Mike Rice is an eight time recipient of the American Sailing Association’s Outstanding Instructor honor and has been teaching sailing at his sailing school, Puget Sound Sailing, for over 30-years. Rice is at the top tier of sailing instruction and weighed in with his views on sailing safety.

ASA: How much emphasis do you place on the safety element when teaching sailing? Do you approach it in a subtle way or more forcefully?

Rice: Our priority has always been that safety is the first issue we discuss - it’s really the most important issue. In my mind, when you’re safe, you are having fun and preparing people well is the key to being safe. And when you get into things like offshore sailing at night where there are harnesses, tethers, jacklines - these kinds of things; safety then becomes an even larger issue.

What, in your mind, is the most important safety tip/concept that you instill in new sailors?

Rice: To always be aware - to be conscious about what’s going on all around, especially the wind and the water. We teach students to look at the water to tell us what the wind is doing - to predict gusts, also to be mindful of the boom, how to walk on the boat - things like that. Awareness is crucial to not being caught off guard.

Are there some students where fear is something you have to address and if so, how do you negotiate that fear?

Rice: Absolutely. We encourage them to express those kinds of feelings and then we deal with them. Their fear is real. I find most fears are a lack of knowledge and/or a lack of control. So if we have a student who is just petrified when the boat heels just 5-degrees, the first thing I’ll do is to put them on the mainsheet and say, ”you’re in control of how much we heel.” After being in control for a while, typically, these kinds of students begin to lose that fear.

Have you ever had to manage an emergency at sea with students on board?

Rice: Yes - we were out in the Tobago Cays in the middle of nowhere when a hose blew and we began taking on water. The pumps were keeping up so it actually turned out to be a great teaching opportunity. I went through the possible causes of the problem one by one until we determined it was a blown hose and we closed the through-hull.

We’ve also had a dismasting once, we had a below-the-water-line cockpit drain on a small boat blow... but with all of these things the key is to be calm. They are looking at you, so if you’re calm then they’re okay with it. And that same idea goes for being a skipper. If something unforeseeable happens, the skipper needs to stay cool-headed and, in all likelihood, the crew will act similarly.

Any other important thoughts about safety you want to pass on?

Rice: Just to remember that if someone were to fall off the boat without a PFD in cold water, they will quickly lose the ability to swim. A lot of people don’t realize that in that event, all the blood starts rushing to their core and their bodies become very compromised. Wear that PFD!
It's a good question and one that probably begs a number of different answers. The first and most obvious is "any" PFD is the right PFD, but of course that requires a bit of qualification.

PFDs come in many shapes and sizes so it's important that a sailor chooses one that fits well and like enough that they will actually wear it. Too many sailors opt out of wearing a PFD based on comfort or cosmetics or both, but this doesn't need to be the case.

The aspect of comfort when choosing a PFD is more important than one might think. With a clunky and/or restrictive life vest, sailors will remove them because they're too hot or are having difficulty moving around. A PFD that ends up being taken off in certain circumstances obviously defeats the purpose.

These days, many PFD styles are lightweight, non-obtrusive and look good. For instance, the ASA sells one that automatically inflates upon immersion, which makes for a lighter vest that people actually forget they have on, but it's safe as anything there is.

There are also models (including ASA's) with built in harnesses that allow sailors to clip into jack lines, etc. Make sure you choose one that is Coast Guard approved and is sized correctly.

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By Cindy Shabes (ASA President)

While the people who walk through the doors of American Sailing Association schools believe they are going to learn the ins and outs of this fun new sailing thing, (and they are) what they will be simultaneously taught is that safety at sea, in some respect, is part of nearly every single lesson.

Since ASA might be the student’s first encounter with sailing it’s incumbent upon our instructors to immediately communicate that yes, sailing is a blast, but there are inherent dangers that need to be learned about and avoided to get the most out of the sport. We've created a tone that treats safety as a given - something that is simply part of how it all gets done.

"In many ways, how we integrate the safety aspects in our curricula is what we're most proud of," said Elbert "Ash" Ashbaugh who is ASA's affiliate representative. "We look to strike a balance that doesn't dampen the enjoyment of sailing with dry and rigid safety doctrines, but instead, we seamlessly incorporate these concepts in our lessons to ensure people are trained properly to avoid potential danger and react correctly if something happens."

The truth is learning the safety portions of the sailing lessons is something that most students embrace. Most people have a healthy respect for the potential danger involved in sailing and being trained in how to manage and circumvent any problems is exactly what they are looking for.

6 Solid Safety Tips

1. Know how to reef
So many fair-weather sailors don't know how to reef their boats, but knowing how is the difference between an exciting day in a big breeze and a white-knuckle fear fest.

2. One hand for the boat
One hand for yourself and one hand for the boat. It's become a cliche' but a cliche' for a good reason.

3. Carry a first aid kit
Sailing is an active pursuit and one that exists away from immediate help. Always have a first aid kit on board and make sure it is stocked properly.

4. Careful Docking
Never use your hands, feet or any part of your body to fend off a dock or another boat.

5. Know your knots!
So many instances regarding safety also revolve around a solid understanding of creating knots. Recovering an MOB, lashing things down, the list goes on. ASA has a great video series on tying essential knots. Go to ASA.com and click on “new sailor resources.”

6. Mayday!
If you hear a mayday call on the VHF, stay off the air and wait for the search-and-rescue services to respond. Listen carefully and record the details, especially the location, but stay off the airwaves.

What PFD is the right PFD?

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