

# Starting Line

February 2014



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Small Yacht Sailing Club of Oregon

## From the Commodore

Our beloved Commodore, Warren Dalby, is on leave of absence from SYSCO World Headquarters, leaving yours truly to write this month's Commodore's message.

Well, it was standing room only at SYSCO's fourth annual Fleet Night on January 27. SYSCO is all about the fleets; it is one of the unique features of our club. Fleet night is a chance for each one-design and level fleet to gather, elect a fleet captain (who is automatically a voting member of the Board), and plan, scheme and dream for the coming racing and cruising season. This year Fleet night was also a "special meeting," at which the membership voted to amend the bylaws to (1) provide for e-mail notice instead of snail mail, and (2) allow fleet captains and officers to serve more than two consecutive terms. Minor matters, it is true, but it was nonetheless thrilling to witness raw democracy in action.

Fleet night was even more special this year, because local sailmaker Dale Waagmeester gave a lively and informative talk about how to build and maintain a one-design or level fleet. Dale has seen many fleets come and go over the years, and offered practical tips on how to keep your fleet fun, growing, and competitive.

SYSCO's allotment of 30 race books sold like hot pizza (if you missed yours, check with West Marine, Schooner Creek or North Sails). Speaking of hot pizza: kudos are due to Social Chair Jacqueline Pitter, who organized the event and served some sizzling slices. Thanks are also due to Membership Chair Jan Burkhardt, who set up a laptop, signed up new members, and sold several official SYSCO burgees (have you got yours?). A number of volunteers helped set up and take down, but special thanks go to Gary Whitney, who acted as our RCYC host for the night.



What's next on the SYSCO calendar? *Chateau SYSCO*, bien sur. Saturday, February 15, 6:30 at *chez* RCYC. This is SYSCO's premier social event, a chance for *tout le haute monde* to mingle, slurp BYOB wine, and listen to tales of life on the big river spun by our special guest John Rekart, Jr, from the Oregon Maritime Museum. John spoke to us last year, recounting tales of piloting the Columbia Bar from his first book *Rollin' on the River*. At *Chateau SYSCO 2014*, John will tell stories from his second book, about tow pilots and commercial traffic on the long waters between Portland and Lewiston. Please join us.

Finally, don't forget the SYSCO race clinic March 20, 2014, at RCYC, an essential primer on how races are run on the river. We'll discuss changes to the OCSA local rules regarding penalties that will have you spinning in circles!

See you on the river.

- Tod Bassham Vice-Commodore

## Fleet Night Wrap-Up

SYSCO's annual Fleet night was a success! Dale Waagmeester gave an in-depth look at the characteristics that help make a successful One Design fleet, Jacqueline Pitter arranged the nourishment that kept everyone fed and in good spirits, Tod Bassham presented the SYSCO By-Law changes which the attending members unanimously approved as well as elected their fleet captains.



# SYSCO Board Meeting Minutes

The February SYSCO board meeting began at 7:00 PM at the Delta Park Elmer's. Attending SYSCO members are as follows: Tod Bassham, Jan Burkhart, Bill Sanborn, Scott Stevenson, Kristen Pierce, Gary Bruner, Jacqueline Pitter, Mike Daily, Christopher Harley, Dennis Olmstead, George Brown, Thomas M. and Ryan Rodgers.

## New Business,

SYSCO members approved the new Bylaw changes proposed by the board at Fleet night.

Look for SYSCO to take on a social media presence in the near future. With the help of a few SYSCO regulars, a few new-to-the-scene individuals are looking to increase SYSCO's social media content.

## Membership

Two new members were unanimously approved by the board. Dan Burch with the Ranger 20 named R Toy and Robert Bouchard owner of a J-24 named One More are now SYSCO members. Welcome!

## Racing

The SYSCO Racing Clinic will be held on March 20<sup>th</sup> at RCYC

Rich Jones has agreed to serve as SYSCO's racing PRO for this year's event's; however, he will be absent for a time in June and July. Fleet captains will be responsible for setting courses on the nights when Rich is unavailable.



## Treasury

Income for the month of January was \$6178.65. Expenses totaled \$1210.40. Leaving a bank balance of \$9575.00 that includes the carry-over from last year.



# How Not to Teach Sailing

**By Tod Bassham**

Those who can't do, teach. I can testify that the reverse is true in my case, at least when it comes to sailing: I can sail, but I can't teach sailing.

I've learned to accept this flaw in my character, but only after many years of inflicting pain and mental scars on family and friends. It was hard to let go, however, of my desire to teach. Since I first held a tiller in my hand and felt the boat heel and come alive, I believed it was my destiny to become a prophet unto the unwashed masses, to free them of the land's bondage and the stinkpot's fumes. I burned with missionary zeal. Like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner I would corner passing strangers, fix them in place with a glittering eye, and mutter ecstatically through my foam-flecked beard about the ineffable grace of a well-trimmed sloop. Invariably the stranger would cry "Unhand me, grey-beard loon!" and flee, festoons.

Undaunted, I turned to a captive audience—my family—and tried to convey to them the joy of sailing. My plan was simple. Go out sailing on a sunny day and, once the boat was on a perfect close-hauled course, with the sails trimmed just so, I would suddenly hand the tiller over to one of the children (at that time ages eight and ten). Then I would calmly explain to them what they were doing wrong. I can't remember what happened next, but my wife tells me that it took a tap upside the head with a winch handle to put me in a more relaxed frame of mind. The children, now in their teens, have yet to forgive me. But I'm hopeful that after enough years of therapy the words "take the tiller, honey" will no longer cause them to twitch and shake uncontrollably.

Back then I still had friends and neighbors who would speak to me, so I tried offering casual day sails. I was surprised to learn that most people do not care deeply about sail trim and boat balance. My guests seemed to resent my orders to ease the genoa sheet one-half inch, or to lie down on the sidedeck to avoid disturbing air flow in the slot. All they wanted to do, seemingly, was to sit in the cockpit and enjoy the day, completely ignoring the fact that the boat could point a tenth of a degree higher if they would simply hike out a little harder and stop distracting my inspired tiller-work with peevish complaints about being soaked with cold spray.

When the last of my former friends walked away down the dock, shaking their fists at me, the truth smote me like a boom upside the head. The problem, I now saw clearly, was that the ordinary non-sailing world was not ready for my brilliant

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instructional methods. I was revealing the most sophisticated sailing techniques to persons who were only dimly aware—if aware at all—of the critical importance of laminar flow. I realized, with regret, that my ministry to the heathens was wasted effort, pearls before swine.

For a moment I despaired. And then ...the heavens seemed to open before me, and I fell to the dock on my knees, like it was the road to Damascus. I knew with passionate certainty that my life's mission was to minister to the Chosen Ones.

Yes, I would go forth among the racing fleets. I would lift up the poor, the downtrodden, the perennial last-place finishers. I would become...a racing coach.

To prepare for my new calling, I reflected back on my own racing mentor, a local character whose real identity is a closely guarded secret, at least until the statute of limitations expires, but who I will refer to here as “Dave Paligo.” In those days, I was as green as the algae on the bottom of my newly acquired Ranger 20, and I welcomed Dave’s offer to coach my first race. Dave invited his old sailin’ crony Doug to come along as crew, and we gathered down at the docks. The wind was 15 knots, gusting to 20. I looked at the whitecaps, and nervously opined that perhaps today was not a good day to die. Dave and Doug stared at me incredulously. “Waugh, pilgrim,” Doug drawled in his best John Wayne, “Yew ain’t skeered of this genteel zephyr, is yew?” Damn right I am, I wanted to say. But I shrank from the pity I would see in their eyes.

I struggled with the tiller as we bashed our way to the starting box. We juked wildly through the Ranger 20 fleet, Dave barking out crisp orders for tacks and gybes to gain and defend the optimum start position. At the one minute mark he called for a crash gybe; the boom rocketed across the cockpit, but I managed to slow it down by the simple expedient of placing my forehead in its way. Blood filled my eyes and I could steer toward the start line only by listening to Doug calling out port and starboard. Dave took a quick look at my forehead, told me to press hard with my thumb *right here*, and graciously offered to stitch me up with whipping twine, but only after the race was over.

The horn sounded, and we hardened up on the wind, the boat heeling 50 degrees until waves washed over the coaming into the cockpit. I clung to the tiller and looked straight down into the water rushing alongside, my thumb pressed assiduously to my forehead. Then I looked over at Dave and Doug, who were perched on the windward rail cackling with sheer delight. Dave noticed the terror on my blood-streaked face, and gently asked if I wanted to ease the traveler. I had no idea what a traveler was, but “easing” sounded good. He reached over and released something, and the mainsail dropped to leeward. Waves ceased washing into the cockpit, and I breathed a ragged sob of relief.

"Get ready for the windward rounding," Dave yelled, and I saw downstream a cluster of boats around a yellow mark, crews screaming and waving at each other. Dave pointed to a tiny gap in the scrum, and told me to punch through it, while Doug scrambled forward to set the spinnaker pole. I shut my eyes in terror as we shot through the gap and rounded the mark. Dave looked back at me. "Call the launch!" he yelled over the howling wind. A wordless scream was going through my head, and the only words I could utter were "no, no, no no NO NO NO" in a rising crescendo of panic. Dave evidently interpreted this to mean "go go GO," because he turned and began heaving on the spinnaker halyard.

The chute filled with an almighty WHUMP. Dave and Doug high-five'd each other, and began tweaking control lines. "Steer down in the puffs!" Dave instructed over his shoulder, and then looked over my head to weather. "Oh shinola," he muttered in alarm. "*Big* puff in 2...1... STEER DOWN!"

What the hell was he talking about? At this point a giant hand seemed to grab the tiller, and the boat spun around and capsized onto its side. Before I could leap clear of the doomed vessel, Dave and Doug had released something and the boat was suddenly back on its feet. The chute flogged, filled, and the wild sleigh ride commenced again.

Dave gave me a wink. "'Steer down' doesn't mean watch out for fallen cows," he clarified, "It means turn the boat AWAY from the wind." I nodded, absorbing this bit of information. It almost made sense. I looked around, and realized I was no longer terrified. I also noticed something that Dave and Doug had already seen: that we were somehow near the front of the Ranger 20 fleet. In fact, we were just to leeward of the lead boat. Dave and Doug exchanged predatory grins.

At Dave's whispered command, I turned the boat up toward the leader. "Come up!" Doug roared at them. Flustered, the other boat turned away, and we slipped through its lee. The other boat moved back onto our air, and we began a duel



that lasted all the way to the finish line. I was filled with a growing excitement. We eventually lost the duel and took second in the race, but Dave, Doug and I crossed the line cackling and high-fiving each other. Racing, I had learned, is a hoot and a holler.

Well, it didn't seem possible to improve on Dave's coaching methods, so years later when I started my own career as a racing coach I decided to use the same sink or swim methods. Yet, somehow I lacked Dave's magic touch, his endless patience. My first clients were a long-time cruising couple that wanted to try racing. After a single outing with me they only never raced again, they sold the boat and moved as far from the water as they could get.



Then there was a young man who was the proud owner of his first boat. When we finally managed to get back to the dock, he pulled a flare pistol out of his bag and fired it into the bilge, incinerating the boat.

And then there was— well, you get the general idea.

Eventually, what was left of the racing fleets asked me to stop coaching, and I reluctantly conceded that sailboat racing is better off without my teaching contributions.

My friends and family have agreed to go sailing with me again, as long as I say and do nothing that could possibly be construed as sailing instruction. For my part, I've learned to bite my tongue when my passengers ignore the screamingly obvious fact that the sheet lead is off by two-tenths of an inch.

I still feel a pang when I see others teaching the joy of sailing or instructing a newbie racing crew, but I know now that that path is not mine.

Yet, I am filled with blessings. I have a racing crew that shares my obsession with sail trim and race performance. I have a family that tolerates my eccentricities. And I take comfort in the words of the Prophet:

“He turned again towards the sea, and he saw his ship approaching the harbour,

And upon her prow the mariners, the men of his own land.  
And his soul cried out to them, and he said:  
Sons of my ancient mother, you riders of the tides,  
How often have you sailed in my dreams.

And now you come in my awakening, which is my deeper dream.  
Ready am I to go, and my eagerness, with sails full set, awaits the wind."

