

Grinners

are winners

YOU DON'T HAVE TO GET THE GUN TO BE A WINNER WHEN RACING AS A PARENT/CHILD CREW, SAYS MARK RASMUSSEN



HAS THE THOUGHT ever crossed your mind that you might like to return to those long forgotten glory days of dinghy racing? You might not be the lightweight superman you once were, but there still are ways. Read on to find out how it can happen to you.

I explained in an earlier article about my return to dinghies after a mere 25-year absence. I mentioned that the reason for this return was because my wife and I had chosen to enrol our children in sailing lessons.

The subsequent fun led to the purchase of an old Heron so that dad and 10-year-old Molly might begin to race. Now the entertainment really began.

The following is an attempt to explain what I have learned so that others might pursue the same activity with the benefit of a little prior knowledge.

Our first season of racing is over. National championships on our local waters have come and gone. Two local teenage skippers, Elise and Rowan Clark dominated the event, finishing a clear first and second respectively, offering a wonderful opportunity to observe close up the qualities both on and off the water required to succeed.

Molly and I have cemented ourselves as mid-fleeters in the local pecking order and continued this trend during the nationals.

Fresh perspective

Molly has progressed from being a somewhat timid little girl to a confident and very capable crew who is comfortable in almost all conditions.

Her dad couldn't have been prouder when she sailed the boat solo, when she crewed for one of her schoolmates in local inter-school teams racing, or when dad took an unscheduled swim after missing the

hiking strap as the main halyard broke and Molly calmly took the helm, sailing herself to safety.

My major discovery is that my definition of winning has changed completely. In these circumstances winning can mean something as simple as a smile from your daughter as another wave drenches her during a long cold windward leg, the fact that she wants to come back for more after a capsize or the discovery that the local chandlery is a pleasant spot for parent-child bonding.

So how did we progress to this stage in the space of one season?

Pride on the line

It's one thing to help teach your children to sail by climbing into the local club's fleet of trainers; it's another thing entirely to put your pride on the line by deciding to go back to dinghy racing with your daughter as crew.

Aged 49, six foot five and more than a few kilos heavier than maybe I should be, my idea of a sailing boat was restricted to vessels over 25ft. Anything smaller than that was too wet and too prone to unscheduled dunkings. My dinghy sailing days had ended in the mid 1980s.

The arrival of children meant that dad spent time regaling the youngsters with tales of dinghy exploits long past while we cruised on the family Catalina 27. The phrase "The older I get, the better I used to be," probably sums up my past glories.

All of that changed; we decided to take the next step at the completion of sail training at the local club. What better boat to train your kids in than the ubiquitous Heron?

Easy to sail, roomy and a boom high enough for a less-than-agile dad to squeeze under, the Heron also offers the advantage of being simple to sail, but difficult to sail well.

Lindisfarne Sailing Club on the Derwent River also offers a very competitive fleet, with the local front runners the equal of anyone in the country in this class. Having grown up racing these dinghies as a youngster, I looked forward with great anticipation to returning to them.

On a pedestal

Apprehension consumed me as we headed out to the start line of my first dinghy race in a quarter of a century. The fact that this was a heat of the Heron state championship did nothing for my state of mind.

Overwhelming my thoughts was the all-consuming fear of complete embarrassment. Imagine finding you were too far behind to compete with anyone. Imagine the ignominy of a capsize.

My then nine-year-old was none the wiser. To her, dad was the oracle of all things boating. A dangerous pedestal upon which to be placed.

It was an unusual day for Hobart; mid March, 33 degrees and a gusty north wind building. Why couldn't we have a nice steady sea breeze? Gusty wind calls for quick reflexes, a quality that deserted me (if it ever existed) about 1990.

We lined up for a pretty good start, a quick call of "Get up!" clearing one opponent away. My daughter, unused to the rough and tumble of start lines looked up admonishingly.

"Daddy, don't growl like that".

We're away! 10 seconds after the start and we'd come up with a good one. A warm feeling permeated my ego ... the old boy has still got it! Clear air and boats behind.

Twenty seconds after the start, that sinking feeling began to set in. Twin death. We're slow and low. This could be a big mistake! I swiftly learned that I had forgotten far more than I remembered about the idiosyncrasies of these little boats. Being about 40kg heavier than I was in 1980 (when I gave up sailing Herons because I was too heavy) might have something to do with our complete lack of speed.

The first windward leg was an object lesson in how to make nobody in the fleet fear "the new bloke and his daughter." As the race progressed, the ignominy sharpened. The race couldn't finish soon enough. Get me out of here!

We're weren't last, but far enough behind

LEFT: Mark and Molly Rasmussen during the 2007/08 Heron nationals at Lindisfarne SC on Hobart's Derwent River.

OPPOSITE PAGE: It's gotta be fun! No wind, race abandoned, we need an outboard motor.



The fact that every night since then she has slept with her trophy and medals from the event tells me all I need to know about how she feels.



ABOVE: Gybe mark carnage during the nationals – not the author!

LEFT: The crew's smiles make it all worthwhile.

OPPOSITE PAGE: On the way to the nationals handicap victory.

to deflate what was left of my now fragile ego and to make me realise that serious homework was going to be required.

Sharing information

Mercifully, one of the major changes that has permeated dinghy racing is the concept of sharing information so that racing becomes more competitive.

The Heron class has published a sensational “how to” manual, written by perennial national champion Don Jamieson. If I’d studied my university texts as comprehensively I’d have a PhD.

Serious thought went into massaging mainsail shape so as to generate enough power to drag Molly and I around the course at reasonable speed. Judicious under-use of the outhaul to produce a more powerful sail shape than most proved to be the secret to rapid improvement towards “mid fleet status”. Local skippers were also happy to answer questions patiently and honestly in order to help us pick up speed.

Before too long (our fifth race in fact), we actually cracked it for our first (and so far, only) win. While Molly was pleased, dad was ecstatic. Nothing does the ego of an old bloke more good than to feel like he can still do what he used to 30 years ago (The same applies to sailing, of course!).

“I’m scared” rule

One of the problems confronting a parent pursuing this activity is the issue that can best be summed up as:

“Are we here for fun and learning, or are we actually trying to win?”

Several examples quickly presented

I swiftly learn that I have forgotten far more than I have remembered about the idiosyncrasies of these little boats.

themselves. The first led to the development of the “Daddy, I’m scared” rule.

Sailing a dinghy is a particularly confronting thing for a small girl to embark upon, even in the company of your dad. (Or is that because of the company of your dad?). The last thing that anyone wants is to terrify your offspring in blustery conditions.

A malevolent looking black line heading across the water towards us one still Sunday afternoon before Christmas heralded a howling sea breeze. My daughter burst into tears and pointed speechlessly towards the approaching squall and the resultant row of upturned hulls, centreboards reaching skywards. A sensational ride back to shore, where dad’s extra kilos kept us perfectly safe was not enough to allay her fears of a future repeat of such conditions.

Hence, the “Daddy I’m scared” rule. Molly and I have done a deal which allows her to play the “I’m scared” card whenever she feels uncomfortable with the conditions. My part of the deal is to accept that she is only a little girl and to accede to her request and retire – provided she makes it three times at five minute intervals.

By doing this, Molly is gradually becoming accustomed to sailing in less than perfect weather, but always feels reassured that dad will not make her endure

what she considers to be scary conditions. While this can be frustrating to me, particularly since we really need a bit of breeze to compete, it is an important safety valve for Molly. While some kids will not need such an arrangement, it allows my daughter to pluck up the courage to at least go out and test the conditions.

Gradually, Molly’s threshold for becoming scared is rising. Most weeks we now race happily. Sometimes when the weather looks particularly ominous, she will want to stay on shore. On the two occasions she has felt this way during this season, she has been dead right. Fleets have been scattered by strong winds. I have to admit, I’ve silently thanked her for saving me from a swim.

Always at the back of my mind in these situations is the thought that if I scare her too much by making her stay out there, I might not get to do this next week. A useful motivator.

Rules of the game

Being too competitive is another pitfall to be avoided. My natural inclination after a lifetime of racing is to play hard, even if we are only contesting a mid fleet placing.

There are some times, however when the rough and tumble of the adult world of racing is less than appropriate for both the

eyes and most importantly the ears of a small girl. Hence, while explaining the rules and how to use them for tactical gain is important, so is showing restraint with language particularly.

Adhering precisely to the rules is an area to be considered carefully when teaching a child.

In one race we found ourselves several boat lengths behind the two leaders and well clear of the rest of the fleet. During a mark rounding the tip of our boom brushed almost imperceptibly against the mark.

Nobody else had seen or heard a thing. We were gaining on the leaders. Molly was in fact oblivious to the rule and made no comment about the incident.

I really wanted to chase down the two leaders if I could. I really wanted Molly to experience the thrill of being in a close contest with well sailed opponents. What to do?

In the end I compromised. I couldn’t countenance the idea that my little girl might discover that daddy had cheated. I explained what we had done wrong to Molly and continued with the race. As we crossed the finish line, still in third place, I called to the officials to disqualify us, explaining why.

Should I have taken the penalty at the time? Perhaps.

Molly’s strong sense of right and wrong and her far too encyclopaedic memory have

on occasions caught me out. “One pump per wave is the rule daddy!” is a phrase she sometimes has to use. Red-faced, I comply. Sprung by a know-all ten-year-old!

Table top tactics

Dinner table discussions of rules and tactics can at times be fun, if a little frustrating for the other diners. “The sauce bottle is the windward mark, we’re the fork, and the butter is on starboard tack that teaspoon is already two spoon lengths from the mark ...”

So far, thankfully, the milk carton and the sugar bowl have avoided a capsize!

On the water, capsize is an inevitable event. Mercifully, in our first year it has only happened once, when dad badly mistimed a gybe on a windy day. The consequences were spectacular for those nearby as we failed to gybe and rounded up with the rudder out of the water. Thankfully the preparation offered by the club’s excellent sail training allowed Molly to easily cope (even if she wasn’t very pleased with dad at the time). Pleasingly, she happily went out to race in more wind the following week, and dad now regularly gets reminded to “Keep the boat flat” just prior to any gybe, even in 3-4kts.

Following this, an afternoon spent deliberately capsizing did wonders for her confidence. I found that the secret for those

children who are a little timid about capsizes was to choose a warm, still day, send the kids for a swim in their sailing gear before getting in the boat (so getting dunked doesn’t seem so unpleasant) and then make it fun. We had a hiking out contest – dad to leeward trying to topple the boat over while Molly and her younger sister Lilly were to windward trying to hold the boat up.

It didn’t take them long to realise that a little less effort on their part meant a backwards dunking for dad. What child could resist? Parents, be warned – once it becomes fun, you have to keep doing it all afternoon!

Warts and all

What a treat it has been to share the highs and lows of a season on the water with my 10-year-old daughter, watching her confidence and competence grow by the week. What a surprise to visit her grade 5 classroom and find artwork featuring sailing boats decorating her wall space.

A warm glow fills me when I discover that even her computer password is a sailing reference. From little things, big things grow.

Just competing in a national championship was a huge win. My once timid daughter raced in all conditions from drifters to 25+ knots. She got to see, close up, how some of the better sailors manage every aspect of such a regatta.

She got to see dad, warts and all, making big mistakes and small ones and even the occasional moment of genius, while sharing the joy and exhilaration of close big fleet racing.

Winning the event on handicap (a consolation prize for me) was a huge thrill for a small girl who has fallen in love with the sport that means so much to her dad. The fact that every night since then she has slept with her trophy and medals from the event tells me all I need to know about how she feels.

Team mates

If ever I thought the whole process was too hard, too painful and even on some occasions too humiliating for me, one simple golden moment during a recent race sums up all that is to be gained both from the perspective of enhancing my relationship with my beautiful little girl and also seeing her progress as a sailor.

It came after a particularly close finish with our regular local fleet rival. We always seem to finish about a boat length apart. On this occasion it was our turn to finish in front. We crossed the line, having been made to work really hard up the last beat. That moment of relief came as we bore away and headed for home, glowing with pleasure at both a small victory and a glorious afternoon on the water.

My daughter looked up at me with a smile from ear to ear, face and hair drenched from the boisterous conditions we had experienced. She needn’t have spoken; we both knew what enjoyment we had just shared.

What she did say was perfect – and sums up all that we have experienced:

“Daddy, I love being in a team with you.”

We win. 🏆