

SAILING CAN TAKE YOU AWAY



Credit: Will Ricketson, US Sailing Team

Whether it is your first time or your thousandth time, there is just something special about being on the water. Maybe it is the unique perspective it provides us regarding our environment and the world we live. Maybe it is the smell of the ocean or nature in general. Perhaps it could be the feeling of the wind as it brushes through our hair or the sound of the boat cutting through the chop of the waves. Or maybe it is because of an observation that President John F. Kennedy made when he pointed out the biological fact that “all of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean.”

Regardless of the reason, sailing is a sport that nearly every individual can experience as long as there are two main ingredients available – a body of water and a boat.

Getting On Board

When sailing with an adaptive sports organization, little is typically required of individual participants when it comes to equipment or supplies. Sarah Winchester, Operations Manager for Chesapeake Region Accessible Boating (CRAB), a Disabled Sports USA chapter based in Annapolis, Maryland, recommends sailors wear sunscreen, a hat, and non-marking shoes. “In some cases, you may need to bring a jacket depending on weather and you may need to bring your own water,” she said. But that is about it. Everything else is typically provided by the organization.

Before one even gets into a boat, a safety briefing occurs. Life jackets are provided and must be worn at all times. As a safety precaution, keep in mind that at no time should you be restrained to the boat (seat belt, etc.) to avoid entrapment issues.

There are three aspects to adaptive sailing, according to Bob Ewing, co-founder and president of Footloose Sailing Association,

a Disabled Sports USA chapter in the Seattle area. Each person must figure out which one route interests them or that they are comfortable with. The first option is just going along for a ride, which allows the sailor to enjoy the social and recreational benefits the sport provides. “Going out for a sail allows you to leave your disability on the dock,” he said. “It can provide an escape from everything that you normally deal with.” The second option is to experience it, through a hands-on approach. For example, you can become a crew member and perform some of the tasks required while out on the water. The third aspect is taking it to the next level, when you come to the realization that you want to get your own boat, take long distance excursions, or race in regattas and other events.

A variety of boats are utilized for sailing that will support all ages and athletic abilities. Footloose utilizes boats that can accommodate individual comfort levels. The Access dinghy, for example is a small boat that is simple and easy to sail. It can accommodate two sailors, side by side with two masts and a joystick in the middle. The dinghy was specifically designed to remove some of the barriers to sailing including concerns over complexity and stability. The servo assist option allows the joystick to be controlled by hand, foot, chin or any moving body part and allows those with additional mobility issues or profound disabilities to participate in the sport as well.

For some, the biggest perceived hurdle can be getting in and out of the boat. If you cannot access the boat on your own, there are a number of other ways to do so. “When you go sailing, you leave your wheelchair or your walker on the dock,” Winchester said.

Individuals that need help transferring in or out of the boat



Credit: Footloose Sailing Association



Credit: Chesapeake Region Accessible Boating (CRAB)



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can either get personal assistance, be hoisted by a special lift, or use a transfer box. The transfer box is a metal box that can be positioned like a ramp into the boat with hand guards on the side that allows individuals to gently slide into the boat. Given these capacities, as well as the special seating and rigging that is available for adaptive sailing, almost anyone has the opportunity to set sail, including those with physical and mental disabilities, visual impairments, and spinal cord injuries. This sport also allows and encourages family members or caregivers to participate as well.

All Aboard

Once on board, another safety briefing typically takes place before you leave the shore to review other important instructions to ensure a safe and pleasant experience on the water. Boats are equipped with all the necessary safety gear, including a radio, first aid kit, life preservers, and more. CRAB provides one skipper and sometimes a crew member for each boat. Skippers must have a good sailing resume, with extensive training and experience. Crew members don't have to have any experience – only a willingness and ability to assist with some of the sailing functions. This is where all participants can have an interactive and engaging experience as they may be able to help with the lines or even steer the boat.

A number of assistive technologies exist to help individuals who may have a severe disability or are quadriplegic, according to Ewing. For example, a chin stick is available for those who may not have use of their arms. In addition, a sip and puff steering system can be used to steer the boat by sending signals through the use of air pressure by "sipping" (inhaling) or "puffing" (exhaling) on a tube or straw.

Ewing points out that there are a lot of tasks to do on a boat besides steering it. Two things must continuously be monitored, including the weather (must be cautious of heavy winds or lightning) and where the wind is coming from (so you can optimize the wind and adjust the sails). In addition, participants can help by pulling sheets, or lines, that will maneuver the boat in the water. In sailing, you will hear words like tiller, jib, foremast, tacking, bowsprit, spinnaker, leeward, or halyard, just to name a few. "Sailing terminology is a foreign language," Ewing said. "Don't worry if you are not familiar with them at first and don't be intimidated."

Ready to Race?

Just like with about any sport, competitive opportunities exist in sailing. If you have fallen in love with being on the water

and have the desire to start racing, a number of regattas and races take place across the country and world. Ryan Porteous, a member of Disabled Sports USA's E-Team, participated in the 2016 Paralympic Games. At just seven years old, the San Diego resident enrolled in his hometown yacht club's Junior Sailing Program, an eight-week program during the summer.

But in 2011, at the age of 18, he slipped on a dock and broke his neck, causing almost complete paralysis. "I didn't know if I would ever walk again and I wasn't sure about the future." He spent three months in the hospital. While there, he looked into adaptive racing. After recovering, he jumped right back in a boat. A couple of years later, in 2013, he qualified for the U.S. Sailing Team. He would go on to serve as the skipper of a mixed 2-person SKUD 18 team, which placed fifth in Rio.

Porteous likes sailing for three reasons. First, it doesn't take a lot of adaptive equipment. "You can pretty much sail any boat, as long as you have a seat." And second, although there are several adaptive regattas that exist, sailing is one sport that allows you to be as competitive with an able-bodied person. "You would never know the difference between the two." Third, each sailing experience is unique. After all, the sport is governed by mother nature.

Alternatives to Sailing

For communities that may not have sailing opportunities, it is important to point out that other boating options are available for those that enjoy being on the water. For example, Sailing 4 All, a Disabled Sports USA chapter located in Richmond, Virginia, offers pontoon boating to individuals with physical disabilities. Ted Abbott, president of Sailing 4 All, says they take regular cruises on a weekly basis up the James River. Boating this way provides different benefits than sailing might, including the ability to accommodate more people as well as power wheelchairs.

Connect with a Chapter

Approximately 30 Disabled Sports USA chapters offer some sort of sailing or boating program. To find the one nearest you, visit <https://www.disabledsportsusa.org/location-map/>. If you're not located near a DSUSA chapter, Porteous recommends you reach out to a local yacht club or sailing center. A number of them offer introductory Learn to Sail programs. "The sailing community is pretty open," he said.

When you are on the water, remember that you have to deal with whatever is given to you, the wind, the waves, etc. "Which is kind of like life," Ewing said.