

SKIP NOVAK

TO INSPIRE A LOVE OF SAILING, EVEN THE YOUNGEST
DINGHY SAILORS NEED THE THRILL OF A VOYAGE

Like many who read this magazine, sailing is not only a life skill, but a way of life for me. I grew up at the yacht club in Chicago and the usual format for young sailors was the classic sailing school geared towards racing. This was fine at the time, I enjoyed it and would continue to race 'around the cans' worldwide thereafter.

When you were big enough to be of some use, you moved on to crewing on the racer-cruisers of the day, racing up and down to small port towns on the Michigan or Wisconsin shore. The highlight was the annual Chicago Mackinac race, all of 330 miles. For a teenager from the suburbs this was high adventure indeed. Early on, if I had the choice of racing endless triangle windward leeward courses or going somewhere I would choose the latter. I learned pretty early on this was a great way to see the world, and there followed an ocean racing and expedition sailing career.

Having retired from racing about the same time the children came along (sort of related), I looked forward to the time when we would, without question, start the dinghy programme. How else do you teach your children to sail competently? It is very true that without a sound racing background it's almost impossible to pick up the many nuances you need to be considered an expert.

We started with the Optimist as being the only class for that age group in Cape Town. We didn't get any farther. I attribute part of this sad story to the Optimist itself.

That clever invention built with 'three sheets of plywood' over 70 years ago got kids afloat and became – and still is – the world's standard starter boat, allowed to exist by the sheer weight of numbers. The downsides are that it is painfully slow, it pushes through the water like a bathtub and needs bailing often. If you fill her up in a failed manoeuvre you are out of the race (in spite of the coaches and parents yelling from the safety boat, "Keep bailing!"). The point is... the concept is 70 years old.

On the other hand it is a highly technical boat to rig and tune, so

therefore the kids who really buy into the competition side of things thrive where the type of boat becomes irrelevant. I defy any parent whose child has won a tough 'Opti' race not to have Olympic thoughts running through their brains. My son, however, was turned off simply because he was bored. Once he discovered surfing it was a no brainer for a young thrill seeker. My daughter got slam dunked too many times by aggressive older kids and threw in the towel, turning instead to mountain activities. Also, sailing in confined spaces like small lakes there was nowhere to go for a 'voyage' and have some non-racing fun.

So I suffered the same fate of many of my sailing

contemporaries with children who'd never had, or lost all, interest in sailing. We were not alone – the attrition rate of the families who started about the same time was staggering. It's the subject of many 'how did it all go wrong?' discussions that are agonised over.

'Sailing in confined spaces there was nowhere to go for a "voyage"'

Although the kids, when still small, were happy to sit beside me on my Laser and bomb around at speed, it wasn't until recently, when they were both heavy and strong enough to handle a Laser on their own in a breeze, that the spark was re-lit. We now have two Lasers where they can 'match race' each other, or I can sail side by side and coach one of them. We don't do any fleet racing, but we have a ball exploring a pristine estuary north of the city with abundant wildlife and deserted beaches for picnics. Being tidal and open to the ocean there are currents strong enough to get you into trouble so seamanship also comes into the equation.

I'm now confident we've got over the hump where so many young people try sailing and, for one reason or another, drop it and never return. I'm told that UK youth programmes have realised this and, at least for beginners, there is more on offer than just racing.

I can't think of anything more satisfying than sailing up the Hamble River on a dinghy, playing the tide, just to get an ice cream for the children at the Jolly Sailor.

Make that a pint for me.

To keep sailing alive throughout life you need to sail, but to sail somewhere. ■

