

Race Committee Is The Key To A Memorable Green Fleet Experience

by Scott Corder

VIEW YOUR EVENT THROUGH THE EYES OF YOUR AUDIENCE!

First and foremost, the Green Fleet experience at any event must be customer-focused, with the customer being the kids and their parents. We need to remain constantly mindful that nearly all kids who try Opti racing have never heard of - and very few will ever ponder trying to qualify for - a Nationals Team.

PARENTS ARE GREENIES TOO!

The truth is, parents of Green Fleeters are usually as “green” as their kids. These parents often have even less knowledge than their children about how sailboats or regattas operate. Green Fleet parents can (and should) learn as much as their kids at a Green Fleet event. The goal of any Green Fleet event should always be no more complicated than for Greenies to really want to sail again in the future – and for their parents to feel even more comfortable and confident about continuing to support their child’s interest in the sport.

PICK THE RIGHT PEOPLE.

The selection of an RC or PRO with the right personality for Green Fleet is critical. In many cases, this might not be the “senior” or “veteran” club PRO but perhaps one of the local sailing instructors or coaches who has more experience with kids and a kid-oriented learning environment. The Green Fleet PRO should be the sailor’s friend and mentor on the water, not an angry disciplinarian who only speaks when rules are broken. A talkative or “chatty” PRO really helps.

SET THE STAGE FOR SUCCESS.

Too often, event organizers simply apply the same Sailing Instructions to both RWB and Green Fleet - and merely put the Green Fleet on a different “circle” for the sake of keeping slower kids “out of the way”. While the Racing Rules of Sailing (RRS) have been carefully designed to apply to all sailboat racing - the RRS also give event organizers the freedom and power to tweak and change many of these rules to fit the desires of their customers – and when Green Fleet is our customer we should do exactly that! The fact is a Green Fleet event is likely to be the first time most of these kids have even heard the term “Sailing Instructions”.

CREATE A SEPARATE SET OF SAILING INSTRUCTIONS DESIGNED SPECIFICALLY FOR THE GREEN FLEET.

With the help of your carefully selected Green Fleet PRO, take the time to create a simplified set of Sailing Instructions specifically designed for Green Fleet. Get rid of complex procedures and protest instructions. Whenever possible, change the wording to terms the kids will understand. Simplify the course layout and the starting sequence. Edit it all down to something that easily fits on two sides of one sheet of paper.

And then...



USE THE SAILING INSTRUCTIONS AT THE COMPETITORS MEETING TO TEACH THE KIDS AND THEIR PARENTS.

Give each kid (and their parents) a copy of your simplified Sailing Instructions. A thorough review of your simplified SI’s (with their coaches and parents in attendance) is extremely valuable to both the kids and their parents. This does not require a great amount of time and can actually be very fun if presented in a kid-friendly manner. This also trains kids to read the SI’s at future events.

Review some of the simplest RRS Racing Rules. Ask them to repeat back to you how the start works. Have them explain why safety is important. Have them draw the course on a white board. You will see an obvious understanding and appreciation on the faces of the parents – and the kids will display a much better knowledge of what to do when you get out on the water.

USE LAUNCH TIME TO TEACH.

Enlist Green Fleet coaches to help the PRO do a brief safety and rigging inspection as each of the kids launch their boats. Have the parents observe and take part. Just like the competitors meeting, this is a great opportunity to teach as well as reiterate to parents the importance of safety and proper rigging. Offering a few “this will help you go faster” tips in the process is a great way to make this fun for the kids



KEEP THE FRIENDLY DIALOG GOING ON THE WATER.

The more the Green Fleet PRO/RC can “chat” with the kids (and their parents) on the water the better. As the photo above illustrates, I always use a bull horn when I am the Greenie PRO (or something similar when my bullhorn stops working).

Establishing an open, two-way dialog with the kids helps the Race Committee learn the sailor's first names so they can be called out by name when necessary. Be "chatty" and even joke around a little with the kids during pre-start and start sequences. Compliment them, give them tips, remind them how things work and gently reiterate safety and rules where necessary. This really helps them to remember why they are doing certain things and to retain what they learning. This also helps reveal which kids are anxious, which kids are "getting it" and even those who are prone to bending the rules a little. Having an open dialog enables the PRO to encourage, discourage and gently guide as is needed.



REVIEW THE DAY BACK ON SHORE.

After everyone has returned to shore and all the boats are put away, gather the Green Fleet for a brief "chalk talk" review of the things they did well – and the things they struggled with. Make this fun. Cheerfully point out their successes. Don't lecture them. Instead, let the kids try to figure out how they could have done some things better – and gently guide them to the right answers. Have a white board handy where they can draw pictures. And... as with the competitors meeting, encourage parents to take part in this session. Everyone learns!!!

DON'T FORGET LIFELONG LESSONS. Beyond self-reliance, sportsmanship and good manners are equally important lessons in Green Fleet. Greenies should always be reminded to be polite and stay clear of others who have not yet finished (not just because it's in the Rules, but because it's the polite thing to do).

Greenies should also learn that the very first thing they always do after they finish each race is say thank you to the Race Committee - here and wherever they may sail in the future (again, it's simply good manners). They should also be encouraged to cheer for their fellow sailors, especially when a straggler finally finishes. Finally, they should thank their parents when we all get back to shore. These lessons not only apply to life in general, good habits like this will make these kids much better representatives of our sport as they advance and become adults.

REMEMBER TO VIEW YOUR EVENT THROUGH THE EYES OF YOUR AUDIENCE! The bottom line is that Greenies and their parents are our customers - and deserve a customer-focused, learning experience. This requires not only an appropriate set of Sailing Instructions, but also the right RC personnel and a friendly, open dialog both on and off the water.

SOME FUN TIPS FOR THE GREEN FLEET PRO:

- Do a mid course start and finish line to keep the kids within easy view and hailing distance if possible.
- Do single lap races to keep stragglers from falling too far behind and becoming discouraged. Kids love lots of starts - and it's great practice for them.
- Unconventional marks can add some fun to the event. Large inflatable pool toys can be fun, especially if it helps the kids know how to navigate the course.
- If the kids are really "getting it", consider doing the last race of the day or event backwards around the course using a downwind start. This can be huge fun! It also gives those who typically struggle at the start a much better chance to experience a crowded first leg and rounding at the first mark.
- It seems kids always want to know "How many more races are we gonna do?" A great way to answer this is to say (with a big smile): "A million!"
- When they ask "How did I do in that race?" Answer with a smile: "How do you think you did?"
- Try to teach the kids a little something each day. For example, fly the postponement flag and ask them what they all think it looks like. The answer is almost always "A candy cane", "Dr Seuss" or "Where's Waldo?" Then explain the flag to them, have them repeat it back to you, and move on. A good way to repeat this lesson later in the day is to fly the postponement flag when you do a water or snack break.
- Chat with the coaches, parents and spectators on the water whenever possible, especially when you see kids do something well. This give coaches good material to teach from and helps parents feel that this experience was worth their time, effort, and perhaps even some parental anxiety. Establishing a friendly dialog is also very useful if you need their help for any reason.

KEEP IN MIND THAT YOUR AUDIENCE AND INFLUENCE EXTENDS FAR BEYOND YOUR GREENIES AND THEIR PARENTS.

In addition to their personal interest in sailing, Greenies are often the core (and future) of their local club's sailing program. When we help the youngest of their sailors develop a lifelong love of sailing in general, we do a great service for these clubs and our sport. Furthermore, the manner in which we do this influences the way these local clubs conduct their Green Fleet events.

