Offering Options
There’s More to Junior Sailing than Optis and a Race to the Top

By Whitney Connor Peterson

One of the primary goals of junior sailing programs should be retaining kids long enough for them to develop a passion for the sport and a personal desire to continue. Far too often, however, before that happens kids are asked to spend too much time (years) in boats that do not align with their version of fun and pressure to “succeed” comes much too soon. The current junior sailing recipe is driving kids out and resulting in an abysmal retention rate.

The most common single-handed entry path into the sport, along with a continual decrease in the age when formal sailing classes start (from 8 years old to the now common 6), results in too many young kids having scary early experiences and too many years in the same type of boat. Pressure to showcase a structured, serious program that can produce top quality sailors cuts into the fun factor. “Racing pressure” sends kids that aren’t ready, to regattas too soon and to events that are too big; kids that show “potential to be good” are sent into the sport headfirst at the speed of light, and year-round. Not everyone drops out from these factors, and some will become amazing Optimist sailors and future Olympic and world champions, but meanwhile we’re losing too many kids before they have a chance to gain enough basic skills and have enough fun in boats to fall in love with all that sailing offers.

I see the results of this problem firsthand through my role as a volunteer junior program chair at Sachem’s Head Yacht Club (SHYC) in Guilford, CT, talking to my own girls about what they like and don’t like about the sport, and through conversations with my sailboat friends about their own kids’ experiences in junior sailing.

Like most clubs in our area, SHYC offers junior instruction in Optimists and Club 420s, along with a few O’Pen BICs. We have about 60 kids in the program from ages 6 to 15, and offer 4- and 8-week programs. As the program chair, I find I spend hours and hours each winter and spring thinking about what the right recipe of offerings is, and it feels nearly impossible at times. How can we make our offerings attractive to kids and parents with the promise of structure, safety, skill building, racing opportunities, excellent coaches, and fun, and also more appealing than the many other sports camps, theater programs, travel experiences, summer jobs, and “screens” vying for the interest and commitment of kids’ time?

But even if all the right solutions to our retention issues are not yet clear, it’s clear that for many kids floating around in a tiny, single-person box for three hours, multiple days a week, every summer from age 6 to 13 is not the right offering. Take a non-competitive kid, and layer on the thought of being asked to race that Optimist alone in classes and at regattas, and sailing classes sound even less fun. Or, consider the social tweeny-girl. I’m pretty sure most of them would say what they like least about Optimists is that there’s no one to talk to. Using the Opti as the primary trainer for the first five plus years of a sailor’s experience is a recipe for major and ongoing retention issues.

Don’t get me wrong. Optimists can be great, and as we all know have produced hundreds of highly talented champions.

When I was a kid and I heard about what Opti kids in other areas of the country were doing, when I was stuck in a Blue Jay in Long Island Sound, I was envious and thought I’d missed out. But now, as a parent of 10- and 12-year-old girls I’m struggling to keep engaged in the sport, I’m no longer sure the Blue Jay was that bad an option.

Looking back on my junior sailing experiences, it was the laid-back, social aspect of sailing a Blue Jay with my friends that kept me returning each summer. We sang songs, threw seaweed at the boys and our coaches, laughed, and attended local regattas that we got to by being towed by our coach the morning of the regatta. It kept us happy and having fun long enough to get hooked and self-identify as “sailor.” At 15, we advanced into I-420s: and started racing hard, traveling up and down the East Coast, vying for spots on the I-420 U.S. Worlds Team, and beyond. The Blue Jay has come and gone, but we can learn from the best of what it offered and apply it to what we should be offering today’s tweens and teens: a double-handed experience with a friend, a main and a jib, some sort of spinnaker, fun sailing classes, and simple local racing opportunities.

We can all do better for our junior sailors. Over the past few summers, we have implemented several different new offerings to try to keep more kids sailing at SHYC. Some ideas have worked better than others. Here are three of our most successful options that other clubs might want to try.

1. Offering a Recreational Class/Path for kids ages 10+ and up.

2. Offering a Club 420 Club/Path for kids ages 10-15.

3. Offering a Blue Jay Club/Path for kids ages 8-12.

These options have been successful because they allow kids to sail with friends, they are less intimidating, and they give kids the opportunity to learn at their own pace.

Avery Peterson (pink lifejacket) and Eloise Streeter (red lifejacket) prepare to “pop the chute.” © Julia Cron
2. Offering a Non-Travel-Race-Team
3. Introducing the RS Feva as a bridge boat focused on 10- to 13-year-olds

We started the Recreational Path (called Adventure Sailing at many clubs) a few years ago. It’s been highly successful and has helped us retain a solid number of tween/teen sailors each summer. Its promise is no racing during classes, plus a varied curriculum, lots of on-the-water games, no pressure, fun, all double-handed sailing, and as much destination sailing as our geographic area allows. This class is selected by both boys and girls, typically ages 11-14 who like being on the water with friends, but aren’t interested in regatta travel and don’t want to compete.

The Non-Travel-Race-Team was a new idea last summer. We piloted it with our RS Feva sailors. It was a big success, attracting mostly 10- to 12-year-olds, with the majority being girls. Most kids who selected this team had done the Green Opti Race Team in prior summers and found regattas and racing to be stressful and not much fun. The focus of this new offering was a weekly Friday morning learn-to-race class, followed by Saturday morning racing during our club’s traditional Saturday junior series. This team was similar to what other sports, such as soccer, call an “in-house” team. Their coach held fun Friday practices, helped the kids rig on Saturday mornings, and coached them on the water and between races in our club series.

Our Non-Travel-Race-Team sailors, while they didn’t travel to regattas, still felt like part of our club’s JR SHYC Race Team. They attended the kick-off team meeting/dinner and received race team gear: team pinnies, team sweatshirt, and team backpack. They all enjoyed being part of the clubs race team, and the lack of pressure enabled them to find the fun in racing and learn without fear.
We offered both a Feva morning class and an afternoon class. The afternoon class was also our Rec Class, and it was comprised of 12 and 13-year-olds. Our morning class was comprised of eight 10-year-olds who the previous summer were barely making it around a Green Fleet course and were barely engaged in the sport. Among them was my 10-year-old daughter Avery, who weighs 60 pounds soaking wet, was adamently against racing (and sailing) Optimists, and was on the brink of not sticking with sailing. The summer prior she said to me one evening, “I love everything about sailing class other than when we have to get in the Optimists, alone, which is nearly every day! The only good day is Thursday, because it’s ‘Opti Buddy Day’ and we pick a friend to sail with.”

By the second of week of sailing classes last summer, these morning Feva sailors, Avery included, were hooked back into sailing. Every day was Buddy Day! Sailing with a friend gives kids natural confidence, someone to laugh with, and makes on-the-water problems that arise not feel so scary. In no time at all, these kids could handle a Feva in a fairly wide range of conditions, sail to a destination, and were “popping” the asymmetrical spinnakers whenever possible. Most of these sailors were small, 60-85 pounds. We never would have retained them in Optimists long enough to be big enough for 420s.

Both our morning and afternoon Feva classes were a huge hit—the kids always wanted to go sailing. Favorite activities included “popping the chutes,” practicing dry capsizes, playing games, conducting endless man overboard drills, pirating each other’s boats, and other on-the-water silliness. And these were the kids that were about to drop out of sailing the prior summer. Little did they know that all of these “fun” activities were building important sailing skills including balance, finesse, rescue, ensuring both skipper and crew could maneuver the boat alone, and problem solving (as the chute often gets stuck on the launch or douse).

For summer 2018, we had 18 kids (about 25% of our total sailors) participate in our Feva classes. These sailors were 10-13 years old, about 2/3 were girls, and they weighed between 60 and 120 pounds with most under 85. Introducing Fevas retained more than ten kids that were on the verge of quitting our program (and the sport of sailing). Without Fevas, the choice they saw in front of them was several more summers alone in an Opti, and that was unappealing. We needed to offer a new option, to bridge the gap between their Opti foundation and the 420 ahead, and the Fevas were the right option.

I think of the RS Feva as a “bridge boat.” Fevas are not meant to replace the Optimist or the 420. Instead they are an option to offer between Optis and 420s to help programs and clubs keep their tweens and teens in sailing.

What a Recreational Sailing Class, a Non-Travel-Race-Team, and Fevas all have in common is that they are new options into the junior sailing formula. Options enable us to make our sport appealing to a broader group of kids who have a wider range of interests, skills, social needs, and goals. Offering new options should also come with the ability to make mid-season changes. Sailors should be able to fluidly move from one type of boat to another, from recreational to racing, or from racing to recreational. Sailors also benefit from being allowed to be in more than one lane at once: for example, being on the Opti Travel Race Team and in the Rec 420 Class.

Lest you think I’m anti-Opti, here’s a personal story about the boat (and a first-rate program) coming to the rescue at just the right time. My oldest daughter Molly started sailing Optis at age 7. She wasn’t a huge fun but stuck it out for the summer because her friends were doing it (and we made her).

The following summer, at 8, Molly was still lukewarm on sailing at best, but we put her back in the program and signed her up to race in our club’s Junior Optimist Regatta, which was scheduled in early July. It was a bit too windy that day and she didn’t want to do it, and she’d barely had seven days of sailing class that summer. The races were scary and confusing, she wasn’t ready, and she came in after just a couple races, in tears. That was pretty much the end of her sailing life for the next four years. She said, “No way” to sailing the next summer and begged to go to sleep-away camp. So off she went to a traditional outdoor-based overnight camp in Vermont for the next four summers!

Surprisingly to all of us, when she got home from camp last summer, she declared she wanted to start sailing again because she was missing out on what her neighborhood friends were doing! She went with a friend to the Fall Open House Day at MudRatz (our local shoulder sailing season program), and decided to join their Optimist program. We’d sold her Opti years ago when she dropped out, but luckily we still had her sister’s Opti in the basement.

The MudRatz were incredibly welcoming and supportive.

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Even though Hamish Young’s Beneteau First 36.7 Jamala IV had to drop out because of a torn jib, his crew had a good time. A veteran of many doublehanded races, Hamish is a Plus One convert. “I have two sons who sail with me, and whenever I raced doublehanded I had to leave one son home,” he said. “Now I can sail with both sons and one more, too. I’m looking forward to more races with this crew configuration.”

What we wanted to show with this race are the benefits of Plus One over doublehanded racing. First, not all boats are set up for competitive doublehanded racing. Further, if one sailor goes overboard, a singlehanded MOB retrieval is not within every sailor’s skill set. With Plus One, there are still enough people to manage headsails with luff tapes and spinnakers that are set without a sock. At the same time, because you’re not sailing with the full complement of crew, everyone’s more involved with racing the boat. There are no purely “railmeat” crewmembers; everyone has multiple jobs so they learn different skills, and owners have fewer bodies to wrangle before leaving the dock.

As the creator of the Plus One concept, I really wanted to get the first race off, but the weather forecast five days before the race was worrying. I kept telling those concerned about big breeze, “Don’t worry. It’s way too early to predict winds we will have.” But as Josh Reisberg pointed out, “This was the first time in memory when the wind forecast was spot-on five days in advance.”

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They matched Molly up with 16-year-old Lily Flack for private lessons (which the MudRatz 420 sailors offer as a “volunteer give-back”). She had two lessons with Lily which were extremely helpful, positive and fun, and she felt ready to join the group MudRatz Opti session. So in this case, the Optimist came to the rescue as the perfect boat to meet the needs and timing of my daughter’s re-entry into sailing. It was easy for her to sail, she was the right size at 95 pounds, it was familiar from those earlier two summers...and she was doing it! My fingers are crossed that she’s our next win-back success story for the sport.

Let’s work harder to offer tweens and teens more boat choices, more class options that don’t include racing, racing opportunities that aren’t a sprint to the pinnacle of our sport, and more fun double-handed experiences at a younger age. If we change the recipe, and sprinkle in some new options, we can retain youth sailors long enough to fall in love with sailing.

A 4-time Collegiate All-American at Dartmouth College and a member of the U.S. Olympic Sailing Team in the Women’s 470 Class in the 1990s, Whitney Connor Peterson is now the Senior Vice President of Marketing at Gowrie Group, one of the nation’s top-50 independent insurance agencies and the largest independent marine insurance group in the U.S. She lives in Guilford, CT with her husband and two daughters.

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