So, the Kid Wants to Teach Sailing

There are plenty of youngsters who can and want to teach sailing but lack one critical skill set: powerboat handling.

The demand for powerboat-certified sailing instructors presents a challenge: it's difficult to get them trained in the first place.

PHOTO: CINDY CADY/US SAILING

Did you really say your kid wants to teach sailing? Smart idea: sunshine, fresh air, responsibility. “It's a great job, like nothing else you will ever do,” says young Cassidy Lynch, who has taught in five programs from Seattle to San Francisco.

But there's a conversation we have to launch now, not later, and it's not about your kid, exactly. It's about what is difficult when it comes to sailing in America. Getting ready to write, I spoke with a heap of people. Coaches, commodores, what have you. Pro forma, contacted Gowrie Group, which offers insurance through US Sailing to clubs and community sailing.

There I found myself engaged with the company's Whitney Peterson, but what I took away was the moment when Peterson jumped topic to say she runs a summer program on Long Island Sound and, "I'm looking for two more instructors. Do you have anyone? It's so hard to find qualified people.

Time was, you qualified to teach sailing if somebody said, "You're hired." Today, supply and demand are upside down. Peterson again: "It used to be that 'every' kid who sailed in college taught sailing in the summer. Now they're likely to take an intern job instead.

Define "qualified." Your kid's a bang-up sailor with a good head on her shoulders, but can she drive a powerboat? Not just leave the dock and return. Can she hover in wind and current in company with a capsized dinghy and hold position clear of children in the water?

For young people who want to teach sailing, powerboat handling is the number one fail. It's also the hardest obstacle to bridge. That is the conversation we need to be having.

I can remember a time at my club when we'd hand an adolescent the keys to the junior van and expect him (always a him) to tow six Lasers 300 miles to a weekend regatta and get back with most of them. I remember a time when any willing body could leave the dock in a Boston Whaler with anchors and inflatable marks. That was then; this is now. For good reason, the United States is far down a path toward standardizing sailing instruction and controlling liabilities — or trying to — and yes, sometimes it seems we're not far from absurdly demanding waivers acknowledging that kids might get splinters from a wooden dock. "There's a cultural shift," observes Stanford coach John Vandenmoore.

"Where I grew up, every kid ran around in a 13-foot Whaler, but access is more and more restricted. Not many kids now have the opportunity to become proficient."

Here's a little housekeeping; US Sailing certifies instructor trainers who then train would-be instructors at levels starting with Level 1, mostly college kids, age 16 minimum. At fully developed programs, Level 1's teach under supervision. Most of our youngest sailors spend a lot of time learning from Level 1's, and I've been on the water with impressive, levelheaded Level 1's holding things together in a state of triage with never less than two things going wrong around them at once. But Level 1 instructors either move on to other things as they mature, or they move up to higher levels of coaching, so there is a never-ending need for new blood.

To feed the need, many Level 1 courses happen at the beginning of summer, the problem being that the kids already have jobs lined up, the programs need them on the water "tomorrow," and the pressure is on to get them out there. The Level 1 curriculum runs four days. It includes an evaluation of powerboat-handling skills — but it does not teach these powerboat-handling skills — and it includes a "Points of Improvement" provision. Where skills are lacking, the student has 60 days to retest without starting the course from scratch, but to an administrator, what does this mean? Peterson says, "We're not engaged to teach, so I'm probably not hiring that kid."

There's more. Proficiency in operating a powerboat is one thing. The skills and awareness for safely assisting capsized recovery are a major add-on. The book for the nationally recognized Safe Powerboat Handling course runs 166 pages. The book on rescue and
support boat handling goes 102 pages.

If you were there, it's natural to mourn the passing of the unstructured good old days. Something has been lost. But what matters now is coming to grips with 21st century needs. The United States is well down the road toward nationally recognized standards — which have to include powerboat skills — that will serve us well, if we can get there. How to get there is the conversation that will follow if we find the willpower to recognize powerboat training as the next leap forward.

At my yacht club, we're requiring members of our junior race team to serve on race committees. It's about skill sets, and it's about citizenship in a volunteer sport. It's not the answer; it's part of the answer. You'll see some stuff, kid, and you'll learn some stuff, and your friendship circle will grow.

Mary von Conta is the Regional Training Coordinator for Western Long Island Sound, well-regarded for its successes, and for making an SPS certificate a prerequisite for Level 1 training (as does the Gulf Yachting Association). However, von Conta still sees situations in which teens are trained to a level of competence, "but they don't have enough time in powerboats to integrate learned skills into automatic behavior."

Her perspective on the good old days? "When I started, junior programs did not require life jackets. We've come a long way, but ..."

I live in California, where we have year-round access to water. Even so, we experience shortages of instructors and available courses. Driving distances can be an issue, and there is the never-ending challenge of convincing Level 1 candidates to think ahead and act ahead rather than wait for the first week of June. On the upside, when we asked US Sailing for help, the response was immediate and bigger than we were prepared to absorb, demonstrating that this is a national problem, but it has to be addressed locally. Colder regions have different issues. Because New England has such a concentration of sailing venues, it can be relatively easy to find classroom course work close by, so a youth does not need overnight accommodations. On-the-water training in wintertime is more challenging. In the northern Midwest; on-the-water anything waits for the spring thaw, and then the rush is on.

Already there are organizations that won't look at a Level 1 candidate who can't present an SPS certificate, and the best take that as only a starting point. Less-robust out-

"For young people who want to teach sailing, powerboat handling is the number one fail. It's also the hardest obstacle to bridge."

fits will need support to rise to higher expectations. Meanwhile, the kids coming along haven't a clue, says instructor trainer Jamie Bartlett: "The kids and their parents just ... don't ... know. When I get one who has never operated a powerboat before, I think, we're off to a bad start."

The obvious next step — on a three- to five-year timeline — is to make powerboat certification a prerequisite for Level 1 training. Or expand and complicate the four day Level 1 course, but to what effect? Von Conta says, "We want to see a minimum of 20 hours before we let Level 1's get anywhere near our children."

So, choose your pain. Getting ourselves from where we are to where we belong will take dozens if not hundreds of grassroots efforts, but talking about it any longer won't help one bit. Coaches and administrators have been struggling with this for years. It's time for the rest of us to wake up and put it into gear.