

How to Be the Parent of a Junior Sailor

By Dr. Tom Hodgson

I had the great pleasure of serving as a race officer at the ILYA X championship last July, and then dropped by the ILYA Optimist Dinghy/No Tears championships hosted by our newest member, the Wayzata Yacht Club. I was struck by the quality of both events, due to the Herculean efforts of dozens and dozens of volunteers, the quality performance of our junior sailors, and the commitment of hundreds of parents. The ILYA provides guidance for regatta organizers, race officers, and sailing school instructors, but nowhere does our great organization help parents provide their children with the best possible experience. It is the intent of this little essay to offer a few suggestions to parents, to make junior sailing in the ILYA even better than it is.

Here are my suggestions, based on 33 years of coaching and teaching in athletics:

The Best Coaches are Teachers First

Have the philosophy of an educator, and stick to it. As a parent, you are the single most influential person in your child's life. What you say, model, and believe will have the most lasting affect on your child of all the myriad influences they encounter during a sailing season.

Remember always, that the process of preparing to succeed is, ultimately, far more important than the success itself. In terms of what athletics has to teach us, it's the difference between earning \$100 and finding it on the street. It's the difference between teaching a person to fish, or simply giving them a fish. In short, it's what you take away from the experience that lasts a lifetime. Educators take the long view—what will the process of learning yield?

Keep in mind, of course, that you'll be swimming upstream against the current of professional sports, where a "win at all costs" attitude is not only prevalent and popular, but backed by millions and millions of dollars. So powerful is the "just win, baby" message, that most people believe that Vince Lombardi actually said, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing," when, in fact, he actually said (and I paraphrase, as the exact words escape me) that, "winning isn't everything, but the willingness to prepare to win, is." Buddy Melges, knows that...his Olympic Gold Medal and America's Cup victory are the result of determined, focused, and unrelenting campaigns.

As most parents know (and as I've seen in my students), kids want maximum reward for minimum effort. They're probably no different than we were at that age (shortly after the earth cooled, Jack Strothman reminds me). So, selling the idea that hard work will get you further than fancy tactical tricks or go-fast from a bottle can be tough. After all, they've been bombarded by the television message that just by lacing on this particular Nike shoe, you will leap your way to the pros and be just like Michael Jordan or Lisa Leslie or Tiger Woods.

Coaches should push the idea that, in athletics, you get what you earn, nine times out of ten.

A second part of being a coaching parent is equally important. Preparation involves learning first. The fancy stuff can come later, as confidence-reinforcers. But the first step in improving as a sailor is learning. Urge your young sailors to know more at the end of a practice, a race, a book, a magazine article, a chat with a veteran on the lake, than they did before they started.

Encourage them to keep notes. Not one of us remembers everything we see or hear. Help them build a notebook and make it messy with clippings, highlights, notes, pictures, and maybe even a gold star or two for really important learning moments. Let them make it theirs, designed and assembled in a way that's meaningful to them.

Open doors for them. Arrange for them to chat with veteran sailors, perhaps even champions. Most out there would be sufficiently flattered that we'd be delighted to assist a younger sailor, and too often, the kids are too shy to ask themselves (at least the first time).

But a word of caution here: Lead these young sailors to these learning opportunities, and let them take ownership of their efforts. At the trophy presentation, you never want to hear a young champion say, "Mom and Dad made me a great sailor," but rather, "I want to thank my parents for giving me so many opportunities to earn this."

Making competition meaningful.

Competition is one of the constants in American society. The business of athletic competition is measured in billions of dollars. If you look around, you see ball fields and golf courses carved into public parks. Schools have elaborate athletic facilities. In the private sector, all manner of sport and sport/theatre is sold to the public, from football to volleyball to auto, horse, dog, and yes, sailboat racing. If you can compete in it, somebody has probably tried to make a buck at it. And somebody else has figured out how to cheat at it.

In some sports—like weightlifting—cheating is so pervasive that the organization to catch cheaters is almost as elaborate as the competitions themselves. Other sports, such as water polo, have the strategy of the game revolve around the fouls committed against the player stationed in front of the goal.

It isn't always cheating that undermines the purity of sport. Any time a referee, umpire, or judge must make a call, human frailties and sometimes outright bias come into play. Few sports are so pure as to escape these human factors. One would think that track or swimming—where the first person to the finish line is the winner—would be obvious examples. But performance-enhancing drugs and blood doping have found their way into these sports. You could probably argue that there is no pure sport, in the tradition of the ancient Greeks, who, for years, held but one Olympic event—the Stade—a footrace that ran the length of the Olympic Stadium. So important was this one event that the four year period between Olympics was known for the winner. The champion returned to his home a hero and often showered with property and wealth. The meaning of this one race was beyond anything we can imagine today.

So, while it is foolish to think that the X or Opti (or even the A-scow) championship could approach the purity and meaningfulness of the Stade, we can urge our junior sailors to consider a few important ideas that will make their competition more meaningful:

1. Respect your competitors as people.

Respect the efforts of their competition. Ask your sailors why, for example should their efforts be of more value than their competitors'? Is order of finish determined for some reason other than your own bad luck, or their own great good fortune? Ask your young sailor, "Would you not like to have your efforts respected?"

2. Respect the rules.
Without rules, competition is meaningless. Imagine a race where sailors could skip the leeward mark, and begin sailing to windward whenever they felt like it. Would it really mean anything when they passed out the trophies? Of course not. The same applies to sailors who barge at the start and push their way around marks whether they have buoy room or not. If they finish ahead of your child, how could their victory mean anything, compared to a race sailed with full respect for the rules?
3. Respect the traditions of our sailing in the ILYA.
Finally, I believe that all sailors, and perhaps especially our junior sailors, should know and respect the heritage they share with those who have gone before. The tradition of the ILYA is as rich as it is instructive. There are great stories of courage, honesty, creativity, and even some moments from the shady side that are imminently teachable.
4. Remind your children that sailboat racing is a shared experience.
They are not sailing in a bubble that encloses them, their crew, and their boat. They share this regatta with dozens of volunteers, other sailors, other coaches, other parents, and many others. They owe a moment of acknowledgement, and probably a debt of thanks (if not a verbal “thank you”) to every volunteer at the regatta. When was the last time your child saw you say “thank you” to the person taking tickets at lunch, or the person at the crane during weighing? Role modeling is one of the most powerful tools that teachers and coaches have. Use it, then talk to your children about what they saw.
5. Help your children understand *why* we race sailboats.
It’s about being with people who share our interests. It’s about being with friends, making friends, and adding meaningful events to our life. Imagine, for a moment, that we could somehow all sail the ILYA championship alone, on our home lake, and e-mail our performance to Jim Smith at the Inland office. He would then enter everyone’s race into a computer, and post the results on the website. Trophies would arrive by UPS the next week. How long would it take, do you think, before participation would dwindle to nothing? A couple of years, if that? Our sport is about people and our relationship with them, and everything we do to honor that complex relationship can only make our sailing better.

How we Measure Success

Here, parents face their greatest challenge. We know there is only one first place in the regatta. Does that mean that every other sailor is “a loser?” Of course not, but we have to take care that the professional sports model doesn’t cloud our thinking. There is little doubt that professional sports and major media coverage of Olympic events place an enormous premium on winning, and as we discussed earlier, the steady bombardment of this message has a saturating affect. Admittedly, we do measure ourselves against others in many things we do. Grades in school, advancement in work, acceptance to college, and, for better or worse, many other dimensions of life are based upon comparison with others.

Yet, in junior sailing, we do our children no favors when we buy in to this “win-only” mania. There are many ways that young athletes should measure their success. Let me suggest a few for parents:

Young sailors are successful when they sail up to their potential. When a young sailor has as a goal to simply do the best they can do with what they know at that moment in time, then a 100% effort replaces the need to finish in first place. This will have the dual affect of reducing pressure and placing emphasis where it belongs, on the progression of learning.

Find success by measuring learning. Remembering that it's important to stay true to our philosophy, parents should use regattas to measure learning—in both motor (sailing skills) and cognitive (strategy and tactics) domains.

Victories are found in meeting the ethical imperatives of sportsmanship. We see far too many examples of poor sportsmanship in our regattas. When speaking to a young sailor, make the point that acts of poor sportsmanship diminish the meaning and tradition of our regattas. Not only is poor sportsmanship illegal, but the violation need not even be severe, for it to undermine the quality of our events. Some critical concepts for young sailors include:

- ① Don't make winning more important than following the rules.
- ② Don't use the rules maliciously. The rules are written to discourage tactical use of the rules to mess up another competitor. Use better strategies and superior boatspeed to gain an advantage...don't hide behind the rules.
- ③ There is no place for intimidation, trash talk, or screaming on the race course.
- ④ If you hit the buoy and nobody's watching....Buddy Melges tells a great story about hitting a buoy in the 1941 X-boat regatta—with nobody around. Time has allowed the story to expand to the touch costing Buddy the regatta—actually, it only cost him the race—but the point is important. 60 years later, Buddy's A-boat spinnaker sheet brushed a buoy, and when he learned about it at the cocktail party that night, he penned a letter to the Chief Judge, and retired from the race. (Note: The rules require that, if you know you've violated a Racing Rule of Sailing, you must either take your penalty, protest someone else, or retire.) Buddy's action may seem remarkable, but knowing he hit the mark, he simply did the proper thing under the rules. What's sad, perhaps, is that such an action would seem like an act of great sportsmanship, when, in fact, it's simply following the rules. Knowing and following the rules should be the norm, and not remarkable.
- ⑤ This isn't collegiate or international dinghy sailing. A little pumping, sculling, or ooching is *not* ok. The ILYA does not want kinetics to be a part of our sailing, at any level. If sailors engage in kinetics, they are breaking a rule, and they know it. Knowingly breaking a rule is, in my mind, a gross breach of good sportsmanship, and a very serious matter.
- ⑥ Teach sailors that, if they are in a protest hearing, they must tell the truth. Although this is rarely a problem with junior sailors (and I've been Chief Judge at the X Championship since the mid-80s), it is a point worth reinforcing.

How to Do This

No doubt, after reading this, every single parent in the ILYA will want to rush to their child's side and pump every single idea from this article into their sponge-like brains. Please resist that temptation. It's easy to be preachy and overbearing. Instead, think like

an educator. In most of these areas, you're educating long-term. You are changing or reinforcing core values, and that takes time. Here's how to do it:

1. Talk about one big idea at a time. Especially with issues that require some processing (why we follow the rules, for example), take it slow. Let ideas soak in. The more complex the information, the more time is needed to learn it. The same is true for physical skills. Complex skills require more practice to achieve mastery.
2. Listen to your child, and try to understand why they think as they do, so you can engage in a real dialogue about these ideas. It's very easy to dismiss crude or fledgling ideas in favor of the wisdom of the ages, but you'll enjoy the dialogue...and your kid may surprise you with how much intelligence they received genetically from your spouse. (just kidding).
3. Look for teachable moments. There are moments when real life provides the perfect illustration for a philosophical point. Seize the moment, and teach from it.
4. Use stories to bring ideas to life. Most adult sailors have seen a lot of buoy roundings, a lot of starting lines. Tell the stories and you'll both be enriched by the process.

And finally, even when your child is on the verge of some spectacular achievement, don't forget that your first obligation is to be their parent—to provide unwavering love and support. Then, within that framework of unconditional love, you are their teacher, coach, mentor, role model, and, of course, tender-driver.