

Practicing in Groups

By Rick Arneson

In the Spring 2009 issue of US Snipe Sailor we printed an article on single boat practice routines. In this follow-up, Rick Arneson describes some practice exercises for small groups.

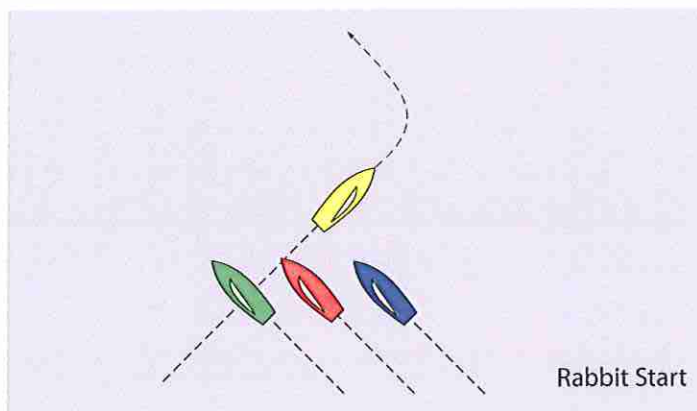
With the summer racing season in full swing, plenty of Snipe sailors have been working on honing their skills for the next regatta, and the best way to sharpen speed, maneuvering, and tactical skills is to practice in a group. Any time spent in the boat is beneficial, and the use of some fun and challenging drills can make a day's practice even better. For all of those looking to make the most of their training time, here are some examples of simple drills that can be sailed in groups large or small, by sailors of a wide range of skill levels.

Three or More Boats:

Circle Drill

This drill is mostly about boathandling, and is a good way to help your comfort in the cockpit with rapid, tight maneuvers. In one variation, the idea is for the group to sail in a circle, as close as possible to each other's transoms without contact or passing. The "no passing" rule introduces the need to slow down quickly to avoid collisions, and helps avoid the confusion of which stern to chase. Designate a person in the group to call a switch in direction after a few minutes, going from clockwise to counter-clockwise or vice versa.

If you have two buoys that you can go around, position them about 6 boatlengths apart, like a small start line, and circle them. In this version, you can attempt to pass the person in front of you, working to get an inside overlap at the roundings. You can also run this drill in a figure-eight to keep people on their toes for port-starboard crossings, or if you want to emphasize tacking and jibing in particular (see illustration).



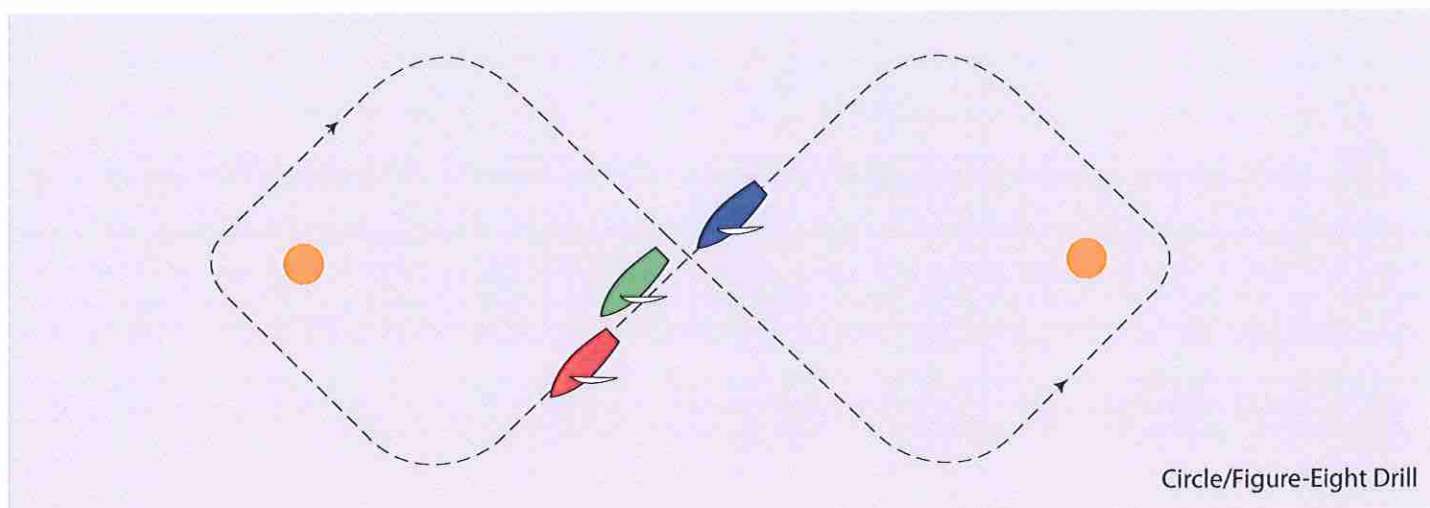
Rabbit Start

Rabbit Start

The rabbit start is a good way to get a group sailing upwind relatively evenly when there is no start line in the water. A designated "rabbit" approaches the group on a port reach until within approximately 6 boatlengths, then hardens up to a closehauled course. All of the other boats on starboard then duck the rabbit's stern and continue to race upwind, closehauled on starboard tack. The rabbit tacks onto starboard after the last boat has passed his stern, and the race upwind commences. This can be a good lead-in to straight-line speed testing, a race to an upwind mark, or another drill.

Tack-and-Duck Drill

In a group of 3-6 boats, line up on the same tack in an area with a lot of runway to continue upwind (a rabbit start is a



Circle/Figure-Eight Drill

good way to start this drill). Sail on the same tack for about 30 seconds to one minute, working to hold a lane of clear air. The leeward-most boat will start the next phase by tacking, ducking the sterns of the other boats, and tacking to windward of the pack. The spacing should be kept consistent of about 1.5-2 boatlengths abeam of each other. After the new windward boat is in position, the new leeward-most boat will tack out and take the new windward-most position, and so on (see illustration). The objective is to keep your lane of clear air without being rolled over or squeezed off.

As the boats rotate through their positions, the leeward boats may find themselves more bow-out on the boats to weather, but they will face a challenge of steering and sail trim to tack and duck the boats on their weather hip. Even if the leeward boat finds himself far ahead of the boat on his weather hip, he must duck all the other boats after tacking, not cross. This will help even the boats up for the drill and benefit the sailors' boathandling skills. This drill is best sailed in open water where the wind direction will be a little more consistent and there is plenty of space. Go through a few rotations of your group, paying attention to straight-line speed, steering and sail trim through close maneuvers, and positioning after ducking the pack.

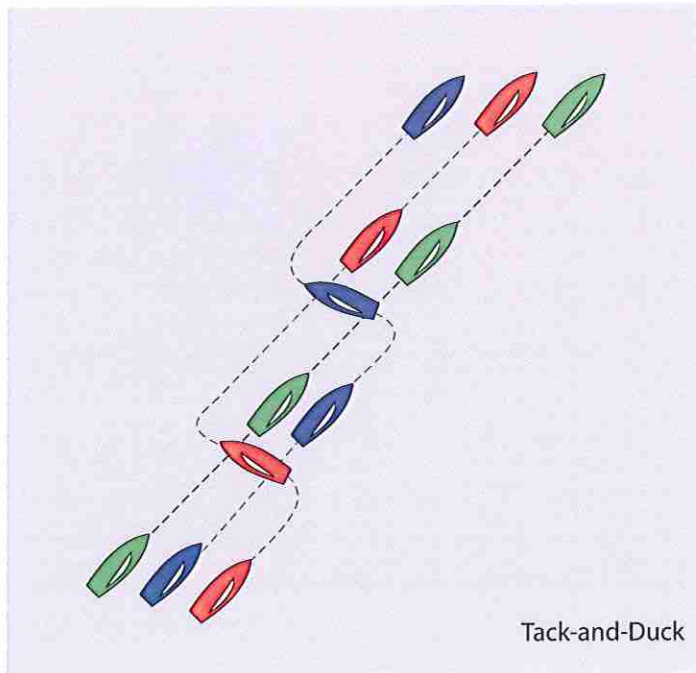
Follow-the-Leader

This drill is a fun back-to-basics favorite. A leader is chosen to sail any reaching or downwind course they choose (the group gets separated too easily with upwind sailing used). Boats in the lineup continually hold position right on the tail of the boat in front of them, but they may not pass. They must accelerate and decelerate by using weight placement, sail trim, and the foils. After a couple of minutes, the leader can rotate to the back of the line using a whistle or verbal command, and the game continues until all have had a chance to be the leader.

Three Boats:

Monkey in the Middle

Although this drill is commonly used for team racing, this is a valuable tactical exercise for any small-boat fleet. A group of three starts by racing around a course, either already designated individually as the first, second and third-place boats, or racing one another until those positions are clear. The objective is for the first-place boat to slow down the second-place boat, allowing third place to pass. First's job is to cover Second, Second's job is to cover Third, and Third's job is to pass one or both of the others. Whenever Third has made a pass successfully, the group dynamic shifts and all boats pick up their new roles in their new positions. When a pass has been made, it makes it easier for all the boats if the leader can call out the new positions: "OK, now I'm 1, Debbie's 2, and Jim is 3" or something to that effect. This drill is best done on a triangle course, as that will continually open opportunities for passing. This is a drill that puts heavy emphasis on both tactics and boathandling, but should only be used to sharpen those skills in practice, as team racing is not allowed in a fleet racing format.



Tack-and-Duck

Two Boats:

Match Racing

An upwind tacking duel can be a fun test of tactics, speed and boathandling. Start by sailing apart evenly on opposite tacks upwind. Go for about 5-10 boatlengths and tack back towards each other. The leader will attempt to cover the boat behind, while the trailing boat attempts to pass. If one boat starts getting too far ahead (3 boatlengths or more), the leader can execute a circle or a 720 to even things up, or the two boats can start again. A jibing duel downwind works on the same principle, with the leader attempting to jibe ahead and to leeward of the trailing boat to cover, but still keep their air clear. These are more aggressive drills, as the goal is simply to pass the other boat.

Point vs. Foot

This drill is a tuning exercise meant to benefit straight-line speed. One boat sets up the boat for pointing ability while the other boat sets up for lower and faster footing. The two boats separate on opposite tacks for one minute and then come back together. When they come back together, one boat should have an advantage. They must not sail too far apart, or a change in wind or current shear could make more of a difference. A speed edge can be verified with a couple of repetitions.

Favored-side Split

This is a common setup drill before the start of a race. Two boats of similar speed separate from an equal starting point on opposite tacks, sailing up the middle of the course. After two minutes, they tack and re-converge. If one boat's lead is apparent after you tack, don't come all the way to the crossing point, as it will likely just advertise the results of the test to other observers. This is a good way to spot less obvious conditions on a course, such as current or wind shears that are not visually apparent. 🐦