

Different Strokes – A Trophy for Fun?

Yes, a major trophy for FUN...and some other good ideas.

BY RON SCHAUBLE

The pure essence of our sport is that– Sailing is Fun! Our club provides a major trophy for the crew that has the most fun during the season. Here are some thoughts...

Sailing is easy. Sailboat racing is a little more difficult. Winning may be the hardest thing many people will ever try to accomplish. If your fleet puts most of its emphasis on winning, it is probably either losing members or not up to its potential. Sailboat racing is often the core of a club or a fleet, and winning is the reason for racing. But fun is still the reason we are all there. We need to make our sport fun for all participants. When you are making up your fleet schedule, take a look at some options:

Raise the learning curve for both skippers and crew-- If someone is always at the back, they will quit having fun and drop out. Likewise, raise the skill level of crew to not only improve the boat's performance but to keep the crew upbeat and maybe move them into the skipper ranks. The Thistle Class started Coach TCA some years back at the Midwinters. This is a several morning classroom course taught by top racers followed by several mornings with a mentor going out with the boat for on the water work. This type of program can be easily set up on the club and fleet level. There are also several excellent YouTube videos to raise skills. Thistle University, 45 minutes, was designed specifically to raise the skill level of crew. Better crew skills = better boat performance = more fun for all. Safer too.

Create more trophies and awards. — Everybody is a winner! We don't want to water the product, but we can think of many things that it would be fun to present an award for: most miles driven to race, most capsizes, best improvement, anything to keep the enthusiasm up. Have some mini-series. Awards need not be expensive. Great items can be found at garage and estate sales. Nothing is more boring than only awarding trophies for one long season series that was probably decided in June and will probably have only two or three serious competitors.

Vary your racing format-- A steady diet of formal left turns around marks will make many head for the golf course. You probably have strict sailing instructions on regular racing, but vary these on other days:

- Sprints: Try a day of 5 to 10 very short races. Starts and the windward leg are the most fun.
- Match racing and team racing: These raise the learning curve and are great fun. Our club has a Two-of-a-Kind race one day in the summer. Two boats in the same class sail together as a team. The skill/winning level of each boat is matched for balanced teams. A top boat is matched with a new skipper or slower boat.
- Long-distance events: Sail to the dam and back or around the shore of the lake. San Diego Snipers do a 24-hour race.
- Rallies: Copy some road rally events. Have a Time/Speed/Distance rally, or a gimmick rally. For a gimmick rally, print a list of items to be found on the lake: number on a boathouse, odd shaped tree, etc. Everybody sets sail to find the items; first one back with a full list wins.
- Try some double handed or even singlehanded races. The Thistle ideally races three handed but often is raced two handed. The Toucan Duet Regatta specifies two crew. It is a success because it brings out people who normally do not feel competitive sailing two-handed and allows them to race on an even level with the other boats. Two handed boats such as Snipes or Comets could race in a single-handed event.

- We have heard about a race down in the Gulf around Halloween time where they have goofy PHRF adjustments. For example if you have a BBQ grill on your boat, you get a PHRF correction, if you have a dog on your boat, a bunch of bananas, etc. There is a story about a guy with a Melges 24 who put a BBQ grill on his stern pulpit rail just for this reason. People could get really creative with something like this and the people that go over the top win that type of race.

Social events-- The Kansas City Ski Club is famous for having several thousand members of which only several hundred ever actually ski. The club has one great party each month, and they are legendary. Plan to schedule at least one fleet event every month, and invite some nonsailing friends. Many people join fleets or clubs specifically for the social activities. They participate in the races, but they really live for the non-racing interaction and meeting new people. Après-ski is fun for the skiers and Après-race is a lot of fun for sailors. Many sail without the benefit of club houses. There is the park shelter or dry sail lot. We have seen some top parties after all the boats are back in the lot and each crew brings out the tailgate items. Set up a grill and have a Buck-A-Burger event.

Involve the whole family-- The great competition to sailing is the plethora of sport options available to others in the family. Find a way to involve other family members in the sport and you will have less objection to taking the boat out.

Have a dynamic fleet newsletter with articles on all the fun things the fleet is doing (not just the box scores). Make sure everyone gets their name in the paper, Some of the tightest racing may be the two that are trying not to be last.

Don't oversell-- Spending all your spare time on the phone calling other members and urging them to get out on the water will eventually get a negative response, and people will start avoiding calls. However, check with the other skippers and crew regularly to see if they need help with their boat, rigging changes, or if they just need a little help with something such as finding new crew.

Create a "buddy" program-- Match someone who has been in the club or fleet for a time with a new person/boat. Make sure the new person meets the others, help them with their boat and skills, and contact them if they miss a few weekends just to see if the boat or crew are OK.

Don't burn yourself out on the boat, the fleet, and the sport. Share the load, and don't make participation a job. Maybe someone had a bad week and just wants a weekend alone.

Sail tough or go home-- We tried that philosophy one season, and we had a lot of people go home. Sail tough if you must, but keep tongue in cheek while you do. Keep the sport fun for yourself and others. You will have a better time, and sail a much better race. Most of all you will start seeing more people sailing.

Article excerpted from — Sailing Is Fun! —In The Bagpipe, the Thistle Class newsletter.