

The Warm and Dry Winter Sailor

By Dave Cannard

The two most important factors in dressing for winter sailing are staying warm and keeping dry. Next is to retain some freedom of movement and not be puffed up like the Michelin Man. Wearing the proper clothing is an important safety issue and helps to avoid hypothermia. A warm and dry sailor is more comfortable, has more fun, can sail longer, and can focus their energy on sailing technique rather than being distracted by being miserable. Appropriate clothing will be required to go out sailing during practices. There will be a gear locker for the High School Sailing Program which is being stocked with some extra clothing to help out on days something is left at home, or if someone needs to borrow an item to augment their outfit.

The sailor needs clothing that wicks moisture (sweat) away from the skin, retains warmth even when wet, and keeps the rain and spray off. The key is dressing in layers with each layer performing slightly different tasks and working together to help the sailor stay comfortable. Dressing in layers also makes it easier for the sailor to adjust layers to suit the conditions.

Synthetics vs. Cotton

No one should be out sailing in cotton. Cotton absorbs water and does not retain warmth when it is wet. Synthetics designed for active outdoor activities do a much better job of moving moisture away from the skin, retaining warmth when wet and shedding rain and spray. **DO NOT** wear any cotton when sailing in anything other than the hot days of summer.

Base Layer

The base layer is what goes next to your skin. It should wick moisture away from the skin, dry quickly, and retain a thin layer of trapped warm air next to your skin, even when wet. It also can help avoid chaffing or rubbing from some of the outer layers. Wear pants and a long sleeved top in the winter, short sleeve t-shirts are available for warmer seasons. To work best it should fit closely, but not so tightly it constricts movement or blood flow. Comes in 2 or 3 weights, the lightweight or mid-weight material is best, the heavy weight models will probably be too warm once you are actively sailing. Examples: Polypropylene Long Underwear, Capelene underwear

Warmth Layer

This is the middle layer and its main function is to insulate the body. Most sailors will probably start out with synthetic fleece pants or bibs, and a jacket. Another option is a wet suit which is quite warm but they can restrict movement due to their tight fit and the thickness of the material. A farmer John or Jane cut wet suit (sleeveless leg and torso one piece suit) can alleviate some of the movement issues but will require some other layer like a fleece jacket to add warmth to your arms. More advanced or committed sailors may opt for specialized clothing designed for dinghy sailing such as neoprene hiking bibs. These are bib style neoprene pants with pads in key spots and fiberglass battens under the thigh to make hiking out over the edge of the boat more comfortable. Examples: Polypropylene Fleece, Synchronia Fleece, Neoprene Wet Suits, SEA Hiking Pants.

Outer Layer

This layer is designed to protect from rain, spray and wind. Most sailors opt for a bib or pant made from waterproof nylon and a jacket of some waterproof/breathable fabric like Goretex. In addition to rain and spray from the outside, an active dinghy sailor will be perspiring and if some of that moisture can evaporate out through a vapor breathable fabric like Goretex, the sailor will be dryer and more comfortable. Due to the constant water contact and the abrasion of the deck, the bibs or pants used are often nylon coated with a waterproof coating, with a second layer of reinforcing fabric on the bottom and maybe the knees. Bibs are generally preferred so that if your jacket creeps up the rest of the fleet doesn't view your plumber's crack and you won't have a dose of cold air or water hit your back side.

A good jacket is essential. Qualities to look for are freedom of movement, good fit, tight seals around the neck, waist and wrists, waterproof, and breathable. Many sailors start out with a good quality waterproof/breathable rain coat designed for backpacking or even a foul weather jacket. These are serviceable and certainly many, many sailors have done fine in such garb. But they are bulky, sometimes restrict movement, often the tails are longer and wrap down around the hips and get in the way and most importantly they usually lack the tight seals around openings. If you are able to splurge on one piece of clothing, a good Spray Top designed for dinghy sailing is the item. A good top will embrace all the qualities listed above and provide many years of service. Spray tops are short waisted and seal around the waist for water tightness as well as allowing full flex at the waist for the sailor, they do not have hoods to blow around in the wind and restrict visibility but have neoprene wet suit like seals around the neck to seal out water and hold in the heat.

Hat

A hat is essential to helping to stay warm and dry. A fleece beanie is good, a fleece hat with a nylon shell which includes ear flaps is even warmer and cuts the wind better (and they come in everything from camouflage and fluorescent orange, to Northern Minnesota Plaid, to your basic solid nylon colors). Having a couple of hats in your duffle bag gives you some options depending on the day.

Boots and Socks

After you splurge on a Spray Top, get a pair of dinghy sailing boots. Your feet will always be wet in a small boat and these neoprene boots will save the day. The heavy neoprene boots stay warm when soaked, the hard rubber soles provide support for walking on the docks and grip the cockpit sole well. A pair of polypro socks will add warmth and give you one more thing to launder with the polypro long underwear.

Gloves

Opinions vary on the use of gloves. Some want the feel of the sheet and tiller in their bare hand, some opt for sailing gloves and some opt for less expensive but effective gardening gloves. It is really personal preference. Sailing gloves come full fingered or part fingered, even some with some full fingers and some part fingered in the same glove. An inexpensive alternative are gardening gloves – the kind with grippy rubber on the palm and fingers, and a stretchy fabric on the back and wrist – they grip well, are very flexible and you won't feel bad when you lose them.

Watch

Every sailor should have a waterproof watch with a countdown timer for timing race starts. A basic Casio or Timex waterproof watch with countdown timer will do just great. If you really get into racing, special sailing watches and timers are available, but they are unnecessary initially.

PFJ (Personal Flotation Device in Coast Guard language, also known as a Life Jacket)

A required safety item for every sailor. Get a good one that fits well over all your clothing, allows easy movement, has the flotation concentrated on your lower chest, belly, and back, and has smooth low profile straps over the shoulders that will not catch on the mainsheet when ducking under the boom. Obtain the best you can, this is an important safety item and something you don't want to skimp on.

Duffle

Every sailor should set up a duffle for all their gear so they have one place to keep it handy and ready to go and not need to search for it in several spots around the house every time you head out to sail.

Where to obtain clothing and equipment

If you are new to sailing or have only sailed in the summer, this list may seem daunting and overwhelmingly expensive. It needn't be. Many sailors find they have many items already that will work for some time and they can upgrade if their commitment grows and as their finances allow. Taking it one step at a time allows you to see what is working well for others in the group, maybe try out some different combinations and determine what will be best for you. Seek out other sailors, friends, family and neighbors. Some may have clothing to loan or give you as you get started. Many adult sailors are excited to see younger sailors get started and may have just the right item to share with you.

It is important to support our local shops whenever we can. For specialized sailing garb and equipment, I encourage you to contact West Coast Sailing here in Portland. There is no one more knowledgeable about dinghy clothing and gear or anyone more enthusiastic or more supportive of the High School Sailing Program than George Yioulos at West Coast Sailing. He is located at 721 N Tillamook, near Emanuel Hospital, just off Interstate Ave. and his phone number is 503-285-5536. Just stopping by his shop for a chat will get you excited to go out sailing.

Having said that, some of us need to bargain hunt for some of our clothing or we couldn't be out enjoying this sport. I don't like to share my bargain secrets and risk losing out on just the right item when you scoop it up before me, but these young sailors should have the opportunity to enjoy the sport even if they don't have a huge pocketbook. Below are a few ideas on where you might find some bargains on new or pre-owned clothing. Don't forget to look for seasonal sales, after holiday markdowns and closeouts.

REI (Multiple area stores, online and mail order)

Offers a huge selection of outdoor clothing including long underwear, fleece, outerwear, and synthetic hats and socks. Also holds swap meets occasionally where you may find some fleece or outerwear.

Next Adventure (426 SE Grand Blvd, 503-233-0706)

A shop filled with bargain outdoor clothing and equipment, some new, some closeouts, some used. I haven't seen much sailing gear here but some general outdoor clothing works fine for sailing, particularly paddling gear.

Alder Creek Kayak and Canoe (250 NE Tomahawk Island Dr – east of Jantzen Beach, 503-285-0464)

Large selection of paddling clothing and PFDs suited to active sailing as well.

Title Nine Sports (1335 NW Kearney St., 503-243-2220)

Focused on active sports clothing for women, this store has some wonderful clothing designed for and fit for women. The company was founded and is run by an old friend of mine, Missy Park. (When we left the North Face, I chose not to join her in helping found the company and instead sailed off into the sunset with my family on our boat. Hmmm, now she is running a successful chain of stores and I am bargain hunting for long underwear.)

GI Joes, Sports Authority, and others

These sports stores do not cater to sailors much, but you can find fleece, hats, long underwear and socks here.

Factory Outlets

Sometimes factory outlet stores like the ones in Troutdale and Woodburn have what you are looking for. Try the Helly Hansen store in Woodburn.

Sierra Trading Post (www.sierratradingpost.com)

A large online retailer (Unless you are in Cheyenne, Wyoming or Reno, Nevada) of closeouts, seconds, last year's colors, etc. Geared more towards general outdoor clothing and gear, but lots of bargains on underwear, bibs, pants, hats, socks, outerwear and so on. Stock changes frequently and you can sign up for specific department email alerts, I think.

Target

A good source for waterproof watches and I have found inexpensive fleece jackets here off and on over the years.

Goodwill, Salvation Army, American Cancer Society, and others

These thrift stores often have some fleece and occasionally some decent rainwear. If one of these stores is near your normal route, stop by occasionally and check for that special something.

Catlin Gabel Rummage Sale (Portland Expo Center)

It only happens once a year for 4 days (Thurs – Sun, the 1st weekend in Nov) so you have to plan ahead. You never know what you'll find, but it has a large sporting goods department and there is always lots of fleece, some wet suits, hats and sometimes some appropriate outerwear. Often you can find name brand jackets like Patagonia, The North Face, and Mountain Hardware for a few dollars. Also check the Mens, Womens, Girls, and Boys departments for fleece, it doesn't always end up in Sporting Goods.