

Guide to Helmsmen

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Summary. A tongue-in-cheek questionnaire from the Crews Union for crew weighing up an offer to sail with a particular helmsman. Twenty categories – from the boat, sails, running rigging and trailer to antifouling, starts, windward-mark roundings, rules, mooring pick-ups, repairs and the bar – each have four answers ranging from a) ideal to d) disastrous. A scoring section explains what mostly a), b), c) or d) answers mean for the season ahead, from Crews Union ‘approved’ to blacklisted. It is a humour piece, though it doubles as a checklist of what a well-run Dragon campaign looks like.

As the start of another season is upon us, and furtive offers of crewing positions are made in darkened bars, the Crews Union has produced a guide to identifying the likely quality of your season’s sailing. We all know that our ideal helmsman would provide a fully fitted and rigged boat, with everything working as it should, new sails, plenty of alcohol, a calm demeanour, and a general ability to aim the pointy end in the right direction.

However, what may have seemed like a fantastic offer under the influence of around 15 pints of IPA, it may turn out to be not what it seemed, and needs careful examination to avoid a severely frustrating season.

Consult the following guide to avoid your sailing season ending prematurely in a messy ‘divorce’ ...

The boat is ... a) brand new; b) an ex-works demonstrator; c) second hand; d) condemned.

Measurement ... a) Brand new boat, latest shape and down to weight; b) Won’t change the boat as it has a certificate, but doesn’t measure at stations 6 and 10 so it’s faster; c) Boat is so old the certificate was awarded to anything a gentleman of good character said was a Dragon. Helm has an encyclopaedic knowledge of every Dragon built in the UK before 1970, and claims that ‘real Dragons grow on trees’. d) It’s a Vancouver 29.

The sails are ... a) brand new – possibly for every regatta; b) somewhat used, but serviceable; c) matured – the owner is a wine buff and treats sails the same way; d) creased, soft, can be folded small enough to fit in your sailing bag, sail trim has no effect on the sail shape, and they are generally good for nothing other than dust covers.

The running rigging is ... a) Pristine, and does exactly what it should when it should; b) Ropes are well-used, but a bit of coaxing generally gets the relevant kit in the right place at the right time (especially if you pull it from just the right angle), although you do occasionally shoot backwards across the boat if you exert too much pressure on something; c) Everything allegedly works, although

no-one understands how, or why, this continues to be the case, particularly when they've seen, or worse, sailed the boat in question. d) The blocks are falling apart, and are likely to come adrift if you dare exert any pressure on them, the sheets are frayed, stiff from salt, and likely to part the first time they are used in a bit of a blow.

The boat's trailer ... a) Ich habe einen neuer Bootsanhänger von Harbeck. Always professionally serviced before every trip away. b) Second-hand Harbeck. Serviced when it needs to be; c) Other brand of trailer. Looking slightly tired, and probably still road legal. d) Rusting heap of junk believed originally built in 1960 for a Soling and badly modified to 'fit' a Dragon. Never serviced, so most of the bearings are likely to give way on your way to the regatta. Probably not road legal, so you hope you don't get stopped going to or from a regatta in the unlikely event you actually make an excursion to other sailing venues.

Antifouling ... a) What's that? – The boat is dry sailed, and the yard will polish it every week; b) Applied liberally, without the aid of the crew, then regular lifts by the yard ensure that weed is kept to a minimum; c) Applied sparingly, with the aid of the crew, once a year. Generally, sufficient moaning will produce a sparing application of beer as well. d) What's that? – during sailing season, the bottom has more grass on it than Wimbledon and weed is dealt with on the slip at three-month intervals on a Saturday morning with a strimmer (by the crew).

Echosounder ... a) Correctly installed and calibrated. Helm always tacks off with just enough depth to spare, but not too much. b) Installed but no-one believes it, or has no echosounder, so helm generally tacks off early, although has been known to strip down, get out and push. c) Helmsman has implicit faith in the sounder, but crew always seen to sail in drysuits. d) Why are there seagulls standing up in the water ahead?

The helm emails you during the week. He/she ... a) Sends you all the information about sailing you need, as well as loads of great jokes which keeps you in stitches all week; b) Will tell you when there's no sailing this weekend; c) Can't even send a text message, never mind email – you need a crystal ball to know what's happening; d) Sends you all the latest viruses likely to wreck your hard drive. Keeps you busy cursing them and Microsoft in equal measure since you're usually round at their house fixing their computer as well as your own.

Planning ... a) Crew meets at helmsman's house around Christmas-time to be plied with drinks, food, and plan the next season's campaign. Crew's employers always happy that holiday booked in advance; b) Helm decides what he can afford to do, although crew successfully negotiate additional events. Crew's employer's patience slightly stretched by last-minute requests for time off; c) Decides he wants to do the regatta at the last minute. Pays late-entry fee, but finds at least one of the crew can't get the time off; d) What do you mean we're not sailing this morning after all then?

New Crew ... a) Unlikely to need new crew since the normal cockpit-jockeys have a mythical devotion to 'the cause' and drop everything to go sailing on the boat. Generally only rock-star super-crew accepted, but will pass on helpful hints to less-experienced crew in the bar with enough alcoholic bribery; b) Booked full-time crew for the season, although will need the occasional replacement due to wedding attendances and suchlike – arranged a week or so in advance. Will happily pass on knowledge to anyone who asks; c) Calls Crews Union Crewsearch at five o'clock on a Friday evening asking whether there are any spare crew available. Professes knowledge to everyone within earshot, but generally it's not worth listening to; d) Will happily accept anyone mad enough to sail with them, pulled off the dock half an hour before the warning gun. Has trouble retaining crew due to incompetence and/or crew-abuse ...

Regatta Circuit ... a) Boat hardly ever sails locally. Loads of travel to big events in great locations all season. Crew arrange Euro bank accounts; b) Will do the Edinburgh Cup and a couple of other open meetings; c) Never goes further than the Medway; d) Leaves their own boat at home (out of the water) and pretends to be a crew, depriving good crew of a trip away.

Regatta Accommodation ... a) Always five-star hotel. Crew have own rooms and appear well rested and fit for the day's racing; b) Nice apartment, in the same block as the rest of the fleet, great for parties; c) Unusual, 'has character'. Crew kept awake by screaming rows coming from next door, chainsaw-like snoring of crewmate sharing the room, and total lack of air conditioning in the height of summer; d) Crew discover kennels that they left the dog with is costing more per night than the B&B you're in.

Race Preparation ... a) The boat is ready for you to step on board, with rigging set and sails correctly attached; b) A debate in the bar about correct sails for the conditions is concluded with the whole team heading out to the boat to prepare for the race; c) The helm has been out since the crack of dawn preparing for the race, although the crew make sure they're aboard with plenty of time to spare to untie all the granny knots, and retie the spinnaker the right way up. d) If you want to race, then you will have to make sure the boat is ship-shape, the rig is set and the sails are on – your helm will step on board (if you're lucky) just before you leave the mooring, or will expect you to do a sail past to collect him/her from the pontoon.

At the start ... a) Perfect, right end of the line, on time and clear air; b) On time, in with the pack; c) On time, wrong club line – the boat is facing the right direction, and is in the same postcode as the start line, although the helm has been known to practise 'speed runs' from somewhere near the marina with about 30 seconds to go; d) Slightly early for tomorrow's race – just ...

At the windward mark ... a) Easily miles ahead in the lead, so loads of space and time to sort things out; b) At the front of the chasing pack. Bit tight, but a clean and relatively quiet rounding; c) Messy rounding at the back of the pack; lots of noise; temper tantrums. Awarded toys-out-of-pram trophy

after race; d) Comes in from coffin-corner on port in a 100-boat fleet at the same time as 30 starboard-tackers. Crew shuts eyes and prays.

Rules ... a) Helmsman always fair, and will not push the point, even if he's in the right. Hardly ever in the protest room; b) Helmsman usually pushing the point, but always just about stays on the right side of the rules. Seldom protests (believing it's best to hold an 'informal' protest hearing in the bar afterward) but occasionally protested; c) Helmsman believes he know the rules, and files protests at every opportunity, wasting valuable time at the bar. Trouble is the rules he 'knows' went out ten years ago ... Crew closes eyes at every mark rounding; d) Believes that he's always in the right regardless of circumstances or evidence to the contrary. On first-name terms with insurance company directors and RYA Appeals Committee.

Picking up the mooring ... a) No matter what the wind conditions, the approach to the mooring is gentle and controlled; b) On most occasions, the mooring is collected on the first attempt; c) The crew has been known to consider whether they will be able to catch the mooring rope tail again if they drop it, or whether they should attempt to get a turn around something and hang on in there; d) Crew knuckles drag on the ground, helms from adjacent moorings sail off to 'look at a (mysteriously invisible) heron on the shore over there' when a mooring approach is spotted to avoid vigorous fending off and gouged gelcoat.

Repairs/replacements ... a) You would hate to see his account with the boatyard/sailmaker, as any problem is solved by giving them a ring. Of course only the latest top-of-the-range gear will do; b) Gentle persuasion is usually enough to get the offending item replaced after a couple of gentle reminders; c) If it comes to it and you are forced to buy and fit the new parts yourself you can normally get the money back without too much grumbling or blackmail; d) Items that worked perfectly last weekend will have been 'improved' in your absence so that it's either completely missing, or will fail when used. If there wasn't enough purchase on a system, you may find it re-rigged so that it is securely bolted at both ends, ensuring it will do nothing but shorten the boat. Gear failure is met with complaints about how 'the staff will mistreat the boat', followed by begging replacements from other sailors.

In the bar ... a) You never have to buy your own beer, and is happy to chat to anyone; b) Usually buys several rounds of the beer, but will only chat to other helms; c) Grudgingly buys the first beer when finished discussing the finer topics of each mark rounding with another helm, then leaves; d) Crew always has to buy the beer, since he/she strangely never seems to have their wallet or club card.

Nominations for the Clanger Trophy ... a) No chance – never seen to do anything wrong, despite sneaking suspicions that they're not entirely innocent; b) The odd nomination for a minor misdemeanour, but nothing too serious, and never won the bell; c) Front-runner. Non-musically able crew getting worried; d) Front-runner by Easter – no one else likely to get it this year – again!

Summing up your helmsman

Mostly a): The boat has probably been awarded Crews Union ‘approved’ status. Although your helmsman is bound to have other shortcomings, when it comes to the boat, he/she is pretty close to perfect, a good start for a shining performance.

Mostly b): Your helmsman is not too bad. Lack of funding may well prevent him/her from buying everything new each season, but you would generally expect the boat to work. Towards the end of the season, things will start looking tired, and a complete winter refit is unlikely to be forthcoming, although the essentials will probably be done.

Mostly c): Although your helmsman has a vague idea of how to treat crew correctly, he/she is still a little rough around the edges and in need of a little Crews Union ‘education’. The start of a new season should be approached with caution, as forgetfulness is likely to be one of his/her key traits, so a shakedown sail is important, for no reason other than to ensure that the pole-up does actually have the desired effect, and the chute hatch opener does. Supervision of things like putting the mast in the boat would be recommended, unless you fancy a couple of trips up the mast to retrieve lost halyards.

Mostly d): The boat is likely to have been blacklisted by the Crews Union – contact your Crews Union representative for moral guidance. Each race should be approached with trepidation, as the likelihood of something coming off in your hands (your fault of course, even when it was being held in place by nothing more than rust and a good coating of salt), is high. Should your helmsman also be a ‘fiddler’ who ‘enjoys’ working on the boat as much or more than sailing it, you may succumb to the additional delights of the uncertainty that pulling on any rope will break something.

Important notes

1. The above list is intended to be humorous and harmless tongue-in-cheek fun, and although individuals may perhaps be recognisable from the descriptions above, any implication of specificity to any one person is entirely unintentional (honest). Anyone offended by anything mentioned in this list really should develop a sense of humour, but may make their complaints in writing to editorial@crewsunion.org, or one of the appointed Crews Union representatives.
2. In the interests of harmony and editorial balance, the Crews Union recognises Dragon helmsman/owners’ right to reply to this document and would welcome any submissions. Please send your proposals to editorial@crewsunion.org, and everything deemed not to be too libellous and amusing enough will be published on the Crews Union website (www.crewsunion.org) and will appear on the Dragon Fleet notice board in due course.

The Crews Union also recognises that this is not a definitive list, and would welcome any additions from crew who have spotted helmsman behavioural patterns not mentioned above.

Again, send your submissions to editorial@crewsunion.org, and an updated list will be published on the Crews Union website.

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