

Crewing with Eric Wilcox

What 's Wilcox doing up there?

Eric Wilcox has won the Snipe Nationals 4 times as crew. That is one more than any other crew on the trophy. With that many wins, and considering that he won the nationals this year after not having been in just a Snipe, but not having sailed in any boat in 4 years (his last regatta was the Worlds in Uruguay), I realized that we should figure out what is making Eric tick up there. With a PHD in oceanography, and a current position working for NASA, he's no dummy, and the undisputed brains in the boat when we sail together.

Q - So how do you approach dingy sailing?

W - The kinetics is why I like dinghy sailing so much. Big boat sailing has the same tactics and such, but it's never held any interest for me because it doesn't have the kinetic aspect.

UPWIND, the angle of heel increased between 2001 and 2005. I felt like I was having trouble agreeing with you on the angle of the heel [because we used to sail flatter in light air. We also used to sail at 21'4" rake].

We didn't really talk about it, but I remembered how we used to focus on accelerating the boat by allowing the boat to heel slightly and sheeting out. I thought about that often on the light days - must have been a lot of need to accelerate.

Q - do you mean that because we were always sailing with the heel we used to use to accelerate?

W - Well, I was just having fond memories of the light spots on the light days. When we hit those inevitable lulls it has just become habit to move inboard a little bit and sheet out slightly (not more than an inch or so on the jib sheet). As we come out the lull and the boat begins to heel I make sure to trim the sheet back in to where it was. Likewise, in the puffs there's a small trim in on the sheet. In general, when there's a change in wind velocity that demands a body movement, I usually make a small adjustment to the jib trim to go along with the body movement. This did not come naturally. When we first started sailing together you were constantly asking for trim adjustments and I was surprised at how small and frequent the adjustments are. Now it has become habit.

REACHING, The first pole reach seemed to make perfect sense to me - with movements of in/forward in the light spots and when you turn the boat down, out/aft in the puffs. I was as far in as right behind the daggerboard, and as far out/aft as hiking off the back the skipper's strap. And everywhere in between. I think the wind direction and the wave direction made that first reach easier. To catch the waves you would turn up a little bit and the boat would start planning and heeling and it was natural to move aft and out. Some of the other reaches I had trouble coordinating with the waves and your steering. Probably because with wind was lighter, or the reaching angle was lower, and the waves were not lined up as nicely. On these reaches there was much more communication (mostly from you to me) about where to put my body, which is inevitable because the crew has to react to the steering, as well and the changes in wind and waves. This is one of those situations where your relationship with the skipper is important. It's much easier to take an urgent nudge in the back from the tiller extension when it's a friend holding the extension. In general, the windier it is, the easier it is for the crew on the reaches because fore and aft movement while inside the cockpit is a struggle.

DOWNWIND, I'm watching the waves on the bow, forward as the trough passes underneath the bow. You're always calling me back as soon as we've caught the wave, but sometimes I feel like I can stay forward as long as we're not advancing up the back side of the previous wave.

Q - Can you explain in more detail how you are playing waves fore/aft on the run in 8-12 knots?

W - Four years ago, the crews were sitting even with the daggerboard on the run. But this year all the hot-shot kids were sitting further forward (approximately between the board and the mast), so I followed suit. From this position I make a quick movement forward as the trough of the wave moves under the boat. I think of placing my palm squarely in the center of the deck forward of the mast. This results in a less-than-graceful sprawl across the bow. My movement is often coincident with the skipper's pump of the main sail to catch the wave. Then I watch the wave off the bow. If we start zooming down toward the trough, I'll move my weight aft toward my starting position. If the skipper manages to get the boat up to the speed of the wave and hang out on the face, I'll recline on the bow for the duration of the ride. If the next wave catches the boat from behind, I'll move quickly back to where I started so I'm ready for the next trough.

During those times when we're not working hard on the waves, I'm generally looking aft for gusts and checking to make sure we're keeping a clear lane with the sails behind.

I guess I would have thought that communication would be more of an issue after four years. But we seemed to get in sync pretty quick. I guess I'm just letting you know when I see a change on the compass and checking on the fleet around the course [Eric calls the high, low, and median headings on the compass as we sail upwind], particularly when I can tell your focused on the boat.

SZ - What do you see when I am focused? What's going on when I am not focused?

W - Besides the compass I'm watching the position and angle of the other boats in the fleet. I'm comparing our speed with those near us. If we're in the middle of the course, I'm looking to see if the boats on either side have a higher or lower angle. If we're on one side of the course, then I'm comparing our angle with those in the middle and opposite side. If the fleet is really spread out and it's hard to see the gusts on the water, then I'm looking to see which crews are hiking out and which are sitting in. When I see something significant I pass it along. Sometimes we're both looking around and there is a lot of conversation about the tactical situation. Sometimes you are concentrating much more on our boat and I take a little extra care to make sure I'm keeping track of situation around us.

Upwind you always see a lot more of the wind conditions on the water than I do, which is a weakness of mine. I suppose that comes with experience and I spend way too much time staring at a computer screen. [Eric spends a significant amount of time focusing on speed upwind. When I'd like to sheet harder, he is often easing the jib out, which makes me ease the main to balance the helm - resulting in the boat sailing faster] Your requests for sail trim adjustments have been reduced to few words, which is efficient [I use trim/ease, and a number of ratchet clicks to move the sheet]. Communicating the initiation of a tack is not necessary. The

sensation is obvious and the pause before the roll is long enough that I can react. Perhaps the 500 practice tacks we did 8 years ago helped.

I've always felt that the attitude is important. The bad reach mark in the first race at Cascade Locks is the only time I can remember where an unhappy circumstance caused us to sail a quiet and overly-serious race, yet we still managed to sail fast. But I can think of a lot of times where we were having fun, not overtly concentrating on the boat, and sailed really fast.

Q - Having a great time together, and constantly joking on the water have definitely made sailing together fun over the years, and helped the boat go faster as well. Spending time on the water with someone you like is the only way to sail in my book. When errors are made by either one of us, a lighthearted joke is often made of the incident, or a complement on a good recovery from a bad situation that could have been worse.

Q - After Nationals, people were commenting how we would move as one, and how there was no air between the bodies upwind. You have the ability to move slowly, deliberately, and very smoothly through the boat. There is no jerking of the boat, which fits the snipe's style of wanting to be sailed by an old man. Part of that smoothness upwind may come from the way that you sit tucked up just outside of the skipper, with no air between the bodies, and low so the skipper has a good field of view, while you are able to tell how the skipper is moving

W - I was surprised at how much I remembered about Snipe sailing after four years. But certainly teamwork and smooth movements comes from putting a lot of time in the boat. I may not have sailed much in the past four years, but prior to that, we put in a lot of practice hours and regattas together. And evidently the benefits of that practice time can stick with you for years.

Eric Wilcox

George Szabo

