TECHNIQUES FOR RESCUING CAPSIZED CRAFT THAT HAVE GONE TURTLE

by N. Robbins and T. Brennan

Winter 1976 Issue of E-Reporter.

It was a windy and difficult sailing day when Ted and I recognized that it might be wise to write an article for the Reporter on the subject of rescuing sailboats which have gone turtle after capsizing. The setting was Pewaukee during the 1976 ILYA Class E Invitational and about six boats were over at one time - stretching the availability of knowledgeable pilots of rescue craft. The class F yacht will take almost any amount of steady wind, but because this wind increased significantly after the race started and more important, blew across the lake in hard hitting, direction changing puffs, that made it very difficult to get the boat in the groove. Hence, an inordinate number of capsizes.
It is not the purpose of this article to discuss the preventative measures for capsizing, nor to discuss personal safety during the event. Instead it is to help both skippers and spectators who are always potential rescue boat drivers effect an expeditious and safe rescue that does not damage either the sailboat or motor boat.

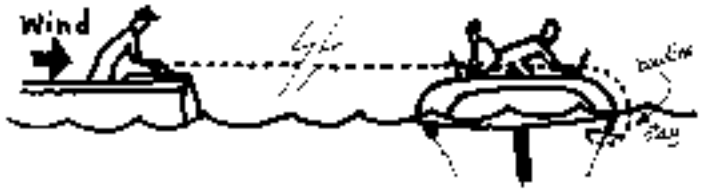
First of all, each boat captain (motor and sail) must understand each other's situation. The spectators are generally unhappy that their attention must be diverted from an exciting race. The sailboat skipper is angry at himself for his situation, unhappy about having to quit a race and concerned for the safety of his boat and crew.

Yelling at one another doesn't help.

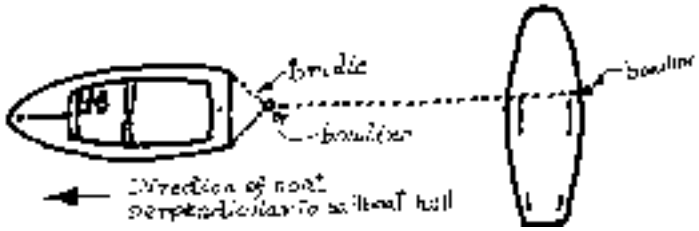
Once the sailboat has capsized, assess the situation - crew all accounted for, life jackets on, injuries, if any, recognized. If someone is hurt or excessively cold, plan to get them into a near by boat first. Then check for loose or drifting gear, sails, lines, etc. that could foul-up the propeller of the potential rescue boat. While waiting for the rescue boat, get a spinnaker sheet, free it from the sailboat and coil it. When that boat arrives, have him ease near the sailboat on the leeward side. This puts the engine behind him and allows the two skippers to talk the situation over before the rescue operation.

The sailboat skipper should direct the operation. If the hull of the sailboat is lying across the wind, and it usually will be, have the motor boat go around to the up-wind side of the

hull. Attach the spinnaker sheet (or other suitably long, strong line) to the leeward side, stay at or on the chainplate - use a bowline.



In the meantime, the motor boat should have a bridle on its stern so that the line from the sailboat can be fastened to the centerline of the motor boat. This helps steerage and maneuverability of the motor boat.



Be sure someone in the motor boat tends the bridle and line to prevent fouling with the propeller The driver then proceeds to take the slack out of the line and when it is tight slowly apply a little extra power and keep it on continuously. At this time his boat direction should be perpendicular to the hull of the sailboat, regardless of wind directions!

Very easily, but slowly the sailboat will come to rest on its side. At this time the power can be reduced on the motor boat, but a little tension on the line should be retained to keep from going turtle again - although the tendency to do so is now greatly reduced because the sailboat is swamped.

Next, try to take down the main and the spinnaker, if possible. Frequently the halyards are so entangled that it is very difficult. If so, loosen the main downhaul and with life jacket on, swim out to tip of mast and take halyard off main at the peak. Don't worry about halyard, that can be retrieved later. Do the same for the spinnaker or reacher if one of these is up. Leave the jib and take it down later.

After these sails have been "lowered" (or should I say horizontaled) gather them in as best possible. Complete gathering isn't critical at this stage. Next, extend the upper bilgeboard. With a little help from the boat, two crew members can ride the board and the boat will begin to turn upright. When it is about three-quarters up, have the motorboat slack off power (keep the lines out of the prop because you would like that kind soul to pull you into shore). Usually the crew can right the sailboat by themselves from this point on. Get the other two members on the other side of the sailboat to help steady it as it comes upright. However, the boat is very stable at this point and even if the main hasn't been lowered, it is not too difficult to keep the mast vertical until the sails can be lowered.

Now loosen the line on the side stay and put it on the bow piece. Have the motor boat hold into the wind with just a little way while the sailboat and its scattered gear are attended to gathering in ropes, sails, sponges and other drifting gear. Finally, lower the jib.

Once all equipment is secure, try to get the hull enough out of the water so that with forward speed from the motor boat, the bailers might go to work. Usually they can and water will flow out from under the forward deck, out over the after end of the cockpit. When some of this is out, putting crew weight forward will generally lift the entire after portion of the sailboat so that no water is lapping in around any part of the cockpit. From here on the bailers will do all the work. Be sure no lines or other items plug them up. The speed of the motor boat should depend on its power and the sailor's assessment of the situation in their boat.

One last thing. If the sailboat isn't completely bailed by the time you reach the dock, be sure to close the bailers when you get there. As a matter of fact, close them anyway. Thank the motor boat owner profusely.

Now that is the easy rescue. Sometimes the water is shallow enough so that upon turtling, the mast rests against the bottom. Under these conditions it is important that rescue be achieved just as soon as possible. Spectators who are familiar with the depth, or shallowness of their sailing area should be sensitive to the situation and give aid immediately. Masts can be damaged seriously if the rescue mission isn't initiated promptly.

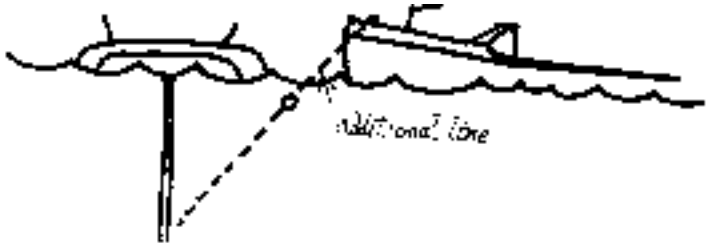
When the mast is on the bottom, the skipper should be alert to the direction the boat drifted when the mast contacted the bottom. Usually it will be from the same point that the wind is blowing.

It is most important that the boat be pulled and righted away from that direction. Be sure the rescue boat understands that. In all other respects, the rescue operation is the same. In the event that the mast is deeply or severely embedded in the bottom, the pull from the motor boat is likely to separate the mast from the sailboat at the step. Keep on the lookout for this occurrence. If it happens, slack off some power from the rescue boat, but keeping tension on the line, slowly turn the motor boat across the wind so that the hull of the sailboat will gradually parallel the mast. It's like taking the mast down under normal conditions, but here we are taking the hull down. Tension on the hull-to-motor boat line will keep them separated. This is all intended to prevent the mast from poking a hole in the deck of the sailboat.

From here on there are no rules and good judgement must prevail because every situation will be different. Once the hull is free and clear of the mast, remove power from the motor boat and try to turn the hull of the sailboat upright. If wire cutters are available, cut the shrouds and stays to free the sailboat, although it will still be attached to the rigging by way of the main boom. Free the sheet and other lines and then once the sailboat hull is taken care of, an attempt can be made to pull the mast out - from the direction it imbedded itself.

As you can see, this latter situation is a real mess. It can be avoided by keeping the forestay and/or the jib luff very tight or pinning the mast to its step. This small insurance will be well worth the risk of the disaster an imbedded mast renders.

Another method which has proven satisfactory is very simple provided the mast is not on the bottom. The rescue boat approaches the sailboat athwartships from the down wind side. A crew member of the sailboat unloosens the snap end of one spinnaker halyard and gives it to a member of the rescue boat. The other end of the halyard must be secure. The rescue boat then adds another twenty feet, or so, of line to the spinnaker halyard and makes the free end fast to the bow of the motor boat. (See sketch).



The rescue boat then gently backs down. When the sailboat mast is about halfway to its side (45 deg. from horizontal), shorten the line to the motor boat, keeping pressure on mast and pull the remaining angle. At some point, the mast can be helped to the horizontal manually by a member of the rescue boat and if cleated on the bow, the boat will lay aside the mast while the crew of the sailboat take the sails down and get ready for the uprighting. From here on all the techniques for final rescue are the same.

Web Editor Note: With modern E-scow, ***FLOTATION PANELS*** *onthe top 36 inches of the sail make turtling a thing of the past. No sane modern E-boat sailor attempts to sail in heavy air without flotation panels afixed. Contact a sail loft for a set of modern floatation panels.*