

Early Lessons

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In thinking back to when I learned to sail I came across some safety lessons that didn't seem like safety lessons at the time. Since then I have used every single one of them to my benefit and personal safety.

After learning the basics of sailing on lake Pleasant, courtesy of a course from Scottsdale Community College, I signed up for a course in larger boats in San Diego. Going over to San Diego became an on-going experience from that time forward... one of my favorite places on the planet. We were learning in a pair of Ericson 29's and later on a Willard 32. In any event, I showed up at the appointed time and place and the instructor, the same one from the SCC class, started by having us all sit the cockpits of the two boats side by side at the dock.

The small boats we learned on at lake Pleasant had no engines so the instructor (Bill) started by telling us about the motors on these boats. They were Atomic 4's, a name that is ubiquitous in the marine world of the late '60's through the '70's. These are gasoline engines so we started by talking about clearing the bilge of all fuel fumes by running the blower. He walked us through the steps we needed to take in getting the boat away from the dock and then he showed us all over the boat to find the seacocks and understand the marine toilet. All good stuff but we all wanted to start sailing!! Bill saw this and cruelly called for a twenty-minute break.

When we got back to the boat Bill was ready with questions for us. It was a review of what he had just covered. Without realizing it we had absorbed nautical terminology and a fair idea of what these larger (to us) boats were about. Okay, so it's time to leave the dock. WE thought we were going sailing but Bill knew that would be in a while yet. Keep in mind that it was still only about 9:30 in the morning and there was zero wind... typical San Diego at that hour. We didn't know why we were going out so much before the wind came up but as I said, we were ready to go sailing.

So, out in the fairway, out of the finger, Bill calls for both boats to stop for a minute. He instructs the person in charge of the other boat to get a bit away from us and start the same routine he is going to start on our boat. That done he puts the boat into reverse and begins to carve a figure eight in reverse! We each take our turn doing the same thing... some with second tries to get it down pat. Then it's into forward gear and we are taught a torque turn to keep the boat in the smallest possible footprint while turning 360 degrees. It involves going in forward and then reverse while using the natural torque of the propeller to maximize this effect with the helm hard over. We all try this and it's about 10:30 and the wind is starting to come up. Time to go sailing? "Yes, it is." says Bill.

We motor out to the end of the fairway, but not past the fuel dock while Bill kept up the review of the things we know about the correct order of getting the sails up. Head to windward and such and before we know it we are sailing out into the bay and the wind is a wonderful 8 to 10 knots. We each take our turns at steering and sheet handling. The motion of the boat heeled over in the relatively flat bay has us all excited. It's not the ocean but it is salt water!

As the day ticks along, Bill is bombarded with questions he has heard a thousand plus times. He still manages to get us through a turn each at the tiller and start the man-overboard drill that we still need for him to call the day a success. After that we are released to sail where we wish until about 4:30 (16:30) when we head back in. It was then that he talked us through the sails down routine before we executed it. There was no rush and he warned us that the sails would be slapping around while the boom was not fully controlled. It went off without a hitch and soon we were motoring back into the finger. We had the fenders ready to kick over and dock lines attached. There was a discussion before we went down the finger as to who needed to do what when we got to the dock. This went well and before we could all disappear to showers and the like we were handed the put away chores. All very organized in retrospect.

By now you are wondering what this has to do with safety exactly. The take away here is many fold. When people are new to sailing they have only a vague idea about how it all works. Showing is a part of the

learning and talking your way through it is essential. Knowing how to stop and maneuver the boat is more important than making it go at first. At least, for the beginner, thinking it through and knowing what to expect in easy steps before you carry them out is a reminder that we all learned at one time. Did you ever spend an afternoon watching the hysterical comings and goings at the ramps at Lake Pleasant? The screaming, the yelling, the tears; gads but how do people ever learn in those situations?

Over the next several trips to San Diego we tried everything we could think of to gain skills we would need. When we finally got out of the bay and further from the dirt every single thing we learned about the basic handling of the boat came into play. Before long we were sailing up to the fuel dock or heaving to for rest on a longer passage. We still need to practice man-overboard and keep an eye on our equipment and the weather. When we have new people on board we need to bring them along at their own pace to understand what is happening or going to happen, CALMLY. Too basic, perhaps, but part of safety is bringing everyone up to a higher skill level each time we have the opportunity. It means talking your way through what you already know is going to happen rather than letting it be a shock when it is perceived that all hell breaks loose... like the flogging sails when you are taking them down.

See you on the water, prepared to introduce others to safe operating.