

## Learning Sailing Skills - 'Like Riding a Bike'

*Michael Blackburn discusses skill acquisition in sailing.*

Sailing's made up of a plethora of specific skills. Whenever we move to body to perform a function on the boat, then that's a skill. But, they're not always easy to learn or perfect and this fact can stop us sailing as well as we can.

Once a skill is learnt there comes a relatively permanent change in your head and body that makes it feel more normal to perform this skill again and again - just like riding a bike. The muscles develop a memory for movement - the strength needed, range of movement and timing of effort. The trick is getting the body and mind to learn and remember the required sequence of movements as quickly and easily as possible. Since sailing requires that a large number of individual skills be learnt - tacking, gybing, steering upwind, light winds, big waves and so on - it's necessary to improve and refine your skills with as little fuss as possible.

There are a number of techniques we can use to enhance skill learning, for example: using cue words; breaking a complex skill down into simpler parts; doing repetitive practice.

### Cue Words

When you've been sailing along in a straight line for a while, the mind can start to wander just at a time you need to focus on a specific skill, like an upcoming tack. Using cue words can help to direct your attention to key parts of the skill. To focus on the main elements of tacking, you can enlist the cue words Roll, Dash, Hike and Trim. Murmur to yourself "Roll" as you prepare to tack to aware yourself of the trim of the hull, to help it steer up into the wind with little forceful rudder movement. "Dash" - rush to the other side once you pass head to wind to minimize the time the sail luffs. Then you need to "Hike" the boat flat to power up and accelerate out of the tack. Finally, think how to re-"Trim" the hull and sails for optimal upwind performance.

### Breaking down skills

If you have trouble getting all the movements of tacking (or any other skill) flowing well together, try breaking the skill down and practice one part at a time. There are many parts you can single-out – preparing to go about, the movement across the boat, the exit from the tack and re-gaining speed. You could just practice exiting the tack and getting up to full speed. Focusing on the exit to the tack makes it easier to get it right without worrying about the rest of the tack. You should always finish this part-practice by doing a few complete tacks, putting all the pre-learned movements together.

### Practice

This may remind you of the P-sayings: "practice makes perfect", or to be proper, "perfect practice makes perfect". It's important to learn a skill correctly the first time to avoid bad habits developing. Repetitive practice of the one skill can get monotonous but it helps you to solidify the movement patterns within your body and mind. It's like cutting a new groove in a record. As long as you keep scratching along the same path, the groove will get deeper and the more likely the needle will fall into that path the next time you need that skill. If you practice a skill poorly you'll be scratching a number of shallow grooves in the record. The next time you go to play that song (skill) you'll get a mix of good and bad performances.

### Highly skilled?

There are two main ways of determining whether you have a skill down pat. First, whether you can do it to a high degree of proficiency. Second, how consistently you can repeat the same skill.

Really good sailors seem to have all the time in the world when they are in tight situations. They react quickly, but look unhurried in a series of smooth, efficient movements. They can repeat the skill perfectly, yet make modifications to deal with novel demands - such as tacking through a bad set of waves. Contrast this with the novice who always seems rushed, unorganized and unclear as to what to do next. Sometimes they will do a good-looking tack or gybe but will not be able to repeat it on demand. The highly skilled sailor has the benefit of having that groove deeply cut into his or her record.

### **Too Similar Skills**

Let me go off on a tack for a moment. Take two sports - tennis and squash - similar in skills yet with some important differences. In squash, the smaller ball comes back faster than tennis, so the players only have time to swing the racquet at the small rubber ball using a snappy wrist movement and little movement of the rest of the arm or body. In tennis, the players often have enough time to get the racket head moving by rotation of each of the trunk, shoulder and arm in a specific sequence.

Play squash for a while then switch to tennis and you find yourself swatting at the ball using your wrist and delivering strokes which lack enough power to get the bigger tennis ball back where you want it. In short, it is quite difficult to learn a new skill that is very similar in its movement pattern to one you have already mastered. So, if you want to be a top tennis player and like to play some other sport as a hobby, try something less similar than squash.

The same goes for sailing. The above can be true when you switch classes of sailboat, especially for the feel of a boat you get when steering. Most boats feel different to steer - even two Lasers - and getting the feel of a new boat takes time to get your steering accurate enough to sail fast through waves, shifts and gusts. Therefore, you should allow a reasonable period to get the feel of a different class before giving it up as too hard. If you often sail different classes of boat, don't spend too much time in one class before an important championship in another.

In summary, to get the best out of your practice:

- Introduce simplest skills first
- Gradually add more intensity and demand until the skill can be performed in the most difficult of situations.
- Use cue words and imagery to get the timing right.
- Remember that interest and enthusiasm are the parents of skill.

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