

Fun Is the Key: We can create growth by helping people have more fun playing with sailboats

By Dave Irish

Let's talk about growth in our sport. Our race courses are not too crowded, and we have plenty of room for more sailors in our schools, club programs and community sailing centers. We want more people to sail, right?

So how do people decide on sailing (or golf or in-line skating or surfing the Internet)? The research has been done, the experience has been gained - people are introduced to leisure activities by family and friends already involved. Lifestyle ads don't work, public relations campaigns don't work, even free boat rides don't work. People choose a new activity like sailing because they are introduced to it by existing participants who are having great fun and want to share that fun with their friends. It's also a question of fun balanced against time, money, hassles and frustrations.

If you are reading this, you are probably a leader in our sport. You already know intuitively that the way each of us creates growth is by helping people have more fun playing with sailboats. In turn, they bring their friends into sailing, who then bring their friends and so on. More fun yields more players, less fun yields dropouts. But how do we do it?

Bring people you know from other activities sailing with you. But when you do, don't let them just be passengers. Let them steer or trim. Ask them to watch for gusts of wind. Above all, explain what's going on at a pace and in a way that engages them and makes it fun. Is there someone in your racing fleet who has a boat but isn't yet up to speed? Being way behind is not fun; being in the hunt and gaining new skills is. Try letting your crew sail your boat next week, and offer to sail with this individual. Your enthusiasm will rub off, as will any helpful, friendly coaching. The newer sailor will start to keep up, not because you took over, but because you provided focus on doing those things that make a difference. Do you know someone "almost ready" to venture farther afield? Offer to do a mini-cruise, each in your own boat: "Let's sail to the island and overnight this weekend." That removes the anxiety and concern about "Where will I moor?" or "Will I get lost?" Cruising in company is usually more fun, and the other sailor will pick up the habit. Remember the first time you were protested in a race? Probably a "not fun" experience. If you hear that a new sailor has gotten into a protest, offer to help. Explain the rules, assist in written preparation, and offer to go to the hearing and walk him or her through it. (The jury can but shouldn't exclude you if you were not on the boat.)

Help the people you sail with to get better, to the end that they outgrow your own skills. Encourage them to move on to the next challenge, whether on their own boats or by moving up to a tougher "league." Meantime, introduce someone new to your team. Done well, this is the process that keeps all sailors stimulated and learning. That's the key to fun in sailing!

Irish was a member of US Sailing for 25 years and a former president of US SAILING (1995-97). Dave spent 16 years on the Offshore Racing Council and the then International Sailing Federation (ISAF), now World Sailing, where he served in numerous capacities. Article excerpted from *American Sailor*, July/August 1996.