

How to lose a mast under spinnaker by Jim Murrant

I have sailed on Russian boats twice in the Sydney to Hobart yacht race. Both journeys were memorable, but for very different reasons. This was partly because the Russians themselves were very different.

The first time was in 1989 on a boat which was a copy of a Peterson 44 and which was crewed entirely by people from Vladivostok, with the possible exception of the man I took to be the KGB representative on the crew. They were a nice bunch and I still have friends amongst them. Unassuming, they readily admitted that they were products of a marine college and knew much about the sea, less about yachting.

The second crew, on a similar boat, were from St Petersburg – and they were much more the modern Russian, smart, self-assured and commercially aware. Though they were 20 years out of date in their sailing techniques they were almost arrogant in their belief that they were not. This was to lead to some firm discussions between us, although my case wasn't helped by the fact that they had taken me on board as navigator and local knowledge expert not as Sailing Master.

We were running before a good hard northerly a few miles past Montague Island on the second day of the race. The wind had been blowing for some time so that the seas, even though they were running with the current, had become significant although not big.

I pointed out to the skipper that the big spinnaker was four or five feet from the top of its hoist, which naturally was causing the boat to get into a heavy rolling pattern. Also the crew had not fitted a choker to the sheet, which was not helping.

At first he pretended not to hear me. Then he said, "This is not the Russian way." I insisted that not only was this heavy rolling slowing the boat down but that there were very great pressures being put on the mast. He insisted, still, that this was not the Russian way.

I snappily replied he would lose the mast – but it was no satisfaction to me when that happened only half an hour or so later. We were out of the race.

(By the way it is something to see when 12 fit strong young Russians, who don't have much money but a lot of incentive, recover from a broken mast. They had the whole thing back on board within 2 minutes and then had the problem of about 15 feet of overhang bow and stern. It didn't matter much at the bow, but with the mast in the steep seas at the stern the helmsman had a struggle to counteract the sweep effect. The mast was trying to steer the boat.)

A better way to sail under spinnaker

If that's the wrong way what is the right way? For a start, never, ever (to coin a phrase) fail to pull the spinnaker halyard, and the spinnaker, right to the top of its hoist. The moment the spinnaker starts to sway from side to side the forward drive of the boat is lost. That's bad in its own right, but as I pointed out, that puts strains on the boat that are far too dangerous. For instance the steering comes under enormous pressure as the side of the boat starts to take control and the helmsman has to use all pressure to try to counteract. If he fails the boat broaches, of course.

The choker, which I mentioned to the Russians, is another way of preventing the death rolls. It is a simple arrangement which may be as basic as tying a line over the sheet, tying a bowline in that line and pulling the standing part through a block and to a winch

so that the sheet is pulled down and in to the side of the boat. On some boats a special open-sided block is used which sits over the sheet and then goes through another block in the same way. As tension is put on the line, and the sheet pulled down again, the spinnaker is held firm and any tendency to roll is counteracted.

While the main way to learn how to sail with spinnakers in heavy weather is to practice there are a couple of good basic rules to learn. In the first place always keep the boat under the spinnaker. This apparently silly little phrase is actually the best rule to know. It means that if the boat rolls to starboard steer 'under the spinnaker' to starboard and counteract the movement of the hull. By this I don't mean giving a big swing on the wheel and making the boat turn to 45 degrees. It is more a little kick.

The next rule is to reef down. When the boat starts being hard-pressed when running it is because the pressure in the mainsail is trying to turn the boat to the side opposite the main. At its extreme the helmsman won't be able to counteract this and the boat will broach. For this reason it is best to take a reef in the main (not always easy when the sail is pressed against the shrouds) but nevertheless take a slab out of the sail and so reduce the turning moment. Of course, in the end, no amount reefing is going to allow you to keep the spinnaker up.

Briefly, that's take a look at the other bogey about heavy weather running – jibing. The most common, and probably safest jibe is the dip pole jibe. In this evolution the spinnaker pole is pulled up a track on the mast so that it can fit inside the forestay, the brace is let forward so that the pole can be detached from the brace, the pole is then attached to the other side so that the sheet becomes the brace and it is pulled back on and trimmed.

Hardly ever used in ocean work is the end-for-end jibe – which the Russians used and which is really only suitable for dinghies and small boats in harbours. This jibe is executed by detaching the pole from both the mast and the brace, swinging it across the boat and attaching the opposite ends to the mast and brace – great fun in a half gale with several burly sailors dancing around the bow.

Finally, the heavy weather jibe. Here two spinnaker poles are used. The one that was in position is left there and the other attached to a second bell fitting on the mast and to what was the sheet. The main is then jibed and the 'old' spinnaker pole removed.

While all this information is no doubt useful, it goes nowhere towards describing the fantastic thrill it is to drive hard in front of a strong wind with the spinnaker up, a rooster tail out behind, and a bow wave sometimes as high as your head.

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