

Size matters

'It is up to us as instructors to make it as easy as possible for novice sailors to succeed.'

Novice sailors' learning is our responsibility no matter what the conditions or equipment. A sympathetic instructor makes all the difference to the sailor. Remember, one reason for the long term success of the RYA Method is that the techniques taught can be changed to suit different boats and sailors.

While there are some variations in the Dinghy Coaching Handbook, this deals mainly with different boat types. Different sizes of sailor also make a difference! Teaching very big or immobile people can require a slightly different 'toolkit', particularly if one is forced to use a small single-handed dinghy for a big adult.

For big adults, just getting under the boom can be an issue, and the smallest movement by the sailor has a big effect on the balance of the boat, potentially undermining their confidence. Watching a bigger person struggle their way around a Pico makes it clear that the boat is part of the problem – arguably in an ideal world there should be a boat for everyone. Good footwork unlocks many problems, but not if the boat is too small for the sailor.

Here are a variety of suggestions from experienced instructors, designed to help the larger novice succeed quickly.

The choice of boat

The boat with the highest boom is not always the best choice – the shape of the cockpit is important. Big sailors

need to get their feet underneath them so they can move across the boat smoothly. Mainsheet hoops can be a great help, giving a good handhold which can compensate for poor footwork.

Taking all this into account, the perfect dinghy for big people might be a Wayfarer with a high boom, a mainsheet hoop, no back seats and Laser 1 type grab rails!

A really big sailor is often best taught in a boat such as a Stratos, GP14 or Wayfarer. These have better visibility and the mechanical skills of tacking and gybing are much easier to pick up because the movements are easier and the platform much more stable. In really extreme cases, a keelboat can be a good alternative, moving back into dinghies once the basics have been mastered.

Some things to consider:

- Wayfarer seats force the feet inboard making the first move harder. The problem is compounded if the sailor moves onto the inside seat as they will be lower in the boat, making it harder to move across. It helps if you take the seats out.

- Handholds are important. Using the mainsheet hand to push against the side of the boat can help. This can take the place of a mainsheet hoop by giving the sailor a push off, helping to get their feet underneath them.
- The Laser 1 is a good example of a hard boat for big sailors to tack and gybe. The problem is the same – it's hard to get your feet underneath you and you don't want to stand up. Holding the grab rail or the toe strap with the mainsheet hand helps pull them into the centre of the boat.
- Try using a Funboat to start with. Get the timing right by just rotating on bums, before moving on to a Pico or similar.
- The RS Feva seems wider and more stable than the Pico or Topper.
- Empathise with your students by having a go yourself. Try sailing the smallest boat available (Oppy, Taz, Coypu or similar). Many of us hate teaching in them because we can't tack or gybe them like kids can, but you will soon work out a variation on the method.

Tacking in centre mainsheet single-handers

A few things for your students to try:

- Do the tacking drills on a simulator, then do them again afloat in the shallows with a handkerchief size sail, while the instructor holds the boat. This gets sailors used to how they will be kneeling, sitting or rotating on the bum, and used to the lack of stability that will soon become the norm once released.
- Face forward during the tack. Let go of the mainsheet and swap hands behind the back, trying not to let go of the tiller. Releasing the mainsheet keeps hand swapping simple, and causes no significant loss of control.
- Rest the tiller extension on the 'new' windward gunwale as they cross the boat.
- Kneel in the cockpit, facing forward and slightly across. This is stable and secure, but may cause problems with knee joints.

- Consider introducing land-based, basic movement and balance exercises, helping them understand how to transfer their weight around the boat.

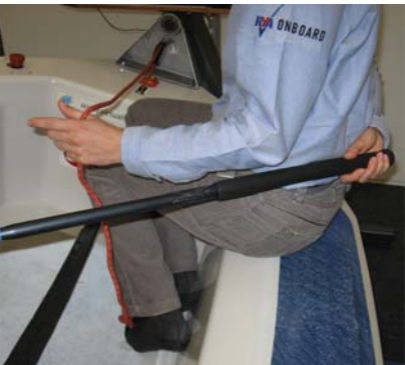
The tacking drill itself

Try to be less prescriptive on how to move across a boat, and allow folk to work out what works for them. Some will bum shuffle, some swivel on a knee and some need to grab a toe strap. Some good sailors use their tiller hand to pull and push off the deck, either due to mobility problems or when roll tacking at a steep angle. Emphasise how to get the boat turned and when the sailor needs to move. Then suggest ways to adapt or improve how they most naturally cross the boat and change hands. Keep it simple!

- Do not rush the tacking drill: a small and gentle tiller movement reduces the requirement to rush across the boat.
- Aft mainsheet boats are good for people who lack mobility or flexibility but you may need to adapt the hand change over. Many people are unable to join their hands behind their back, or to pass something between their hands accurately. In a Pico, rig the boat for aft mainsheet, tie back the tiller extension or remove it completely. Use the aft mainsheet method, but with the tiller extension tucked away and mainsheet trapped under the thumb.
- If the height of the boom is more of an issue than agility, then basic roll tacking at an early stage can help (as early as the Start Sailing course if appropriate). Rolling the boat creates a space to move into when the sail has come across. Ease the tiller away, ease the sheet a bit and wait for the sail to cross the boat so far that the boom is behind the sailor's head and the boat is heeling over. Only then, cross the boat. For the conventional drill, steer for a while before changing hands.
- For centre mainsheet boats try the 'gun method'. Follow the tacking guidelines in G14, until 'he centralises the tiller as the sail fills...' and then continue with:



Mark Covell with his helm Ian Walker - silver medallists in the Soling class at the Sydney Olympics. Proof that bigger sailors can get to grips with sailing!



Centralise the tiller as the sail fills. Bring the sheet hand across the body, holding the mainsheet in the 'cup' of your hand using thumb and nearest finger to make a gun shape pointing towards the rudder.



Pick up the tiller extension with your gun shaped hand, taking the new front hand forward behind the back to pick up the mainsheet. Release the mainsheet from the gun shaped hand.



Simply rotate the tiller extension in front of you with the back (gun shaped) hand, which becomes a 'dagger' grip.

The same process can be used for a gybe, changing the one point from G14 starting 'helmsman brings sheet hand...'

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