

Learning To Sail an Optifish

How to ensure novice sailors learn the basics very quickly and have a positive experience.

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The Optifish—a Sunfish with an Optimist sail. Photo by Tom Thieson.



One sunny Sunday morning—from the vantage point of the Key West Sailing Club’s waterside swing seat—I was enjoying seeing some new sailors coming to terms with the vagaries of wind and water as they tried to tack Sunfish back and forth across Garrison Bight. I observed them having the same problem all new sailors have: steering the boat and keeping it on course. If you get it wrong, a small dinghy tells you in a split second.

It is easier to learn to sail if the experience is kept simple, easy, and rewarding from the start. Getting into irons (or trying to get out of irons) when you are not sure what is happening can be frustrating for the novice. Like many clubs, KWSC teaches children to sail in Optimist prams, and for good reason. They are excellent trainers for them in that they are relatively inexpensive, simple and almost indestructible. However, we do not have a good adult basic training boat. The Opti is too small and uncomfortable for anyone over 90 pounds, and it is impossible to acquire a good sailing position. The boat does not balance on its proper trim, and the extra weight puts the bow high in the air and close to sinking at the stern.

Although the Sunfish at a glance seems to be a simple and easy boat to sail, it can present several problems to the first-time sailor. Teaching adults to sail in a Sunfish, which is a high performance boat, is like teaching someone to fly in a stunt plane. While the hull is a good, stable platform and adults can move around relatively comfortably, I always have felt my success produced mediocre results because: They can get confused with regard to how to rig a Sunfish sail. The sail area is over 70 square feet. During the rigging process, because of the design of the rigging, you often have to stop raising the sail and use one hand to push the gooseneck up while trying to pull the halyard with the other, and the gooseneck may have been put on upside-down!

Once the sail is up, the beginner will inevitably try to grab hold of the boom and restrict the swinging of the sail until the boat capsizes at the dock

When they do get under way, a new sailor is usually not aggressive enough to sheet the 70 square feet of sail in and let the boat fall off and sail. The boat is very subject to going in irons, and a lot of coaching is needed in order to prevent it from finally ending up on the lee shore tangled in the mangroves or capsized.

Observing kids learning to sail Optis, it seemed that the smaller sail enabled them to get things under control more quickly. I figured perhaps things would be easier for the adults if there was not as much sail to deal with. The alternative I came up with I have christened the “Optifish.” It uses a combination of a Sunfish hull and a 3-foot- by-3-inch PVC pipe to adapt an Opti rig onto a Sunfish mast hole. The result is that the boom is high enough to get under comfortably; and the sail is easily controlled by straight sheeting or a combination of the sheeting and the Sunfish existing blocks.

With the reduced sail area, the boat is not nearly as intimidating and, with the center of effort moved forward, it just about eliminates the tendency to get into irons. I have had new sailors solo in 15 knots without any problems. The boat sails well, and the student has time to think about how things work without trying to keep the boat upright or struggling to get out of irons.

If you are teaching someone to sail, give the Optifish a try. Provide minimal instruction on the dock. Observe the wind direction, safety issues and general awareness. Do not give the students any technical stuff about why a boat sails or the jargon of what is the difference between a sheet and a halyard (just call them all ropes). Just have them follow your skiff around as you take them through all points of sail. You will be amazed at how manageable the Optifish is and how quickly their senses get tuned into what is happening. They get the feeling of success, have fun and are encouraged to continue developing their skills. After a couple of sessions you can confidently remove the Opti rig and replace it with the correct rig for the Sunfish