

SAFETY POSITION

Paul Tara, 2014

Definition: The Safety Position is a standard basic small boat sailing technique. It occurs when a boat is borne off onto a close reach, stopped or moving slowly, with the sail eased and luffing. The Safety Position is used to minimize speed while maintaining control.

Physics: In the Safety Position, the boat is more or less in equilibrium. Because she is on a close reach, she is out of the “no go zone” where control decreases. Easing the sail reduces speed and heeling force. It also moves the center of effort of the sail plan forward, decreasing weather helm. Control is maintained because the boat is *almost* stopped, but still in balance, requiring only very small changes in rudder angle and sheet tension to maintain the same relative wind angle. The Safety Position is not, as many believe, when a boat is luffing, headed straight upwind. Such a boat is in disequilibrium. It will eventually stop. Then it will begin making sternway, often with unpredictable consequences.

Guidelines:

- Beginners are often told to “let go of everything” if things get out of control. This may avert an initial capsize but is not “safe”, especially in close quarters. The boat will immediately go into a series of uncontrolled round-ups and accidental tacks.
- After a near capsize, or whenever needing to maximize control, the boat should be deliberately steered onto a close reach and the sail eased until it is luffing.
- In breeze, ease the vang and raise the board halfway. This will help the boat settle down. Easing the vang decreases weather helm. Raising the board lowers lateral resistance, allowing the boat to dissipate heeling force by making leeway.
- A tiller-control shock cord, which can be deployed to center the tiller, makes a hands-free Safety Position possible (lunch).
- In traffic, starboard tack offers a “Safer Position” than port.
- To start sailing: center the tiller or bear off slightly, sheet in, wait for the boat to gather way, ease the board down, reset the vang. If the boat tries to round up when sheeting in, keep the boat flat or heeled to weather.