

Crewing on the Inland Cat

By Jack Stiefel, with Janie Paoletta-Smith and Nancy Stiefel

How do you maximize the performance of the Inland Cat sailboat? Much has been spoken on that subject, but the role of the crew person in contributing to good performance has been largely overlooked. This article is an attempt to correct that omission. Janie Paoletta-Smith and Nancy Stiefel are experienced and highly skilled Inland Cat crew. At one of the 2009 rules and tactics sessions, they shared their perspectives on crewing. This article is substantially a collection of their ideas.

History:

When the Inland Cat Class Sailing Association was founded in 1957, Norm Bell, John Larimore, and the early members felt strongly that a crew should be an integral part of the Inland Cat racing experience. Though the Inland Cat was designed to be comfortably sailed by one person, it was deemed essential for each skipper to have a crew while racing. That arrangement fit nicely with the family orientation of the early fleet and encouraged the involvement of a maximum number of people.

The first and second edition of the fleet by-laws *required* a crew for all boats that raced. The size of the fleet grew and reached its zenith in the mid-1980s. As the number of participating boats thereafter started to decrease, the case was made that the difficulty of finding a crew kept some skippers from racing. So the by-laws were amended and racing without a crew became permissible. Having a crew, however, was still recognized as desirable for reasons of added participation and increased safety, so those racing without a crew incurred a scoring penalty. This stipulation continues to apply, and the vast majority of Inland Cat skippers still seeks out and enjoys the assistance of a crew.

Why Have a Crew?

The benefits for skippers who race with a crew are numerous. Not the least of these benefits is having another person to share the experiences: the lifts (and headers), the good mark roundings (and penalty turns), the good finishes (and the capsizes!). A mature crew provides a second pair of eyes watching for other boats and is an important safety factor. A knowledgeable crew is critical for maximum boat performance and for aiding in tactical decision-making. Crews are helpful, too, in making adjustments to lines not easily reached by skippers.

A skipper who takes the time and effort to arrange for a crew can reap handsome dividends. Once the crew is lined up, the skipper should help the crew become knowledgeable and skillful in his/her role. Becoming a successful skipper/crew team requires effort and experience. This article is intended to hasten that development.

Communication:

Audible and easily understood communication between skipper and crew is essential.

- Talk loudly. It is difficult to hear when the hull is pounding through waves, the wind is blowing, and you are facing away from the other person in the boat.
- Verbalize intentions. For safety, communication needs to occur before major actions are taken. Before a tack is executed the skipper can say, "Ready about" (or "Prepare to tack"); the crew can respond with "Ready" or "No!" When the skipper executes the tack, he/she can say "Tacking" (or "Coming about.")
Before a jibe, the skipper can hail "Prepare to jibe" with the crew replying "Ready" or "No!" Just before the boom comes across, the skipper can say "Jibe" and then "Ho!" as the boom crosses. As the boat approaches a mark, is about to be tacked, or is about to be jibed, a skipper should preview the actions he/she wants the crew to take before and immediately after those maneuvers.
When the skipper gives the crew directions regarding movement in the boat, precise language should be used. For example, *up* (to the gunwale) *down* (to the floor), *straddle* (the centerboard), *forward* (toward the front of the boat), *back* (toward the back of the boat).
- Be precise and concise. When reporting observations, the crew needs to be as precise as possible. For example, "Another boat is approaching from the right and is 10 boat lengths away" instead of "Here comes a boat." The crew also needs to focus on what is relevant and important. An over-abundance of information can overwhelm and/or distract the skipper.
- Be positive. There is a significant psychological aspect to competitive sailing. Being upbeat and not dwelling on mistakes is important. The crew should report positive developments: "You're pointing higher than boat #200," "Boat #200 is pointing higher, but your boat speed is better," "Good mark rounding!"
Skippers need to be positive as well: "Your hiking is really helping keep the boat flat," "Nice smooth move on that tack," "Sure is nice to have you out here with me!" If things go wrong or mistakes are made, wait until you're back at the dock before doing a detailed analysis.
- Be compliant. The crew should try to do exactly what the skipper asks. Competitive sailing produces tension. The skipper may sometimes brusquely tell the crew what to do. A crew should not take it personally but understand it in the context of tension. Regardless, a skipper should make every effort to communicate respectfully. Arguing or complaining by either the crew or the skipper takes attention away from racing and should be avoided.
- Learn terminology. Sailing has its own language. A crew that acquires the meaning of sailing terms and learns the principles of sailing is a valuable asset. Some of this can be acquired from on-the-water experience, but checking out a basic sailing book from the fleet library is also recommended.

Keeping Time:

To get a good start, a skipper needs to know precisely how much time is left until the starting signal. The crew should know the countdown sequence and flag signals, carefully watch the raft for the signals, and start the stopwatch accurately. During the countdown sequence, the crew should report the time remaining each minute after the five minute signal and then in smaller increments inside one minute as arranged with the skipper. A skilled crew will focus on time keeping and boat balance at the same time; hiking may be needed as the boat approaches the starting line. The crew can also assist at the start by informing the skipper of the approach or presence of nearby boats, but being aware of the surroundings is primarily the responsibility of the skipper.

Boat Balance:

While a crew needs to be much more than “moveable ballast,” helping keep the boat properly balanced is critically important.

- Move smoothly. Crew movement should be fluid; think of “slow dancing.” When moving across the boat, keep the upper torso bent over to lower the center of gravity. Time your movement during a tack so that your body moves across the center of the boat just as the boom crosses the centerline. During a jibe, the crew should be sure to duck when the boom comes across and shift his/her weight to the predetermined side of the boat.
- Know the skipper’s preference. Be aware of whether the skipper wants the boat flat or heeled. With experience, a crew will develop the valuable sense of where to position his/her body without direction from the skipper. But even with highly experienced skipper/crew teams, it is essential to talk about who is going to do what in terms of boat balance. For example, is it the crew or the skipper who is going to get up on the gunwale during a moderate puff? Does the skipper want the crew to adjust for wind speed variations or to stay put while the adjustments are made by the skipper?
- Hike when needed. When going upwind in windy conditions, the crew needs to hike in order to keep the boat as flat as possible. Hiking can be physically demanding. The boat owner should make the experience for the crew as comfortable as possible by installing padded hiking straps. A rope should also be installed for the crew to hold for an easier return from a full-hike position.
- Fore and aft placement. The standard crew position is at the front of the cockpit. However, on an upwind leg when large powerboat waves are encountered in light to moderate wind, it will help for the crew to lean forward with the upper torso on the deck. Also, on a run or broad reach when the wind is strong, the crew may be asked to move toward the back of the boat.

Observation and Reporting:

A crew can provide valuable information based on what he/she sees.

- Observe boats, wind, and waves. A skipper is focused mainly on the sail with only rare opportunities to survey what is happening around him/her. The crew can watch the bigger picture and keep the skipper informed regarding other boats, wind, and waves; a good crew has busy eyes! Two heads are better than one.

- Going upwind. On an upwind leg when on opposite tacks with other boats, the crew needs to keep the skipper informed about approaching boats. This information is essential to avoid dangerous collisions and rules violations and it also helps the skipper make sound tactical decisions. On the upwind leg, it is also helpful for the crew to observe if boats ahead get headed or lifted, if certain other boats are gaining or losing ground, and which tack certain competitors are on.
- Going downwind. On reaches and runs, the crew's attention shifts to boats that are behind, so it is helpful for the crew to sit facing the rear of the boat when hiking is not required. Here the crew keeps the skipper apprised of boats that are trying to "steal" his wind. Pointing toward an over-taking boat (or describing its movements) permits the skipper to make tactical moves to prevent being passed. During light wind runs, the skipper may ask the crew to hold the boom out to help keep the sail full. To complete a jibe in light wind (only), a skipper may ask the crew to grab the boom and pull it across to the other side of the boat.
- Wind awareness. The wind on Lake George is never constant. The crew needs to understand what direction the wind is coming from and be sensitive to variations in wind speed and direction. Wind direction can be determined by the wind indicator at the top of the mast or tell tales on the shrouds, as well as by flags either on shore or on the Race Committee boat. Puffs or areas of better wind are indicated by ripples and a darker color on the water surface. Going upwind, it is helpful for the crew to keep the skipper informed about lulls and patches of better wind. Let him/her know if they seem to be approaching from directly upwind, upwind to the right, or upwind to the left. This will help the skipper decide which tack to take to get to the better wind.
- Gusts. On every leg of the course, both skipper and crew need to know about significant gusts that are approaching. The crew can estimate the arrival of a gust by counting down: "We'll get a gust in 5-4-3-2-1." Slow or speed the countdown to adjust for the actual arrival of the gust. Then, on upwind legs and reaches, just before the puff arrives, both skipper and crew can hike!
- Waves. As the boat approaches waves (or vice versa), the crew should inform the skipper of the spatial relationship between the boat and the waves: "Waves 20 feet away coming from the right." Sometimes, a variation in course by the skipper can lessen the negative effect of waves.

Adjusting Controls:

The crew may have to identify and adjust control lines.

- Which ones and how much? The skipper may ask the crew to tighten or loosen the outhaul, the cunningham, or the boomvang. Either the crew should know these terms or the boat needs to be rigged with color-coded lines. It is helpful for the skipper to mark these lines to make precise adjustments easier. A crew can respond more precisely to "Ease the outhaul to green" than to "Ease the outhaul a little." In the absence of marks on the control lines, the skipper's directions need to be specific, e.g., "Loosen the cunningham an inch" or "Tighten the boomvang as much as you can."
- Sheet problems on a jibe. On the Inland Cat, it is common during jibes for the main sheet to get hooked around the rear corner of the boat. It is a good practice for the skipper and crew to work out some kind of communication from the crew so that the skipper knows whether or not the sheet is hooked at the conclusion of a jibe.

- Sheet tangling. The boat's lengthy sheet will occasionally get tangled as it lies on the floor of the cockpit. Untangling it is another task a crew can do while the skipper keeps focused on making the Inland Cat go!

Have Fun!

Crewing on an Inland Cat offers the opportunity to experience the excitement of competitive sailboat racing, learn sailing language, acquire crewing techniques, form an effective team relationship, be appreciated, see your team's performance improve...and have fun!!