

## Optimist - a 25 Year Perspective Safe Design Breeds Success

by Steve Sherman

**In 1970, I was living in Muncie, Indiana. My three sons were reaching the age when I wanted them to share the joy sailing had brought me. I talked our sailing club into starting a junior sailing program. We bought ten Optimists from Paul Hemker at Dynamic Plastics (they cost just \$200 each, complete with sails.)**

The first day, seven-year-old David sailed from shore enthusiastically, motivating four-year-old Mike to try it too. We rigged a second boat for Mike and out he went. Even having never skippered before, he made it out and back in the eight-knot breeze- although with a lot of verbal instruction. In hindsight, it was probably unwise to send Mike out, but the experience was a positive one for him, a fact that is almost entirely due to the excellent design of the Optimist.

**Over these many years, as I have built Optimists and observed thousands of young skippers, I've come to understand why this design is so great and what it really offers our children.**

The hull is not heavy. At only 77lbs, it sails well in light air. The sail is small, allowing even a 65 lb. skipper to tackle big seas and high winds.

For learn to sail programs, the Optimist is perfect. It can safely accommodate two beginners. Pair them up in one boat, put them in the bottom of the cockpit and send them out on their own. They'll not wander far from the instructor, simply because the boat doesn't move very fast. The speed of the Optimist enhances its safety as a learn-to-sail boat. It keeps the instructor in control and the program safe. Try this with Sunfish and, in five minutes, your beginners will be spread over a mile wide circle-a definite safety problem.

In an Optimist, beginners don't feel in danger of capsizing because the flat bottom gives high initial stability. Also, since they're sitting on the floor, which is below the waterline, their combined weight ably resists the sail's tipping forces.

(This secure feeling is, incidentally, lacking in Opti clones, which have the problem that the floor raises the skipper so high that the boat feels like it's on roller skates. The high floor also leaves little room under the boom to tack and jibe.)

Overall, the safe design of the Optimist just about guarantees that a beginner's Optimist sailing experience will be a positive one. This gives another big payoff: The attrition rate due to fearfulness is significantly reduced. No other boat used in learn to sail programs achieves this as well as the Optimist. In my sailing career, I have taken hundreds of adults out in large boats, for their first sail. About 20% never get in a sailboat again. Why? Because the wind, waves, and heel terrify them. Children are even more susceptible to these concerns. The Optimist, by contrast, feels "safe and stable, encouraging a higher percentage of children to finish the program, then go on to fully enjoy the benefits of recreational and competitive sailing.

There are other significant benefits to a child under 10 independently rigging and launching their own ship and returning it safely to port. The self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-discipline learned will serve the sailor throughout life. As a young dad I took a course called "Parent Effectiveness Training." It taught that the overriding objective of parenting is to teach your children to utilize all the creativity and potential with which they were born. The Optimist sailing experience is perhaps the best way I have ever seen to attain that goal.

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