

Sailing Upwind in Light and Shifty Conditions

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Summary. Simon Brien (Kin, IRL 182) explains how to keep a 1.8-ton, long-keeled Dragon with its 'Mickey Mouse Ear' rudder moving upwind in light, shifty breezes. In a lift, ease the genoa and main marginally first, build speed, then come up smoothly while trimming back on over five to ten seconds – aggressive tiller movements act as a brake. In chop, ease sheets and runners just before a new wave pattern; in a really lumpy sea, put on the inner barber and ease the sheet for a deeper headsail. Trim pointers include the genoa leech 4-5 cm off the spreaders and just touching or 1-2 cm off the shrouds at deck level.

Simon Brien (Kin IRL 182) considers the optimum combination of balance, trim and helm control, taking into account the 'Mickey Mouse Ear'.

The Dragon is widely regarded as the world's best one-design keel boat class, possibly due to its exquisite lines, depth and closeness of racing throughout Europe and worldwide, and the camaraderie in the class. However, it must be remembered that the design dates back 75 years and the boat weighs 1.8 tons.

This in itself provides another dimension to the racing. It is not a racing dinghy or planing sportsboat that can be tacked and gybed or manoeuvred without consideration and respect to the balance, sail trim and rudder movements.

For those moving into the class from dinghies, sportsboats or keelboats with transom-hung rudders, it can take a while to settle into the optimum combination of balance, trim and helm control to maximise boat speed.

With a long keel and 'Mickey Mouse Ear' rudder at the end, and 1.8 tons to keep moving at maximum speed there are many aspects to consider.

Crew position and balance

Generally in light weather, the crew should sit as far forward as possible within the cockpit, perhaps with one on the lee rail (depending on wind strength) to maintain a small amount of leeward heel, which is preferable for the balance and feel of the helmsman.

Personally, except in very light weather, I prefer to sit to weather as I feel there is a better feel for coming wind shifts and variances in strength, as well as better visibility of the game of chess on the

race course and the overall sail trim.

Working the shifts and variations in wind strength

In light variable conditions, often as the wind increases, even marginally, it can veer, causing what appears as a rapid lift. The immediate response is often to put the tiller down to alter course to suit the new wind direction and strength – this is where the ‘Mickey Mouse Ear’ comes into play.

On *Kin*, we have found that with the displacement, long keel and ‘Mickey Mouse Ear’ rudder, it is best in these conditions to alter the entire sail trim of the boat to suit the new wind direction. We ease the genoa and main (very marginally), without first dramatically moving the tiller, thereby we increase the boat speed to the optimum. Once up to full speed, we start to alter course smoothly and progressively, simultaneously trimming the genoa and main back to full close-hauled beating.

This process of easing sheets, optimising speed, progressively beginning to ‘point up’ and ‘trim on’ can all happen within a matter of five to ten seconds. However, well executed crew work, particularly between the helmsman and front man can readily maximise boat speed and optimise pointing once the boat speed is achieved.

On *Kin*, I have been fortunate to sail with the same team for many years and like on any boat, or in a team sport, the instinctive actions of each member to their respective role pays dividends. Often by the time there is a board meeting over sail trim adjustments – the moment has gone!

Basically, in light winds, adjust trim first, then progressively alter course. Regular, aggressive tiller movements cause the good old ‘Mickey Mouse Ear’ to act like a brake.

Light winds and a short chop

Sounds horrible and these are probably the most difficult conditions in which to sail a Dragon.

Basically, all of the aforementioned still applies but the chop just adds to the problem.

When sailing along in a relatively flat sea, balance, trim and optimising speed and pointing are paramount. However, in advance of a changing wave pattern that you see ahead of you, trim needs to be adjusted to maintain and, if possible, increase speed for the new conditions.

Immediately before hitting the new wave pattern we ease sheets marginally, and also ease the runners to optimise power. We have found that in particular the easing of the runner in advance of the waves keeps the momentum and power in the rig.

Obviously once past the wave or wave pattern, alter the rig set up as before.

A few other minor pointers

- Main traveller pulled to weather – to keep the boom on the centreline
- Main sheet – not over sheeted with plenty of twist in leech
- Genoa Halyard – just enough tension to take creases out of luff
- Genoa Sheet – leech 4-5 cm off spreaders, and just touching or 1-2 cm off shrouds at deck level.

Basically, genoa leech profile should match main leech twist.

Light winds – really lumpy sea

Conditions which can often occur after windy conditions when the wind has gone through and left a lumpy sea.

Everything stated above still applies, except boat speed is paramount and optimising pointing becomes secondary.

We have experimented with putting on the inner barber to bring it close to the deck level and easing the sheet in lumpy conditions, thereby creating much more depth in the headsail. This can be particularly effective when carried out in these conditions.

Finally

After racing dinghies for many years and different keel boats, getting involved in the Dragon Class in 1992 has since provided myself and the *Kin* team with exceptional one-design racing on both the Irish and International circuits.

Each year, the class has gone from strength to strength, not only in Ireland, but worldwide, with many of the world's best yachtsmen sailing in the class (don't know if that's a good thing – it keeps getting more difficult to win!).

We have enjoyed regattas in many of the exquisite venues that the class has taken us to – from Martinique to Fremantle, Douarnenez, Cannes, Palma, St Tropez – I don't know what other class can host such a magnificent circuit, race organisation and social scene – a bit we quite enjoy!

Most of all, the Dragon Class has introduced us to competitors worldwide who have become great friends.

Seventy five years on, the class offers more than any other class worldwide. If you haven't tried racing one – have a go!

(petticrows.com).