

How to Become a Senior Skipper

by Dan Acland

When I first came around the Cal Sailing Club I was a mess. I was broke, homeless, and physically disabled. But did I take the time to find work, get a place, and rest up? No chance! All I wanted to do was sail. I slapped down my check, took a turn or two around the South Sailing Basin, and donned the robes of a Junior Skipper. Was I in heaven? And how! I sailed Lidos six or seven days a week, plus weekends. I learned and I taught, I capsized and righted, turned left about, right about, anchored and docked. Sparks flew from my transom. I was high!

What could possibly be finer? Right? Well believe you me, in a couple of months I was beam reaching back and forth along that north-south boundary line like a shark in a tank, one eye on the Ashby radio tower, and the other on the Golden Gate Bridge. I was a hungry man. I needed more water and I needed more boat. I needed a Senior Skipper rating, and if you see yourself in my story, you need one too. You'll sail any boat, at any time, and in a larger sailing area. The club will benefit when you become a senior too. It means more test givers, more highly skilled instructors, and more opportunities for junior and unrated members to sail on keel boats.

So let's get serious about making you a Senior, and let's start by demystifying this illusory senior rating. First of all, what does the process really involve? Four things: a ten hour work project, a written test of sailing theory and club rules, and two practical sailing tests, one in a dinghy (Lido and sometimes Laser), and one in a keelboat (Ensign), both to be taken in winds "clearly exceeding 15 knots." These four hurdles are laid out in this order for good reason, and while some flexibility is possible, I will explain why this order is best, and how to approach each step.

Start with the work project because it is likely to take some time, and requires no advanced sailing skills. You don't have to have all your skills honed in order to start working on the senior rating. In fact, you are much more likely to get the attention from Senior and Cruising Skippers necessary to hone your sailing skills if you can demonstrate that you are serious about getting the rating, and the best way to do this is to start and finish a work project. Furthermore, you can proceed with the rest of the process while your work project is underway.

Club custom dictates a single large work project. Contact your 1st, 2nd, or 3rd Vice Commodore, or your Port Captain and request a project. (See back of newsletter for phone numbers.) Your ten hours are a huge asset to the club, and you will get all the help you need to complete your project. If you take the simple first step of starting a project, your campaign for the senior rating will begin to build a momentum of its own. You will have an investment in the process, and from there it's just a question of taking one step at a time.

The written test is next because, like the work project, it doesn't require special sailing skills. Also, you will learn a lot of sailing theory while studying for the test, and understanding sailing theory will truly help you when you take the helm. I suggest you read Stephen Colgate's Basic Sailing. It will give you most of the sailing theory you need for the test. Trust me on this one. It's thin. It's illustrated. It's very well written. **MEMORIZE IT.** Also, go through the club rules with a fine toothed comb, and talk to various Senior Skippers about the test. Then call up Elizabeth Simon, your rating committee chair, and arrange a time to take the test. Elizabeth is always willing to make time for tests, and you will learn a lot from her, whether you pass the first time, or wind up taking it more than once (which is fine).

Once you have passed the written test, you are ready to pursue the two sailing tests. I suggest you focus on the dinghy first because what you learn on the dinghy will help you on the keel boat, but not so much

vice-versa. Dinghy's are far more responsive, and thus demand a higher standard of skill and understanding. It has been said that if you can handle a Lido in 20 knots, then you can handle an Ensign in 40. And sailing in strong winds is one of the main tests on both boats.

Besides heavy weather, you need to know how to sail without a rudder. "That's a breeze," you say. "Just spin furiously in circles, swearing at the top of your lungs, and slam into the dock. I've seen you do it a thousand times, Dan." Well, yes. But seriously, you need to develop enough control over a rudderless boat to pick up a crew-over-board dummy, both in a Lido and in an Ensign. (Again, start with the Lido, and by the time you have mastered it, the Ensign will be a stroll in the park.) I strongly recommend you learn the theory first. In my opinion, hands on lessons in rudderless sailing aren't worth a hill of beans until you've fully understood the theory. There is a worthy hand-out at the clubhouse on rudderless sailing, but nothing beats a good pencil and paper session with an experienced rudderless sailor. This part of your Senior campaign may prove frustrating, but the dividends are high. You can't claim to be fully in control of a boat if you are afraid to let go of the tiller.

Docking is the next challenge. Upwind, down-wind, and across the wind, you must be in control. The keelboats are harder to dock than the dinghies because they have so much more momentum. So now it's time to get out on an Ensign. The club provides Ensign lessons every Wednesday at 6 p.m. Meet at the J-dock parking lot. These lessons are a great place to get started on the keelboats, but if you are going to go all the way you will want personal attention. Once you get to know them, many Senior and Cruising Skippers will be happy to take you out for focused practice. And check out another thin and superbly written text: Easy on the Helm, by Conliffe, all about boat handling in various conditions.

One more hurdle stands before you on the keelboats. You must be able to fly a spinnaker. One way is to fold the great sail neatly, wrap it in brown paper, and Air Mail it to Peking. Another is to attach all three corners to a spare line and toss the thing off the stern. But to pass for a Senior you will have to get tack, clew, head and bunt all billowing proudly forward and under control. It's a good idea to pick up a book that describes the process. And then if you want to learn fast, get yourself hooked up with the Friday night keelboat races down at the Berkeley Yacht Club. The races start in April and run through September. Show up at the Yacht Club around 5:30 p.m. with foulies and a life vest, and friendly yachties will encircle you with welcome. You will learn more about spinnaker handling in a few weeks of racing than in a lifetime of trying to figure it out for yourself.

My hope in writing this article has been to present the steps necessary to become a Senior Skipper as clearly as possible. My experience has been that accurate information is the best antidote for self-doubt, hesitation, and the unnecessary limitations we all put on ourselves. There is no magic in becoming a Senior, and it doesn't have to take years. It's just a matter of putting your foot onto the first step, and proceeding from there. I welcome any calls about any part of the process, and will gladly spend time explaining what you need to know.