

Contentious issues

Several of the numerous enquiries received at RYA Training concern some familiar friends when it comes to starting heated debate!

Helmets

When, or should, beginners wear some form of helmet when learning to sail?

Those against the wearing of helmets argue that it interferes with the ability to feel the wind and learn about that telltale moment when the wind is on the other side of the head indicating that a gybe will shortly follow.

They also argue that wearing helmets impairs vision to the extent that beginners cannot see the boom moving towards them, increasing the likelihood of head bumps, particularly to the face where most helmets provide little protection anyway.

Those in favour of the wearing of helmets argue that, so long as the helmet is a good fit and of suitable design, then wearing one does reduce both the incidence and the severity of head bumps.



Like many discussions, there may never be a consensus because there are so many variables such as the experience of the individual, the weather, type of boat, height of boom, whether the boom is padded, whether or not an instructor is on board etc.

So, what does the RYA recommend in terms of the wearing of helmets? We see both sides of the argument and inspectors and coaches will recommend that the wearing of helmets is an option and a 'tool' in the instructors' and centres' tool box which may be appropriate, depending on some or all of the variables mentioned.

The key is to find a safety control measure that suits your centre and your circumstances.



Masthead floats

Should RTCs use masthead floats?

The arguments usually put forward against their use are that it's not 'normal sailing' and that sooner or later people need to learn about how dinghies behave in a real situation and how to prevent and recover from an inversion. They need to learn about and manage this risk as an inherent part of the activity.

However, it's also fair to say that most centres running lots of beginners and improvers courses do use masthead floats as a matter of course. They are considered an important option in the prevention of inversion and the risks associated with it.

The RYA's research into entrapment found no single underlying cause of entrapment relating to type of boat, equipment or incident etc. (The report is available on the website) However, when it came to rescuing or releasing the entrapped individual, the overwhelming view was that prevention is always better than cure. Thus, the use of masthead floats on training dinghies especially, would seem to have three main benefits:

- 1 A reduction in the likelihood of inversion, subsequent entrapment and possible drowning.
- 2 By preventing inversion, the boat is righted and sailed away more quickly, thus saving time, energy and effort, and maximising time spent sailing rather than swimming.
- 3 The prevention of mast breakages in shallow water and the associated cost.

There will probably be no clear consensus on the use of masthead floats. When dealing with risk we must always remember to look at all the

dynamic variables and to put in place reasonable safety control measures which keep the individual safe. However, we must not over-sanitise the activity so much as to take away its very essence as an exciting sport with an element of inherent risk.

Fitting your masthead floats

If your centre goes down the route of fitting masthead floats, here are a few tips from Nic Wymer at Plas Menai National Watersports Centre.

At Plas Menai we used to suffer a number of broken masts through contact with the bottom during inversions. This was further accentuated as modern boats gained more inherent buoyancy, causing them to invert more regularly.

Originally, we used 5L plastic bottles hoisted on the main halyard, replacing these with buoyancy bags the following year. However, when the boats were reefed the buoyancy came lower down the mast, losing the leverage needed to prevent an inversion just when the wind was getting up. There was also reluctance from more experienced sailors to be seen using buoyancy.

We now fit an extra external halyard with a permanently attached buoyancy bag. This allows it to be lowered at the end of the day to reduce windage and chafing on the bag. It also enables it to stay at a fixed height regardless of the sail plan.

The halyard is an endless system with the lower block elasticated to allow for some mast bend and for it to be pulled away from the mast when being lowered.



With the older Proctor masts the front part of the halyard can be passed between the adjuster and the spreader bracket, reducing the impact on mast bend. The later spreaders have a hole in a similar position.

We bolt the upper block through the mast about 150mm down from the top. This avoids the bag getting stuck on the top of the mast and the boat having to be rolled to untangle it. It also reduces the wild gyrations of the bag by keeping it away from the vortex coming off the main.

We tend to use buoyancy bags inside a protective outer skin, reducing wear on the bags and making them easier to change. About 20 to 30 litres is usually an adequate size, depending on the boat.

