



PHOTO LLOYD IMAGES

# Start **yacht** racing

It might sound scary and glamorous, but actually there's lots of roles for newcomers to play onboard a yacht or keelboat. **Rupert Holmes** looks at how to get started big boat racing.

**T**here are arguably more similarities than differences between inshore yacht racing and dinghy sailing, with the same skills of wind awareness, tactics, rules and subtle nuances of sail trim assuming equal importance. One of the biggest differences is the considerably greater loads on a big boat, especially on main, genoa and spinnaker sheets. On larger craft these can easily exceed one tonne and must be treated with respect, especially in heavy weather. Equally, these loads must be tamed quickly in order to handle the boat efficiently, so the proper use of winches, clutches and other deck hardware is important, and effective teamwork is critical.

Big boat sailing also tends to take place in a

more adverse environment, further from the shore and in deeper tidal water, than dinghy racing. Despite the potentially hostile environment, big boat racing is a statistically very safe sport, yet also one that offers huge thrills, although the potential consequences of falling overboard are very much more severe than for dinghy sailors, where taking a swim is often part of the overall experience. Another important issue is to ensure you're not hit by the boom, mainsheet or vang in a gybe – where enough force is generated to cause serious, possibly even fatal, injury.

Although a yacht will not capsize in the way that a dinghy will (although some broaches can be quite spectacular), optimum weight distribution is crucial to boat speed. Some tasks only involve one or two crew members, so those who are not actively engaged should be hiking hard on the rail. In light airs, weight might be needed to leeward and some crew members may even be sent below, where their weight will be better located and they won't contribute to wind resistance. On the other hand, weight needs to be as far aft as possible when sailing downwind in heavy weather. In all this, a dinghy sailor's instincts will be very helpful, especially in light airs when even relatively large yachts such as Farr 45s and TP52s will be roll tacking.

Some manoeuvres, particularly spinnaker work, will involve everyone on board, with each task needing to be carried out in a strict order. Timing is everything, so even if you only have a minor role you must understand how it meshes into the overall picture.

### Training options

There is no RYA scheme that serves as an introduction to yacht racing in the same way as for dinghy, keelboat and multihull sailing, so those wanting to learn to race big boats need to be a little more resourceful in planning their training.

What's the best size of boat to train on? It really doesn't matter, especially if you already have some sailing experience – people can train on 52-footers, although most yachts used for training are in the mid 30-40ft bracket.

Whatever boat you start out on, it's important to recognise that deck layouts vary enormously even among boats of similar sizes, so be flexible in your thinking and be prepared for things to be done slightly differently on each boat you sail. This is even more marked for boats of different sizes and with differing numbers of crew, so when you first sail an unfamiliar boat make sure you're briefed as to what your role in each manoeuvre will entail.

The RYA's very comprehensive sail cruising training scheme may be useful for those who want to get to grips with the general aspects of life afloat on a yacht. For those who want to race, taking the Competent Crew course on a race-oriented boat will prove more beneficial than on cruising designs.

This scheme can also be invaluable at a later stage of your racing career when you may take charge of the boat, possibly on a delivery, or on a watch during an offshore race. The Coastal Skipper and Yachtmaster qualifications include navigation, boat handling and seamanship skills that will be required alongside your racing knowledge and ability.



PHOTO: LEE WHITEHEAD

**Above** Manoeuvres like spinnaker hoists will involve the whole crew, so make sure you know what your job is beforehand.

**“A dinghy sailor's instincts will be helpful – in light airs even large yachts roll tack”**

A number of schools run race training courses which focus specifically on the skills needed for inshore racing. These can be tailored to suit your existing experience, will prepare you for specific roles and offer the opportunity to experience performing that role while competing in well-known events. This is often an excellent route for good dinghy sailors, or those with a cruising background, and gives a good leg-up into making rapid progress in the skills needed for yacht racing.

Those who are new to sailing may also find the RYA keelboat courses helpful. These will give you experience sailing a smaller boat, and will give you a broader range of experience covering all the roles on board, including helming. As a small boat is more responsive, it's easier to get the feel of the vessel and the wind. This knowledge and awareness can then be easily transferred to larger craft.

### Finding a crewing position

Yacht racing takes place at clubs all around the coast of the UK, and it's possible to find a crewing position just by going along to a club and offering your services. This is especially true if you make the effort to gain some basic skills first. If your local club runs an evening series during the summer, these are often relatively low-key and relaxed, which means you have more chance of being able to go along as a newcomer and build your skills and confidence without getting in the way of serious competition.

The south coast, and particularly the Solent area, has numerous opportunities for yacht racing, with many people travelling considerable distances to sail there, although it's arguably more difficult to make initial contact with owners as they're less likely to sail within the structure of a

**Right** Smaller yachts, keelboats and Sportsboats are often a great way to learn more skills as they have fewer crew.



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single club. One tactic is to hitch a lift by 'dock-walking' around marinas before the start of racing and offering your services. Another possibility is looking on event websites and the crew (sailors' database) section of [yachtsandyachting.com](http://yachtsandyachting.com) – a lot of people find crewing places in this way. It helps of course to have some solid experience

**Further information:**

[www.rya.org.uk](http://www.rya.org.uk)  
[www.sailing.org](http://www.sailing.org)

## Getting started...

**H**ere's a suggestion for total novices wanting to get started in big boat racing from scratch – competent dinghy racers with experience of sailing in tidal waters can skip the keelboat elements.

RYA Keelboat Levels 1 and 2 – these two-day courses will give you basic familiarisation with being afloat, experience of boat handling and wind awareness. Although generally more expensive than the equivalent dinghy courses, they are still cheaper than a full-on yachting course, and you'll have more hands-on experience of sailing the boat.

This could be followed by two race training weekends with a sea school that specialises in yacht racing. This will help you build on the skills you have already learnt and transfer them into a specific role in a larger crew on a raceboat. Good dinghy sailors, or those with a solid cruising background, could go straight in at this level, but it's helpful for novices to first have a broader

experience first.

After this, newcomers might want to combine the performance sailing and start racing elements of the keelboat scheme, with some more experience on big boats. By this stage you'll be becoming a useful crew member who's able to switch between boats and some differing roles.

Even if your long-term aim is solely to race big boats, don't rule out racing keelboats and Sportsboats. There are a number of advantages to doing so, especially in the early stages of your sailing career and many of those who race yachts successfully also sail keelboats. In particular, racing in closely-matched one-design fleets is invaluable experience.

In addition, being part of for a smaller crew broadens your role, putting you closer to the decision-making process, so when you step up to a bigger boat you'll become more likely to be able to slot into more roles and carry them out with a greater degree of skill.

behind you before taking this approach. Being able to say you've performed a particular role on a certain type of boat in a particular event – which you can do as part of a training package – will help to open doors.

Once you've gained a crewing position, it's vital to understand how your role meshes with those of the others in the crew. Before the start, and when you're on the rail on windward legs, ask the people around you what and when you're expected to do in each manoeuvre – a well-drilled boat will often have everything planned down to almost the last hand movement. It's always better to ask to be briefed in advance than it is to bumble along and make mistakes.

Of course, we're all human and do get things wrong from time to time. When this happens, once everything has settled down and the boat is sailing fast again, discuss the problems and learn from them. If you understand what you did wrong each time, and what you should have done differently, then you'll make fast progress up the learning curve. This approach also maximises the likelihood that the team you're with will ask you back.

Whenever you sail in conditions in which you don't have lots of experience, possibly super light or super windy, be upfront about it and tell your fellow crew members. They'll be happy to give you hints and tips, rather than risk you making a mistake that could cost valuable time.

Not all crews are great to sail with – if you get the sense that the boat you're on is sailing in a reactive (rather than proactive) fashion, with lots of shouting when things go wrong, then you may wish look for a ride on in different boat – one on which the crew practices more effective forms of communication. ■

## Next issue...

Start offshore racing – making the step up from inshore racing to offshore events.