

# Tips for the Freshman

Observations on what it takes to excel in Snipe competition by a veteran Sniper who was once a member of the Freshman Class.

by Craig Leweck

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*This article was originally published several years ago in the Bulletin. Author Craig Leweck reflected on his experiences as a newcomer to Snipe competition, and told how others can profit from his research and on-course observation. Leweck was not a typical freshman. He had won the Sabot Nationals three times and won the 1980 MORC Internationals. In 1983 he triumphed in the Pacific Coast Snipe Championship, and finished sixth place in the Heinzerlings at his first U.S. Snipe Nationals. All of you freshmen (sophomores, juniors and seniors are invited to audit the class) should identify with Craig's first year in Snipes.*

While competitive sailing at its best can be one of the most satisfying endeavors for anyone, it seems like it can also be one of the most frustrating and endless of causes. Nowhere do these low moments occur more frequently than during one's rookie season in a one-design class. Since great amounts of sailing time in a dinghy are required to achieve any degree of success on the race course, a first-year player not only lacks this precious "time in the boat," he must also overcome the problems and dilemmas any new boat presents. The Snipe is no exception. As the wind pipes up on the course, do you drop the traveler to keep the boat on its feet, or do you vang, or both? To eliminate jib luff sag, should you tighten the jib halyard or the shrouds? And what about the mast ram? Answering these questions while at the same time trying to keep your brain in the race can make a couch and a television set seem like a viable alternative for a weekend activity. Fortunately for most of us, we live through this education. Hopefully with a few shortcuts from a former rookie, the learning curve for new class members may get a touch steeper.

The decision to enter the Snipe class was a strong one. As it is one of the oldest and most competitive one-design classes, this signifies one thing: top-flight racing, year-in and year-out. Throughout most of its history, the Snipe has attracted world-class sailors across the board. What does this mean for you? It means that it's time to get to work, for at this moment, you not only can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, you can't see the tunnel.

As with any class, to be competitive on the race course, one has to have total confidence in his equipment. The only way to determine what's up is to attend a few regattas and crew on one of the boats. Growing up as I did on the West Coast, where the Snipe Class may be the strongest, I was fortunate enough to have a broad base to analyze. Finally, after crewing in the North Americans at Mission Bay, I had a pretty good idea of what was currently working in the class. I talked to all the heavies, pumping them for hidden secrets while later taking notes on their boats as they entertained at the bar. One must go from A to Z, finding out what hull, mast and sails to use while absorbing rigging ideas. A camera is helpful for the latter, since bar-napkin drawings usually will poorly reinforce the memory. Then there are the things you didn't think of, like spreader length and angle, the amount of fairing on the daggerboard, and the method of preventing mast breakage. What you once saw as a nice dinghy designed a half-century ago has suddenly turned full circle. You are now on a quest to overcome this new nemesis.

Now that you've bought your ticket and had it stamped, come aboard, for the ride has just begun. The first point of interest on our journey will be the rigging on your boat. Working

forward, I have found success in placing only three controls (in addition to the mainsheet) in front of me on the deck. As I physically maneuver the boat through a race, I find it both a pleasure and a must to be able to grab the string I want. The result of this is that you must divide the sailing adjustments between your crew and yourself.

A popular and unpractical area to position cleats is the aft, underside vicinity of the deck. Unfortunately, to avoid having to double up all the controls so as to have them on the sides, a few do have to go in the middle of the boat. The problem here is to consider which controls come into play where crew weight is not vital. My final list was a short one. I presently have the forepuller, which is used for either light air beating or downwind sailing, and the barberhaulers, that find their application while the crew is usually in a transition through the center of the boat.

The strings that are pertinent for going to weather must be reachable from where the crew is likely to be found--on the rail. However, one perplexing control that can't be doubled to the sides yet must be available for fine tuning is the jib halyard. The short distance from the halyard exits to the crew, combined with the need for plenty of purchase, has led many to similar solutions. The result I found most efficient was to direct the halyard back to a long Harken magic box along the port side of the centerboard well, with a cleat just behind it. The line passes through the cleat to a turning block, which then can allow the jib halyard control line to be adjusted from any point in the boat. Since I don't play with it much upwind, I find this to be a satisfactory compromise.

A couple of other tricks to focus on include the daggerboard and the mainsheet system. The class permits only an inch of sharpening along the fore and aft edges of the board, and this is what you should aim for. It's quite common for the trailing edge of a quality board to cause most razor blades to appear dull in comparison. Lately, though, this knife-like finish is finding itself more often on the leading edge. Theoretically in contrast to the parabolic shape, the finer entry will keep any stalling at a minimum. I would definitely start relatively sharp forward and go from there.

As for your mainsheet system, the method of splicing the traveler tails within the core of the mainsheet is a must. This allows for both dead-center sheeting in light air and full-powered cranking in a blow. My personal tendency toward constant mainsheet trim has led to the elimination of its cleats and the addition of a second ratchet block, this one placed on the boom, just above the one in the cockpit. This added ratchet block allows me to continue working the main as the wind speed rises. I may have to re-establish my friendship with my hands at the end of a tiring day. but I feel that the control of always having it in my palm is worth it.

Even with a total weight of nearly four hundred pounds for a fifteen-footer, it's crucial that the hull be kept at the minimum. Following the passage of those enjoyable moments of sanding and fairing our hull, the focus should next be aimed toward achieving a well-sealed boat.

When either your mother or wife is not looking, commandeer the vacuum cleaner and pull it up to the stern of your Snipe. Reverse the air flow system so it is emitting and tape the hose to your drain plug. With a bucket of soapy water, slowly go over every possible leak with a sponge. Be careful to apply only a small amount of suds or else it will be tough to detect any air leakage. Newly discovered openings must be quickly sealed for your Snipe to anticipate a reasonably competitive life.

With the boat now faired and sealed, all we have left is to weigh her with the permissible equipment, eliminating or adding the extra baggage to level off at the three hundred eighty-one pound limit. In my book, for all the time we direct toward squeezing that last ounce of speed out of our rigs, to not have a platform at the minimum weight seems incredible.

Ascertaining that our hull is up to par leaves us to only look up--to the mast, that is. My first accomplishments in breezy conditions were preceded by intense levels of frustration, having

been rolled so often that the dirty air which remained would cause oxygen masks to fall from the boom to permit proper breathing. I decided that since the pain from hiking was as great for winners as it was for losers, I had better take a closer look at the rig's reactions to situations before I could take advantage of its characteristics. The first thing I noticed was that as the wind increased, the middle of my mast was forced to leeward. I later discovered that the spreaders I had were about an inch longer than the norm. Without lower shrouds support the mast's mid-section, spreaders longer than around sixteen and a half inches will in effect drive that portion of the rig to leeward as the shrouds load up, thus closing the slot and any hope of speed.

The trend in design has removed the mast's lower stiffening, resulting in a very bendy rig. I knew that, before I was to become a threat on the course, I was going to have to be able to control the mast's fore and aft bend and jib luff sag. Because of the flexible nature of the spars, a great deal of luff curve must be drawn into the main for the sail to match the mast's maximum bend. Considering this, to properly alter the depth of the main to match the varying conditions, we must see what can effectively bend the mast. Simple mainsheet tension transmits into a compression force to help our effort, but to avoid over tightening the leech, we turn next to the boom vang, the Snipe's most efficient tool for modifying mast bend. Since the spreaders are unfixed to the mast, tightening the vang will thrust the boom forward, freely inducing bend. However, what the vang does not realize is that excessive bend will turn the mast right past the designed luff curve, producing those hideous "overbend wrinkles" which extend from the clew toward the luff. To avoid exceeding this bend limitation, we must limit the swing of the spreaders to prevent the spar from passing this point of no return. Once the spreaders are blocked out at the correct spot, they will discourage further bend while allowing the lever-effect of the mast to handle our other concern, the luff sag of the jib. The compression force of mainsheet tension is now reduced, enabling it to pull the tip aft and thus lessen jib sag. The need for a powerful jib is diminished as we enter these upper ranges, so the elimination of luff sag will allow us to sail to weather more efficiently .

Using the Snipe rig to maintain the desired sail shape is critical, but so is keeping it in the vertical mode. In the face of a premature end to a regatta, the significance of taking the necessary measures to preserve one's mast is obvious. Considering that there is little preventing the mast from inverting while off the wind, it's essential that your spreader tips can't swing forward of ninety degrees to the boat. As this restricts the mid-section of the mast from fading aft, at the same time we can use our forepuller to attain our goal. It's also vital to realize that as we sail upwind with a tight vang, the moment we drive off and ease out the main, that forward force of the boom will now be directed at an angle to the boat. This in turn will throw the mast out of column and possibly snap it, so a timely ease of the vang at the weather mark will let your mast live to see another day. As I discovered during the 1983 Halloween Regatta, a 1-1-dnf is a frustrating way to conclude a series. With that in mind, we must prepare a mental checklist for those breezy conditions so as to prevent any problems. At least your insurance company may be more apt to smile in the face of adverse conditions. A decision as weighty as any you'll cross is the choice of which sailmaker to go with. The level of racing that the class presents should direct your interests at those who are actively involved in Snipe racing, for it is only in this fashion that possible design shapes can evolve. As for regatta results, they are definitely an asset, but be aware of sailmakers sporting win lists that could double for personal resumes. In the long run, it is the continuous accumulation of satisfied customers that carry a loft, not the few wins by one of the loft jockeys. Beyond the sails, the loft should also provide you with a complete tuning guide that allows you to reproduce the identical sailing environment (ie., shroud tension, spreader angle, mast rake, etc.) for which the sails were designed. And possibly above all is that your final choice should

be there to answer the phone when you call with a question. Their ability to stand next to their product is what's needed for you to be able to attain your goals and expectations.

That leads me to my final point--that of one's goals and expectations. As we enter this humbling period with our egos tenderly resting in our back pockets, it's important to place many levels ahead of what we ultimately dare to attain. The pressure we place on ourselves to swiftly achieve our lofty ambitions will only erode the spirit which dreams of such acclaim.

One must enter this new arena with only thoughts of learning, not of living up to past achievements or of the monetary investment and sacrifices that have provided this opportunity. Mentally pacing one's natural desires to succeed is never simple, but neither is standing erect to repeated failures. Fortunately, the format of class racing supplies one the competition in the local arena to learn the lessons at a less painful level. Then if the desire exists, the road to the top stretches out just beyond the sign.

Regardless of where your sights fall or your horizons extend, the grandest part of your Snipe experience will be the people you encounter, for they are among the finest. So, from the toe I stubbed to the one you're possibly about to, I wish you the very best.

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