

PERSON-IN-CHARGE

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The objective of this article is to bring attention to yacht racers, the importance of the Person-In-Charge (PIC). The greatest asset both to the boat's safety and racing ability is the process by which its crew leader anticipates threats, resolves errors and brings the incident to a safe conclusion. The process of logically thinking and making sound decisions is the hallmark of a successful Person-In-Charge and good seamanship.

The role of the PIC is much more than just the skipper who pays the entry fee and buys everyone shirts. The Person-In-Charge assumes not only authority on the boat but also the responsibility for the lives and safety of the crew. The PIC has one overriding duty to his or her crew – to ensure that they safely complete their voyage. The race is secondary to your prime responsibility. We do not take risks in our sport; instead, we identify problems through education and experience and form strategies to prevent a recurrence. If you lack the resolve to embrace this responsibly then you are not ready to be a Person-In-Charge.

Per US Sailing and the Racing Rules of Sailing *“The safety of a boat and her crew is the sole and inescapable responsibility of the "person in charge", as per RRS 46, who shall ensure that the boat is seaworthy and manned by an experienced crew with sufficient ability and experience to face bad weather. S/he shall be satisfied as to the soundness of hull, spars, rigging, sails and all gear. S/he shall ensure that all safety equipment is at all times properly maintained and safely stowed and that the crew knows where it is kept and how it is to be used.”*

The term Person-In-Charge is used in the Mac SER's (Safety Equipment Requirements), but perhaps the better term is 'leader'. An effective leader is one who evaluates his team, uses their strengths, corrects their deficiencies, and has their loyalty. To be an effective leader, you cannot be an island unto yourself; you must use all the assets at your disposal and make prudent judgments both on and off the water.

Leadership is an attitude by which you constantly prepare the crew, boat, and yourself. In life the only constant is change and you need to keep abreast of new technology, tactics, and safety practices. Your crew will follow your lead. Are you lax about wearing PFD's? Do you accomplish the MSR safety checklist only so you can pass the post-race inspection? Be lax in any area, especially safety, and your crew will do likewise. Effective leaders do not go through the motions - they believe in them and pass that attitude on to those who sail with him.

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There is nothing like experience to learn about your boat and crew. It will also help you to learn about yourself. Formally practicing sailing skills will aid your crew in trying circumstances and performing quickly in an emergency. You can talk about alternate take down procedures all you want, but you won't want to try it the first time in a real emergency. The old proverb, "You cannot learn to swim at a desk", applies here as well.

Historical tragic sailing accidents here on the great lakes and in our sport, should give us all pause and cause us to redouble our efforts to be safe. At any moment, the PIC may have to realize that the race is now secondary and the safety of the crew takes priority. During prior storms did you fully anticipate the weather? Did you shorten sails early enough? Did you stop racing hard and order the crew into the safety of the cockpit? If you did not do these things, your attitude towards safety, your judgment and your leadership skills may need some tweaking. You will have to grade yourself. We are all professionals at our occupational careers. Transfer that professionalism to your sport. The Mac race is an amateur race, but is not a place for people who act like amateurs.

A novel could be written on this subject, but lets' reemphasize a few key points...

1. Realize that the Person-In-Charge has a large responsibility. You are now responsible for human lives, whom are likely some of your closest friends.
2. You need to accomplish your mission in a safe manner. Thus, you personally need to overtly embrace safety.
3. You need to master leadership skills and gain the trust and support of your crew.
4. On the water experience will educate you and the crew.
5. Never stop seeking knowledge. Keep thinking all the time; never be satisfied. It is a daunting task and you will always be checking your 6 to make sure you have accomplished everything.

Accept the job willingly. Your reward will be getting the crew safely to the finish-line, the satisfaction of a job well done, perhaps a brag flag, and the most memorable sailing experience of a lifetime.

If you have any questions, please contact us at safety@byc.com, macchair@byc.com, office@byc.com or through the BYC office @ 313-822-1853

Note: The purpose of this article is to highlight concepts for how you and your crew can race as safely as possible. As always, ultimate responsibility for the safety of the crew and the decision whether to race or to stop racing is that of the skipper (RRS4, MSR2). This email is meant as a courtesy only and you should always refer to the Notice of Race, Sailing Instructions and Safety Regulations, which govern the race.

Credits to Matt Gallagher and the Chicago Yacht Club for the original content of this Sailing Safety Series Article