

“Upwards to 40 MPH” Take-away from a pop-up squall Safety Boat, Coach Boat, Spectator Boat

As an avid sailor, coach, teacher and Summer Sailing Program Director, there is nothing more satisfying than working with students on the water. Coaching at a shared venue with two other High School teams is a blessing. Shared experiences and fun build our sailing programs.

One of the great things about a shared venue is pooled resources and cooperation. This plays an important role in the quality of sailing opportunities offered each day. Paramount to all sailing activities is **safety**. In my processing of the events to be described below, the safety of our sailors is THE MOST IMPORTANT aspect of sailing.

Last Wednesday was a great sailing day. Winds were a steady 15 with gusts to 18 or so. Awesome wind for sailing. Rain was in the forecast. No big deal. Two of our three teams at the venue were hosting regattas. My team had an off day and was practicing closer to shore in order to give the other teams room for their race course. Given the wind conditions, the digital N course was appropriately set up with decently long upwind and downwind legs and offsets. Sharing a course does not pose problems generally, with race fleets being at different ends of the course. I point this out as this translates as, in this situation, the two fleets were “spread out over about a quarter mile”.

With shared resources there were specifically 12 420's racing, 5 420's practicing and 5 “safety” boats in the area. A 3:1 ratio of boats to safety boats is better than that required by US Sailing. This sets the scene.

Now the safety discussion.

As the rain neared, the area was hit by a gust front with gusts rising to around 23mph. Since it was near the end of my practice, I told my sailors to go in. By luck alone, one of my younger sailors had capsized and we had sent that boat back towards the floats a few minutes earlier. As my team was on their way, followed by the assistant coach, the squall hit in earnest. My boats were safe as they had reached the lee of the bluff along the channel. Clearly, the other teams were sending their boats in as well. With the wind gusting to near 40 mph, 5 of the 12 racing boats flipped nearly simultaneously. Spread out over a square mile of water, the capsized boats could not be righted and subsequently turtled.

By virtue of the fact that the hosting teams had “extras” in their boats from both teams i.e. coaches and other sailors “for swapping out” These boats were already near / at capacity. In this instance, the flipped boats became secondary to the safety of the sailors. Coaches from the other teams made the correct decision to abandon the turtled boats, get the sailors out of the 46 degree water and to take them back to land. Yet, in this discussion, we need to look at this situation more closely.

Often, teams bring an inordinately large number of sailors to a regatta - knowing full well that most of the sailors will not be actually sailing in the competition. Yes, it is good to have a couple swaps for a change in conditions - light crew for heavy crew or vice versa etc. Yet with limited resources and the nature of most venues, this means either leaving sailors on land / floats or to pack them into one of the "safety boats". Once there are more than 3 people on a safety boat it ceases to be a safety boat and becomes a spectator boat.

NESSA defines a safety boat in the following manner:

6. SAFETY BOAT CREW TRAINING 6.1. Individuals operating a safety boat must understand their function and not be diverted to other functions. The first priority of a safety boat is to assist sailors and boats in need. The effectiveness of a safety boat is only as good as its operators. The number of crew in a safety boat should be limited to those needed to operate the boat and perform rescues. A safety boat with too many people aboard does not move as quickly or with as much control. Untrained crew or people interested in another function (e.g., photographers and spectators) may interfere with rescue operations. (Underlined section for emphasis)

I would further point out that when boats are loaded with more than an appropriate number of sailor swaps it becomes a dangerous liability. The legal limit for boat occupancy is 6 (we are technically boats for hire) - and even if you believe you are not "for hire" then when you look at your boat's capacity it rarely exceeds 7. When you have 5 people on a safety boat, and 5 boats flip simultaneously, you have 10 sailors in the water. Given a situation in which a coach must abandon their boats and pull the sailors out of the water - means that a safety boat may have as many as 10 or 11 individuals in a safety boat. In my experience, these numbers preclude that boat from rendering further assistance to sailors in the water and effectively becoming a danger to themselves. That number of people in a boat tends to also mean there is not enough seating - most people stand up. This was my observation on this day.

One must consider an overloaded boat moving sailors to land/ floats in a squall with winds kicking up often chaotic waves. Such waves could easily cause a standing individual to fall overboard. (Which brings up a whole host of safety issues in itself) Notwithstanding this, given the size of the race course and relative positions of the flipped boats, an overloaded boat moves slower. This translates to slower response times across a course to other sailors in need of aid.

(Think: 16 foot Whaler, 9 people in the boat, attempting to move a quarter mile to windward in waves and wind to assist a boat with 2 kids in the water only to find you need to abandon the flipped boat and pull 2 more individuals into the safety boat - making 11 people in the boat that now needs to navigate to land) Not a good scenario. Furthermore, in high stress situations such as this, the overburdened boat now does not react predictably as balance becomes compromised. Also, the crowd on the boat tends to voice unwelcome advice delivered in urgent, insistent and overexcited manner. Which hinders the decision loop and processing ability of the person at the helm responsible for the safety of all.

My point is: We need to establish expectations for how many sailors can be on the racecourse in the safety boats. A team cannot/ should not show up to most regatta venues and expect that their whole team is going to be on the water. I know every venue is different. I know that the capacity to accommodate teams and sailors is unique to each venue. I know we all want as many kids to participate and be a part of sailing.

But as far as the Safety Boats go, in my humble opinion, there should be no more than 4 individuals in any one coach boat. To be termed a safety boat, there should be no more than 3 individuals.

Because we share resources, skills, knowledge and mutual support, there were no ill effects. Nobody was hurt. No boats were damaged. Yet, I can only acknowledge that we dodged a bullet.