

What to Expect in a Sailboat Race

Revision 1 / 2024-05-01

Northern California has a lot of great sailboat racing, from casual evening races to world championships, and from 10-minute team races to sails to Hawaii. For people just starting out on something casual, here's some tips on what to do and what to expect.

Beercans are the least-competitive races, akin to pickup basketball. Boat owners race beercans to get out and enjoy an evening on the water, with secondary goals of encouraging participation in the sport, and finding more people who could crew in the more serious races on weekends. An experienced boat owner may be willing to take one (1) completely new person aboard for a beercan. Do not expect a boat owner to take more than one new person at a time --- simply racing the boat and running the normal crew is a lot to do, and adding a new person means having to keep an eye on them to ensure they're not getting into trouble. Two or more new people at once is too much for most boat owners.

Contact the yacht club where you want to race. Look at their website and find out when they are racing summer evenings or "beercan" races --- those are the least competitive races, where boat owners are most willing try out a new crew person and train them. See if the club website says something about coming out as brand-new crew. Look for a "race chair" or "race manager" or "rear commodore" contact, and reach out to that person about how to raise your odds of having a boat owner invite you to come aboard and race. Be upfront and honest about your sailing and racing background and physical condition.

Sailing is inherently risky. People do get hurt. You're accepting the risks by sailing. The club may ask you to sign a legal waiver saying you accept the risks in writing.

Get some safety gear and be sure to bring it to the race. You should buy a lifejacket, also called a "personal floatation device". A foam lifejacket is recommended for beginners because they're affordable (e.g., about \$30 for <https://www.amazon.com/Stearns-Adult-Classic-3000001685-Oversized/dp/B000NV7ONM>) and practically foolproof. You should also protect your hands from "rope burn" by buying sailing gloves, or use gardening gloves for your first time or two. You should not depend on someone else's safety gear. Be sure to wear both at all times when the boat is away from the dock.

Depending on the boat, where you sit, and the weather, you should prepare to get pretty wet from waves splashing over you. You should bring a waterproof jacket, and several layers that will keep you warm even when they get wet. Wear shoes that you're ok getting soaked with salt water. The Bay is cold and windy most nights, and cotton can make it much colder. Try to avoid jeans and t-shirts, and instead wear tech fabrics, fleece, even stretchy pants – anything not made of cotton that might possibly shed water. If it's really cold and windy, someone might lend you an old, smelly pair of foulies (foul weather gear) with duct tape on the butt. Take them, wear them and say thank you – they can prevent hypothermia.

Bring a complete change of clothes, including shoes, and leave them in the car where they'll stay dry. If you have shoes with white or light soles you can wear on the boat, so much the better --- dark plastic soles can leave black streaks on a white deck that are annoying to remove. Bring a baseball hat, but bring one you're willing to get wet and/or lose overboard. Attach your hat to you with a breakable or detachable clip, so it's not going to blow away on its own, but it's not going to trap you if it gets wrapped around something in an emergency. Bring a gallon ziplock freezer bag, or even better a tupperware container, and put all your valuables into it to keep them dry.

Since you're hoping to be invited aboard as a guest crew, it's thoughtful to bring some finger food to share, like a bag of cashews or pretzels. Keep it really simple: avoid anything complicated, fragile, hot, or messy. You could bring some beer in cans, but do not bring anything in a glass bottle. Be prepared to spend about \$30 for dinner and beer at the yacht club after the racing is done. Racing is a social activity, and socializing after the race at the club is part of that.

On the evening of the race, show up early. Follow whatever instructions the club has given you about how to look for a crew spot aboard a boat.

Boat owners are people. Some are very nice. Bluntly, some are jerks. If you can, sail with a half dozen different boats over the course of a summer to get a sense of the "nice vs jerk" continuum. There are other dimensions as well. Some boat owners are competitive, some just out for a nice evening on the water. Some are good teachers, some are not. And so forth. If you can sail with a half-dozen boats, not only will you learn where those boats fall on the continuum, you'll also start getting a sense of what you are looking for: maybe you'll discover winning matters more or less than you first thought, for example.

But for your first race, you won't have a frame of reference to compare the boat owner vs others. Just keep an open mind and remember that whatever this person is like, the person who owns the next boat over is probably different.

Once you have a spot, introduce yourself, and help get the boat ready.

Prep work typically involves putting a lot of "lines" (ropes) from the middle of the boat to the front of the boat. These lines are a pair of jib sheets that control the jib, a pair of spinnaker sheets that control the spinnaker, and sometimes a pair of spinnaker guys that are dedicated strictly to control of the spinnaker pole. The boat you end up on could opt to control the spinnaker pole with one of the spinnaker sheets, or carry the spinnaker on a bowsprit (with no movable pole), or sail without a spinnaker at all. It's also possible to race on a boat where the jib is furled around the forestay when not in use and the jib sheets are left on between races.

Do what you're told, but be careful not to do something beyond your skills. For example, there are innumerable ways to connect all the lines to sails, around the mast, shrouds and lifelines, and through blocks --- and most of them are wrong, risking damage or injury when the boat

goes to use that sail in the heat of the race. At minimum, have someone check your work. It's quite possible the owner and crew might prefer you just stay out of the way and watch them set up the boat.

This is a good time to put on your waterproof gear, life jacket, and gloves.

Usually the boat will leave the dock under motor and put the sails up just outside the marina. Mainsail (in the back) first, jib second. Once the sails are up the motor will be turned off and the boat is sailing.

To balance the boat so it leans about 10-15 degrees away from the wind but no more, you'll move to "the rail" on the high / upwind side whenever the boat "tacks" (turns), unless told otherwise. The preferred warning the boat is about to turn is the phrase "ready about", followed by a countdown, followed by either "helm's over" or "helm's alee" or "tacking." Different boats have different communication styles, however, and you should pay attention to the people near you. Duck under the boom and get from one side to the other as the boat levels out. If you go too early, leaving the old high side while it's high and the new high side is still low, you can careen across the boat like you would slide down a hill. If you go too late, leaving the old high side after it's become the new low side, and the new high side is pretty high, you can struggle to get across because it's like climbing a ladder without an even set of rungs. Watch the people around you, but going quickly across as the boat levels out is best.

For a first timer, moving from side to side might be all you're asked to do all evening. That is, your role will simply be weight on the rail to help level the boat.

Until their race starting time, boats will go back and forth on the "pre-start" side of the starting line. Normally all the similar boats start at the same time. Some clubs run "pursuit" style races where each boat has its own start time, calculated so that whoever finishes first wins.

In the preparation to start the race, expect the skipper to tack, jibe, or do circles, or even ask everyone to "sail slow" as they try to hit the starting line at speed without fouling any other boats. If you're new, that will look like random, unexpected turns. This can be very chaotic and hard to stay on the boat, so be **ESPECIALLY** aware of what the boat is doing just before the race starts. Keep your head down!

The boat will almost always sail upwind to the first mark, so after milling around waiting for the start time, the boat will "harden up" to point more and more toward the wind. The apparent wind will increase, and the boat will heel over more. Expect to go from side to side as the boat tacks upwind.

At the upwind mark, a boat that flies a spinnaker will hoist the spinnaker as they turn downwind around the mark, get the spinnaker flying by pulling the lines on the bottom corners of the spinnaker, and immediately drop the jib. That's why spinnaker boats need more crew to sail well, and on a spinnaker boat you may be given a line to manage, depending on how many

other people are present. On a boat that does not fly spinnaker, things are more relaxed and the boat will simply turn downwind and ease out the main and jib.

When going downwind, the boat may need to jibe, which will move the spinnaker or jib to the other side, and the main sail to the other side. This can be very exciting. The boom that the mainsail attaches to has to make a big movement, often pretty fast, so keep your head down as soon as you hear "ready to jibe." Getting clonked on the head by the boom in a jibe hurts a lot, and can even cause serious damage to your skull, so keep your head down.

Depending on the course, if there's a downwind mark, the boat will undo everything that happened at the upwind mark, in preparation to go back upwind: the jib will go up and the spinnaker come down (on a spinnaker boat) and the sails will come in.

It's possible you'd be asked to "squirrel" the spinnaker. This involves going down below to stand under a hatch in the foredeck. As the spinnaker comes down, grab it from the middle and pull it into the boat. Try to pull down the sail along the vertical midline, if possible. Getting a spinnaker down in wind can be hard. The trick is to pull the sail where it's easy. If one part of the sail isn't coming down, don't fight it, just pull another part that's easier to pull. Pulling where it's easy means less sail to fill with wind, and you'll get the sail down faster. In beercans, this "douse" is especially important as the finish is often right at the harbor, and there is a rocky breakwater or dock you need to avoid hitting. The main thing is to get it down quickly without tearing it, and ideally without twisting it. Spinnakers cost thousands of dollars and the fabric is very lightweight, so use care if you're the squirrel. As soon as you're done, get back on deck and to the rail, because while the boat is going upwind it benefits from having as much weight as possible on the high side.

After the race, the engine will come on, and the sails will be dropped.

If the Race Committee picked a good course for the conditions, most boats will finish just before sunset.

Then the boat will go back to the slip and tie up before putting everything away. Help put everything away. It's an important part of being good crew.

Depending on the boat, there may be socializing and eating and drinking on the boat. A yacht club usually sells alcohol and dinners as a money-raiser, so they encourage everyone to eat and drink there.

It's not required, but it's considered a nice gesture for new pickup crew to offer to buy the boat owner a glass of beer or wine.

After people have come back to the club, the Race Committee will announce winners. There may be several classes, and the winning boat(s) from each class will often get a nominal prize, like a bar glass.

Have fun! This is a great sport, and starting out as beercan crew is a great way to get into it!