North Sails NEWS

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PERFECT SPINNAKER JIBES

Two-time World Champion Will Welles says that no matter how big your boat and crew, the key to perfect jibes is practice, practice, practice. There are two basic jibing techniques: End-for-end jibes for smaller boats and dip-pole jibes for larger boats.

Our divide and conquer approach provides a good framework for analyzing jibes. The job of the trim team—driving and trimming through the jibe—changes little from one technique to the other, while the foredeck squad's job—the mechanics of jibing the pole—changes significantly. The foredeck team often gets the brunt of the blame when problems occur but, more often than not, it is the work of the trim team that makes or breaks a jibe.

Regardless of method, practice is a key ingredient to develop the coordinated effort that lies behind any smooth jibe.

We'll look first at the driver's and trimmers' functions, and then address the two different techniques on the foredeck.

Driving and Trimming through Jibes

The driver must pace his turn to the crew work, while the crew must rotate the spinnaker and free fly it as the boat turns. This means trimming the (old) guy and easing the (old) sheet as the boat turns downwind. Here's how to help make the coordination as smooth as possible.

Helm

Make a smooth turn from broad reach to broad reach. The turn must match the trim as the spinnaker is rotated around the boat.

Do not hold the boat dead downwind. Stay on a broad reach on one jibe, and then turn smoothly to a broad reach on the other jibe as you pull the main across. Avoid centering the main and avoid a dead downwind course. Keep the air flowing across the spinnaker.

Trimmer(s)

As the boat turns from broad reach on one tack to broad reach on the other, your goal is to rotate the spinnaker around the boat as the boat turns to keep the spinnaker on the downwind side. This means trimming the guy and easing the sheet as the boat turns downwind. It is best to trim too far and over-rotate the spinnaker, then correct your trim.

Why does the spinnaker collapse every time?

When the spinnaker collapses in the middle of a jibe, it usually means the rotation did not stay ahead of the turn. Either the trimmers trimmed too slow, or the driver turned too fast. It usually depends on whom you ask. When the guys in back can't decide which, they compromise, and both blame the bow crew.

Don't Do This

Often you will hear that the helm should "Keep the spinnaker in front of the boat" and "Steer to keep the boat under the spinnaker." These suggestions are misleading, because you don't necessarily want the spinnaker in front of the boat; you really want to keep the spinnaker on the downwind side of the boat. The only time the spinnaker should be in front of the boat is when you are dead downwind.

Even more dangerous is the common advice to "Hold the boat dead downwind" while you jibe. In a dead downwind position, air circulates behind the main and can cause wraps in the spinnaker. Sailing dead downwind will also induce the boat to roll, making steering and crew work very difficult. In heavy air sailing, steering a course dead downwind can lead to a broach.

Jibing Practice

Start your practice without the pole, free flying the spinnaker. The goal is to complete the jibe without the sail collapsing. As the driver turns from broad reach to broad reach, the trimmer rotates the spinnaker to keep it flying. Trim both sheet and guy if the sail gets too far away from the boat; ease both if the spinnaker is strapped too tight to fill. Keep the spinnaker downwind of the boat, and keep it full.

The key to successful jibes is coordinating the trim and the turn. Once you do that, it matters little what happens on the bow.

Don’t forget to over-rotate

It bears repeating: To keep the spinnaker full as you jibe, over-rotate the spinnaker to the new leeward side. This lets airflow re-establish luff to leech as the driver turns smoothly to the new broad reach.

Jibes with the pole

End-for-End Jibes

The fastest and easiest jibe for boats without large numbers of crew is the end for end jibe. Once the helm starts to turn the boat downwind, remove the inboard end from the mast and the outboard end from the old sheet. As the mainsail crosses centerline, connect the old inboard end to the new spinnaker sheet and push it outboard until the new inboard end can be connected to the mast. A shout of “made” will alert the helm and trimmer that the pole is hooked up on the new jibe.

If you can’t get the inboard end on the mast, ask for the guy to be eased. The trimmer should not square back the guy until you’ve said “made.”

This technique depends as much on quickness as it does on strength. With good technique, and a little cooperation from the back of the boat, end for end jibes are pretty straightforward.

Twings (used to choke down the spinnaker sheet to a lead block on the midship rail) are often helpful during end for end jibes. The twing is a line with a block on one end. The spinnaker sheet is lead through the block. One twing is rigged to each sheet. The windward twing is choked down to the rail to improve the working angle of the guy. The leeward twing is left free or trimmed down part way to create a proper sheet lead. During jibes, both twings can be snugged down to control the spinnaker and keep the guy within easy reach.

Dip Pole Jibes

Larger boats with unmanageable spinnaker poles must resort to dip pole jibes. A proper dip pole jibe requires two sets of spinnaker sheets and guys. When sailing under spinnaker the leeward sheet and windward guy are working, while the leeward guy and windward sheet are lazy. The spinnaker pole is rigged with an internal control so the outboard end can be released from the guy by a crew member working at the mast. During a dip pole jibe, the end of the pole attached to the mast remains in place, while the outboard end is “dipped” to clear the forestay as it swings from one side to the other. On the way through, the foredeck crew removes the old guy, inserts the new lazy guy into the pole end, and yells “made,” indicating that the pole can be hoisted to the new side.