



NOT JUST FOR THE BUOYS

BY CORNELIA LUETHI

WITH THE AMERICA'S CUP in full swing, you may be wondering what yacht racing is all about – and is it really just about rich boys and their toys? Cornelia Luethi demystifies the sport.



We're a lucky bunch. In other parts of the world, yacht racing really is the realm of the rich. But fortunately for us Kiwis, New Zealand boasts one of the highest levels of boat ownership in the world, so yacht races are a common sight. Better still, it's a sport that's accessible and affordable to anyone who wants to take part. Why? Skippers are reliant on having crew in order to go racing.

It's a sport with great appeal to those who get easily bored: no two yacht races are the same, as the conditions are never identical. Sailing provides a mental challenge as well as a physical one.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Ponsonby Cruising Club's Femme Fitness Women's Series attracts sailorettes at all levels, many of them beginners. Women's racing involves the girls doing the hard work and is a great way of learning and improving skills.

So step one to going sailing is to contact local sailing clubs for information.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Great, you've found a boat to sail on – but what to take? Non-slip shoes, sunglasses and sailing gloves are the most important items. A hat, sunscreen, fleece, waterproof pants and jacket are useful too, depending on the weather. Many newbie crew start off by borrowing gear before buying their own.

Turn up on time, and honour your commitment to crewing: your skipper is relying on you. A reliable crewperson will nearly always be invited back – especially

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if you bring some drinks to share after the race!

Follow any instructions to the best of your ability. Remember that as well as wanting to win the race, your skipper is responsible for your safety. If you don't understand something, a good time to ask questions is after the race. Sailing does have its own language – and you will get used to it. It's a lot quicker to refer to the “main halyard” than to “the rope which pulls up the big sail”. Reading sailing books will greatly accelerate your learning.

Yacht racing is the only sport where the pre-start is one of the most important stages: remember that yachts have no brakes (or accelerators), so positioning the boat as near to the start line as possible is quite a skill.

The race itself usually takes a few hours, depending on weather conditions and how long the course is. The course is usually communicated when you're on the water, by numbers on a start tower or committee boat. The start will be signalled by flags as well as hooters or a gun.

After the race, many crews have a drink on

board the boat and then attend the prize-giving ceremony at the clubhouse. Yachting is a very sociable sport where you'll meet people from a variety of backgrounds, with a passion for sailing being the common bond.

SAIL AWAY

You've done a few races and have enjoyed it. What next? There are plenty of choices: your skipper may be willing to let you crew in other races they do, or can put you in touch with fellow skippers who are looking for crew.

Sally Garrett, who competes in regattas all over NZ, advises: “try every sailing opportunity you get: sail on different boats, in different races. Find out what you enjoy and don't enjoy. Work out what's right for you.”

Want to go yacht racing? Sailing clubs throughout NZ run women's series, or if you're in Auckland contact Ponsonby Cruising Club (www.pcc.org.nz). *f*