

First Time Flying Fifteen - Basic Spinnaker Handling

So you are climbing aboard a Flying Fifteen for the first time? If you are from a two sail boat, or an asymmetric – or are new to sailing – the spinnaker might seem a little daunting at first. However, spinnaker handling really is the most satisfying thing to do well. Being good at flying the sail makes an enormous difference too on Olympic format courses such as we have at Datchet. The spinnaker is so influential in performance that I often think the crew makes a bigger contribution to winning races than the helmsman. It certainly evens up the teamwork contribution! In an 8 leg course, 5 legs have spinnakers – they double your horse power potentially by doubling the amount of sail cloth you are carrying. Flying the sail well is a great skill to pick up and it's not too difficult to learn how....

The techniques for the basic hoisting, dropping and gybing vary slightly between whether your boat uses a 'chute' or 'bags', and fly-away or end-to-end poles. So these are covered in separate pages on this website. See the "Interesting Links" column or go to 'Categories' and select "First Time Fifteen".

The Basics

Everything is symmetrical – the top of the sail, the head, is a fixed point at the mast hounds, and the bottom 'floating' corners are called the clews. You steer the sail with the pole - basically getting it as far back as you reasonably can (squaring off the sail) increases the forward drive of the boat. On a dead run you can get the pole very square, but on a reach the finer you point into the wind the more likely you are to ease the pole to just kissing the forestay.

General Spinnaker Trimming

As a crew, get to windward so you can see the sail properly. You cant see it from the leeward side of the boat. Send the helmsman to leeward if you need to. Most of the time you will be trimming the spinnaker sheet. What you are trying to do all the time is to let the sheet out until the luff just starts to curl – then pull it in a shade, then try letting it out a bit again. You want to get the luff to be just on the point of curling... A constant game. You never cleat that sheet as you are playing the sail each moment of the leg. It becomes second nature quite quickly...

If you are reaching and are having difficulty holding the sail on the point of curling, you will let the pole go forward a bit by easing the 'guy' – that's what you call the sheet that is attached to the pole-end. If you change course and bear away, you will be hoping to pull the pole back a little as you do so, squaring it off more and increasing the forward drive as you do so.

On the run, with the wind broadly behind you, you will be squaring the pole off. On a dead run it will look like it is at 90 degrees to the boat. If the sail develops a vertical flutter running up to the head you can square the pole off even more.

Sail Shape

The biggest contributor to the shape of the sail is the pole height, which should be easily adjustable. You will probably adjust the pole in every race if not every leg. You may find for example that you set the pole end a little higher on the run than you do on the reaches. How do you tell if it is in the right place? Two basic tests:-

- (i) Adjust the height, so that the clews of the sail are flying level. This is a good technique in a Flying Fifteen.
- (ii) A bit more subtle, but when the sail luff starts to curl, you want the curl to start in the centre of the luff. If it is curling above the centre point, try bringing the pole end down a bit. If it is curling below the centre point, try lifting the pole end a little.