



**ADULT COURSES
CAN MAKE YOU AN
EXPERT AT TACKING
AND JIBING IN JUST
ONE WEEKEND**

By Geoff Watkinson



On a Friday evening in mid-July I was on a 20-foot sailboat slowly motoring between the USS Wisconsin and the dock of Sail Nauticus, a community sailing center in downtown Norfolk. Kelsey Guy, my sailing instructor from Sail Nauticus, sat on the stern and gently pushed and pulled on the long wooden tiller that controlled the rudder beneath the water's surface. Chris, a 32-year-old father of an infant daughter, sat next to me on the starboard side—the right side—of the boat. As we eased our way onto the Elizabeth River, translucent jellyfish with tentacles that sank into the oil-dark depths moved with the river's current. On the boat's stem, a solar panel as thin as one of the jellyfish's tentacles powered the small motor I had put into the water before casting off from the dock. The sun was beginning to drop over the Portsmouth shore behind scattered, harmless clouds. It was quiet except for the water lapping lightly against the boat's bow.

"Let's raise the mainsail," Kelsey said. "Chris, take control of the mainsheet line." She pointed to the cleated line connected to a system of pulleys in the center of the boat about 18 inches from the cockpit floor. Kelsey, 27, wore a black Lynchburg College windbreaker. Her skin was tan from years on the water, hair tucked back in a low-sitting ponytail, revealing pearl earrings. She talked with her hands, brown eyes intense. She was 30 weeks pregnant.

Chris uncleated the mainsheet and pulled until the yellow mainsail with the Nauticus insignia neared the top of the mast. "About 18 inches more," Kelsey said, hand shielding her eyes from the sun as she looked up at the gap between the top of the mast and the head of the sail. Chris pulled harder, the line digging into his hands, until the sail was raised completely. He put his hand through his black beard, took off his baseball cap and wiped the sweat that was beginning to bead on his forehead. Kelsey unfurled the jib, the front sail of the boat. We were off.

Chris and I were taking the weekend keelboat certification class at Sail Nauticus. The class runs Friday night, and all day Saturday and Sunday. The community sail center is one of the hidden gems of Norfolk. With a staff of five full-time employees, Sail Nauticus offers a summer camp to kids which, this year, had a waiting list of nearly 100. Its adult classes are also growing in popularity. With an inexpensive club membership after certification, you can take out a 20-foot keelboat with a captain whenever you'd like, without the associated boat ownership costs.

The only experience I'd had on a sailboat was for three hours on a catamaran in the Virgin Islands, where everyone aboard was taken to a small island to snorkel. On the way back, we were given all you can drink rum punch. I learned nothing about sailing.

The keelboat certification class was an entirely different animal.

Before Chris and I left the sail center around 8:30 on Friday night, Kelsey asked us to review the 91-page *Basic Keelboat* textbook.

In the morning, Kelsey hadn't forgotten about the book. She quizzed us on right-of-way between boats. Against a motorboat, a sailboat always has right-of-way, regardless of positioning, unless a sailboat is under power and thus functioning as a motorboat. Then things get complicated: right-of-way depends on positioning and wind direction. I felt like I was learning how to drive all over again. It was simultaneously tedious and exhilarating.

Kelsey quizzed Chris and me constantly on the various parts of the boat. "What's that?" she asked, pointing to the top tip of the main sail.

"Head," I said.

"And that?" she asked, pointing to the lower rear corner.

"Clew," Chris said.

"And what about the back edge?" I thought for a few moments, but couldn't come up with it. "Remember the creepy-crawlies," Kelsey said, using the mnemonic device she'd mentioned in the classroom earlier.

"Oh, right. The back edge is the leech. The roach is just inside of the leech, which runs from the top of the sail—the head—all the way down to the clew." I had been going to school my entire life—college, graduate school—but it had been years since memorization was so essential.

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Sailing directly into the wind was called the "No-Go Zone," in which the sails will ruffle, or luff, making a clapping sound until the boat comes to a direct stop: the sails have no wind to catch. You could tell which direction you were sailing by looking at the wind vane on the top of the mast.

On Saturday, we spent nearly the entire day on the water, practicing the two most fundamental sailing maneuvers: tacking and jibing. Tacking seemed relatively simple—you steer the bow of the boat into and through the wind to change direction, the boom swinging from one side to the other. Jibing was the opposite—you change the boat's direction by steering the stern through the wind. It was more complex than I thought.

We practiced in a cove near where a tugboat was docked, on the other side of the river from the Navy shipyard, where security boats patrolled and industrial noise echoed across the channel—beeping, saw blades grinding steel, running motors. We avoided crab traps marked by small blue buoys, and barges making their way into or out of the Chesapeake. It was a busy waterway.

After practicing, the maneuvers gave Chris and me more comfort with wind direction. We were able to understand what would happen to the boat depending on where we steered it in relation to the wind. And the maneuvers were essential if someone fell overboard.



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And so we practiced man overboard drills. One of the fenders—a bumper used to protect the side of the boat from the dock—played the part of a person in the water. Kelsey named the fender “Bob.” Chris took control of the tiller, and I controlled the main sheet line. Kelsey handed me Bob, which I tossed over my head and into the Elizabeth.

“Man Overboard,” we all shouted together. Kelsey and I pointed at Bob in the water. We went through the first method of rescuing Bob, called the Quick Stop. Chris immediately tacked by steering into the wind, the boom swinging over my head. He then steered the tiller so that Bob remained abeam, or off the side of the boat at a right angle. He did this until the stem of the boat went through the wind, called a jibe—the boom switching sides again. As I released the mainsheet line—the sails luffing in the wind, causing the boat to slow and eventually stop—Chris headed directly for Bob.

“This maneuver always reminds me of a shark circling,” Kelsey said. And that’s exactly what it was—you circled the person in the water until the wind, essentially, allowed you to head directly toward him or her.

The maneuver seemed easy because the conditions were relatively good: light wind, and smooth water, although some dark clouds were coming in from the mouth of the Chesapeake. I considered how difficult it would be to rescue someone on the open ocean during a storm, with huge swells. Spotting the person would be challenging, let alone performing the rescue.

A voice crackled through the radio attached to Kelsey’s lifejacket. “We’ve got a capsized bow rider, 15 or 16 feet. Man overboard. He’s waving his arms while holding onto the stern.” A storm was rolling in. For the first time since we’d been out on the Elizabeth, I was humbled by the power of the water. The coastguard was called in, and I can only assume that the man was rescued.

On Sunday afternoon, after enduring a whirlwind of information during hours on the water, Chris and I had passed our practical test, as well as a three-fold knot test. And then we took the 80 multiple choice question certification test. No open books. No notes. In the end, we were both surprised by how much we knew, each scoring in the mid-80s.

A few weeks later, I found myself in Portland, Maine, drinking a beer at a waterside restaurant where a handful of sailboats were tethered. For the first time in my life, I could have gotten onboard and sailed out into the harbor, knowing what lines to cleat and uncleat, pull and let go. I now find myself seduced by a boat under sail—the beauty, the danger, and the pure excitement of a day on the water.

For more information on Sail Nauticus, visit www.SailNauticus.org/Adult-Sailing.

