

29er Myths, Retorts and FAQs Intended for Prospective 29er Parents

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The 29er is a very modern and exciting skiff sailing boat with particular appeal to today's youth. It is the most popular skiff design in the world but perhaps better known in Europe and Australasia than the US. The 29er breeds an infectious enthusiasm amongst those who sail it. However, for some it constitutes a challenge – for the establishment that doesn't understand it, and perhaps for those who have vested interests to preserve.

This article is intended to address some of the myths or questions that are frequently asked of fleet members, their parents or coaches. For those already converted to the qualities of the 29er, the content is obvious; for those that don't want to know, it is probably blasphemy. My intended audience here is parents of potential 29er sailors considering investing in a 29er and that open to the pros and cons. My perspective is undoubtedly biased, for which I make no apology. The views herein are my own and I take full responsibility for them.

I'll add to this list as ideas surface or questions are asked. Feel free to e-mail me with topics to address. I hope you find it provocative and useful.

“Skiffs are not tactical”

Skiffs are fast boats and put a premium on boat handling and rapid decision making. Since the boat is so light, it accelerates quickly and boats separate fast given just a few seconds advantage, say, due to hoisting the kite faster. With boats accelerating faster off the line and their increased closing speeds, the 29er helps develop a team's communication, anticipation and split-second decision-making skills faster than slow boats, indeed making other boats seem to be in slow motion by comparison.

“Skiffs are not good training for college sailing”

While, there is no doubt that training in the type of boats typically found in US colleges (420s, FJs) will prepare you for such boats, ultimately the best sailors in the sport (or at the top of any given class) have spent significant periods in many different types of boats to develop their skill sets, learn from others, and in turn transfer their new knowledge back to all boats.

However my biggest criticism is that boring boats cause promising sailors to look elsewhere and drop out of sailing all together. This sad trend is made worse when the sailors are forced to quit a class when they age out at 18. Every boat ownership change is an excuse to quit. I believe college sailors exhibit a 'survivorship bias' – you only see the ones still in the game, not those lost by the wayside. When you look at the names of recent 29er sailors now at college, it is not hard to find them sailing for top college teams (Dellenbaugh – Brown, Provancha – Boston College, Liebenberg - Tufts, Miller - Rhode Island, Toole, Scutt – Stanford, etc.). Perhaps 29er sailors' limited team presence at college is only limited by the number of 29er graduates?

29er are an open class, meaning that any combination of adult/youth, or male/female is allowed. There is no age limit. As a class, we feel that sailing against adults is good for youth sailors, and we invariably set up youth and even female divisions within the results so that youth can compare their performance with their peers. As the price they pay for mixing it up with our youth sailors in the US, we expect our superstar adults (Charlie McKee, Chris Rast, etc.) to lead a de-brief on the day's racing in which the top teams are quizzed over what they did and why. This mentoring brings camaraderie, accelerates learning and makes our superstars accessible. This is not a class where withholding information is power. We believe that we'll get more out of it by cooperating and sharing the learning.

Furthermore, by not throwing teams out of the fleet at a certain age, the hull they bought as teenagers will still be good for use when they are twenty something, and you can even soup it up to become an XX for an added challenge. I argue that the 29er keeps youth interest enough to make sailing a lifelong sport, not just a temporary edge to get into college for those that stick it out long enough to get to the top sailing boring boats.

At this point parents have to ask themselves what they are in it for: their interests (free access club boat)? or their kids? I would also suggest that some old school coaches ask themselves whether they recommend only what they know, or have access to?

Assuming you want the satisfaction of introducing your kids to a lifelong sport, take a look at what types of boats are growing fastest nowadays. You will see a lot of skiff attributes in modern sports boats like

Melges aka apparent wind boats. Such boats have asymmetric spinnakers, light displacement and enormous fun factors for those with sights beyond college.

“It’s not a good route to the Olympics”

In May 2011, ISAF agreed to a double-handed women’s skiff event for the 2016 Olympics. This is in addition to the men’s 49er double-handed skiff, and the retained men’s and women’s 470 -- a design that dates from the early 1960s. The 29erXX, (a souped up version of the 29er with a double trapeze and masthead kite) is one of the favorites for the women’s double handed skiff selection, subject to evaluation trials sometime late 2011/early 2012.

Based on this decision, the 29er is an equally good path to the Olympics as the traditional pre-skiff route and perhaps better if you see where the IOC is pushing ISAF in terms of more exciting, spectator-friendly photogenic boats. Since 49er growth/interest had leveled off for a few years in the US, it is fantastic to see a resurgence of US interest in the 49er this year attracting several of the top post-college men onto the circuit in readiness for 2012 and 2016. Several of these teams are ex-29er sailors, (as are many at the top of 49er sailing worldwide), but many were not previously skiff sailors, perhaps never having had the chance.

I am very optimistic that the more girls will follow the same logical 29er to 29erXX path, now that they have an exciting and cost-efficient option to campaign for the Olympics.

“My kids are not big enough”

There is a trend towards having kids step straight out of Optimists or Sabots into 29ers, indeed it is frequently encouraged by US Sailing’s Olympic Committee coaches. Initially such teams will wrestle to come to terms with the boat, but that is the same whether they start at 14 or 17. Initially they will be light and will be forced to develop their technique quickly or they will spend an inordinate time swimming. The key is technique, not strength. As they put on weight, they will move from being competitive at light wind venues to becoming competitive at the breezy venues that the fleet lives for. In the meantime they’ll rely on the flexible composite top mast to take the punch out of gusts till they have the capability to use it.

The optimum weight range for 29er teams is 240-300lbs. Typically the helm is lighter than the crew, such that many (boys) start as helms, then move forward as they grow. To prove strength is not the issue, we have Paris Henken, aged all of 15 years, as the current 29erXX North American champion, and a frequent top 3 finisher in top tier 29er regattas. I doubt that she is more than 5’3” and 125lbs. Similarly Antoine Screve and Mac Agnese went from the top of the Optimist fleet straight into 29ers and each took roughly two years to get established at the top of the 29er fleet. Neither was more than 130lbs when they made the transition although both found themselves heavier crews to compensate. Now they race together and will represent the US at the 2011 ISAF Youth Worlds.

“Boat maintenance”

Many parents don't know where to start with this and understandably would prefer to delegate or avoid. I believe boat maintenance is a life skill and a responsibility. While the general attitude of skiffies is to “just go sailing”, it is important to maintain a skiff, both for safety/seamanship and not to lose the race.

Owning a skiff breeds responsibility, and while not hard, it is part of letting go (yes – hard for helicopter parents!). 29ers are strong and built of medium-tech, not high tech, materials so repairs are infrequent, easy and relatively cheap.

That said, skiffs do reward good preparation, preventative maintenance and attention to detail. Expect to replace most trapeze elastic/shock cord most years, a main halyard every 18 months, replace the odd ball bearing block and repair the odd jib batten pocket through chafing when a batten breaks. You will be pleased to know that 29er parts are readily replaced for sensible money – for example the masts are in 3 sections and can be replaced individually if damaged.

“Skiffs are expensive”

There is no doubt you “can't beat free” if you have access to club boat. However, if you have a choice, the 29er is not expensive in the big scheme of things unless you sail club boats. It is a well-built, one design boat, built on at least four continents under a strict builders license, with a long racing life based on a whole set of intelligent design decisions.

For example, the boat has one licensed supplier of masts and sails. The sails are relatively inexpensive due to manufacturing scale and their longevity. They last a long time due to the choice of mylar film and full length battens that resist flogging, rather than traditional Dacron. There are no brand decisions to make, nor any need to optimize the match of sails to masts to crew weight.

Another intelligent design decision made by Julian Bethwaite was to specify one design, extruded aluminum foils. In other classes, foils are expensive, damage prone and maintenance-intensive – this is not so in the 29er.

As Julian Bethwaite points out something to the effect of “I deliberately made it a strict one design to stops parents tinkering (i.e. spending money) in the search for that microsecond of advantage for their kid”. Sorry folks – it is not a case of buying your way to the top, not in boat terms anyway.

As a result of all this, boat depreciation and running costs are not a big deal and resale values are good because there are few owner choices to discourage buyers. Most of the costs of top level sailing are not in the boat itself, but travel. The good news here is that 29ers are readily chartered at major events so you are not obliged to ship your boat just to compete. In contrast, have you ever seen an I-420 for charter, or borrowed a boat and had to come to grips with another owner's peculiar tweaks?

Once on the road, the class also has great camaraderie, so teams frequently stay at friend's houses or team up to cut accommodation costs once they get to know the fleet.

In summary here, borrow a boring club boat when you have to, but buy own your own skiff.

How good is the standard of sailing?

The standard of sailing is probably at an all-time high. Indeed 2 out of 3 medals brought by Team USA at the 2010 ISAF Youth Worlds were 29er sailors (Antoine Screve in the 29er, Mac Agnese in a catamaran!). Antoine and Mac subsequently teamed up and cleaned up the 2010 Orange Bowl in Club 420s.

As an example of those at the upper limit of size, Oliver Toole and Hans Henken, long time 29er sailors but fresh into 49ers, were the third best US team in the 2011 Miami OCR results aged just 19.

To round out the story, another popular and enthusiastic helm is Kristen Lane, now in her 30s. She frequently sails the 29er and 29erXX all over world, often with Charlie McKee or Matt Noble as crew. Charlie won bronze in the 49er in Sydney with his brother, and Matt is no slouch as one of the top I-14 crews. While she's one of the top US Melges 24 sailors (male or female) with her "Team Brickhouse", and always in contention, she has yet to crack a top tier 29er event.

Why not to own a skiff?

I do think there are some valid reasons not to own a skiff.

Skiffs love breeze and top events are only held where there is a decent expectation of breeze. In fact the class rules specify a minimum of 5 knots for racing at major events. Not all areas of the country have breeze, so perhaps it might not be the ideal all year round boat.

Crews are a very important part of the 29er, indeed they are at least as important as the helm in achieving good results and seem to be hard to find with so much Opti and Laser influence breeding a surplus of helms. Not many non-skiff sailors know that it is the crew that takes the main upwind, and has a very energetic role keeping the boat trimmed flat and fast. It is also the crew, from their vantage point on the wire that has the best view for making tactical decisions. The top teams invariably have sailed together for a while, know how to communicate on and off the water (a life skill) and have choreographed their boat handling. The 29er needs a balanced helm and crew team to compete properly and the best helm will not win a major event with only an average crew.

Anything worth doing takes a little time. Those with short attention span and little staying power may not like the idea of earning their way to the top by putting in time on the water and getting over the ignominy of 100+ capsizes.

"There is no fleet near me". While this might be true now, you should ask around and perhaps break the mold by starting one with your fellow parents. Your kids will thank you for it.

Where do I find one?

Contact the class association or their regional rep. We'll do our best to put you in contact with active teams, like-minded parents, possible crews and coaches to get you started.

See the site web pages for the builder, dealer and used boat contact details.

<http://www.29ernorthamerican.org>