

US SAILING's Requirement for PFDs

The 1998 - 1999 edition of the Special Regulations Governing Offshore Racing will contain the following US SAILING Prescription to Paragraph 5.1:

US SAILING prescribes that all personnel on deck shall wear personal flotation while starting and finishing without exception, and at all other times except when the captain of the boat directs that it may be set aside.

Categories

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Observations

1. Paragraph 5.1 is the section on Lifejackets.
 2. The Prescription is to the ORC Regulations and has no impact on a race unless the ORC Regulations are invoked for that race. The Categories to which the Prescription applies include the most-used Category around eastern Long Island Sound, Category 4.
 3. Off Soundings uses its own "Off Soundings Club Minimum Equipment and Accommodations Standard, dated April 2, 1994." That Standard is based on the then-current ORC Category 4 requirements. This new PFD Prescription is not a part of the 1994 Off Soundings Club Standard.
 4. The revised (1998 - 1999) ORC Regulations are likely to contain other new provisions and a review is being undertaken to determine if revisions are needed to the Off Soundings Standard, in addition to the consideration of the PFD question.
 5. Note that "personal flotation" is not limited to US Coast Guard approved devices. There are available several inflatable devices which are worn around the waist that, when inflated, provide the needed 35 lbs. of buoyancy. Some are actuated by lanyard, others by a dissolving seal. And, some of the newer, more comfortable devices are now Coast Guard approved.
 6. For boats other than those complying with the ORC Regulations, US SAILING has approved, on March 22, 1998 the following Resolution:

US SAILING strongly recommends that sailors wear a personal flotation device while on the water.

US SAILING strongly encourages all race organizing authorities and classes to include this recommendation in their Notice of Race and Sailing Instructions.
- It was stated that this is a recommendation to sailors, not a requirement. It is designed to increase awareness among sailors in the value of wearing PFDs.
7. A related item obtained from the Internet is attached.

This is a current column in the Southern California Log (bi-weekly boating publication) written by Rich Roberts [no relation to Dick Roberts, of New London]. 3/2/98

Four years ago it was Larry Klein. No life jacket.

Then it was a young woman in San Francisco's Vallejo race. No life jacket.

Makoto Namba, Japan's America's Cup skipper, in a race off Japan. No life jacket.

All gone. No life jackets.

And this a few weeks ago: "A Southport, Conn., sailor is missing after falling overboard in heavy weather during the Ft. Lauderdale to Key West Race. William Cargill, 42, father of two . . . was struck by the boom. Two crewmen witnessed the incident and attempted to rescue Cargill. . . Cargill, an experienced sailor, was not wearing a life jacket or safety harness."

But, you think, this is Southern California. When was a racing sailor last lost in Southern California?

Last month I was about to start a race in my little boat at Long Beach when the weather turned gnarly.

"Let's put on the life jackets, guys," I suggested to the crew, Mike Ludt and Dennis McComis.

Then we took a port start from the favored pin end of the line but couldn't quite cross a big starboard tackler, and as I pulled the tiller toward me to duck him, a pintle snapped from the pressure. Suddenly, I was holding a pool cue in my hand. I released the main sheet, but until one of the crew could scramble down to leeward to cut the big genoa we kept driving straight ahead at 5 1/2 knots on a dead-on collision course. One guy--Mike or Dennis, who knows, I had my eyes closed--got the sheet loose just in time and we missed catastrophe by inches.

"Boy," I said later, "I'm glad we had the jackets on." But, was I convinced?

Well . . .

Two weeks later, the Midwinters. First day, torrential rain and big winds, nobody goes out. Second day, sunny and dead calm going out, but the clarity of Santa Catalina Island meant that the wind was on its way, bigtime.

Nice moderate breeze for the first race, but building. I know of three people falling out of boats that day--a Star sailor and a woman off a J/35 at Manna del Rey, and a guy at Long Beach. The guy at Long Beach fell out of my boat.

We should have put on the life jackets before the second race. Instead, we ate lunch.

After flogging our way around the course, we set up for the last tack across the finish line. Mike went down to release the genoa just as we bounced off a wave, and over he went in a quick little backflip and a splash.

No life jacket.

I let the main go and tried to head up into irons, but Dennis couldn't release the genoa sheet. Mike was holding onto it at the stopper knot for dear life, surfing alongside.

"Stop the boat!" he yelled.

What could we say--OK, but you've got to let go of the sheet?

Somehow, Dennis got the sheet slack, we stopped, dropped a rope ladder over the side and hauled Mike on board. Happy ending. We were lucky.

The Star sailor was fine. He had a life jacket on. The J/35 woman wasn't wearing a jacket and had a bloody head wound but was picked up by a boat skippered by Chris Snow of North Sails. She was very lucky.

What struck me afterward about our incident was that there we were, not even 100 yards from the committee boat, with other boats in the area, and not another soul knew we had a problem.

And even if they did, what could they have done? Larry Klein was in the middle of San Francisco Bay with boats all around. The Vallejo woman had boats all around, but they couldn't grab her in the heavy chop.

It's very difficult to get back on board a sailboat, especially in rough seas, and if you're counting on outside help, you might as well be alone in the Southern Ocean.

Speaking of that, some of the Whitbread sailors have discovered that automatic inflatable PFDs work only too well, like anytime green water comes over the bow. But the manually inflatable ones aren't the answer, either. If you've been conked unconscious before you go over, who's going to blow up your vest?

What would you give then for a cumbersome, tacky, orange Styrofoam model?

Now there's a silly scheme to require racers to wear PFDs for the start and finish but, presumably, not in between. Who has time to put on a jacket during a race? The sailors are thinking about racing, not drowning.

It's time for race committees to take it upon themselves. Despite that fine-print waiver in the entry form, the rules imply their responsibility to act when conditions get rough.

Rule 40: "Personal buoyancy; life-saving equipment. When flag Y is displayed before or with the warning signal, competitors shall wear life jackets . . ."

The Y flag is the one with red and yellow diagonal stripes. It's now standard at San Francisco, since Larry Klein's death.

But when did you last see it in Southern California? Even on days when the wind blows so hard that racing is called, as it was in the Midwinters, you seldom--never--see the Y flag.

Shall we wait? Would you want to be the race officer who wishes to God he'd flown the Y?

It's time. After a very close call, my crew and I can live with it.

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