evaluating your strengths and weaknesses will make a huge contribution to the rate at which you progress up the learning curve.

In addition, over time try to sail with a variety of people, in different boats and in different locations – you'll gain something extra each time. Ask lots of questions, read lots, take as many opportunities for training and coaching as possible and maintain a realistic appraisal of the skills on which you most need to focus in order to continue moving forward. ■

Further information:
www.rya.org.uk
www.sailing.org