

Sailing Without Sight



Photo by Amory Ross/amoryross.com

Blind sailor and title defender Matt Chao demonstrates his unique helmanship style in this year's Blind Sailing National Championship hosted by Sail Newport during the 2008 Clagett Regatta. Fellow blind sailor Deb Keating tends the main sheet as sighted guides Peter Frisch, center, and Tom Winston assist.

If you ever happen to see Boston sail racer Matt Chao at the helm of a J-22 driving hard downwind to the next mark, more likely than not, he will be facing dead aft.

Your mouth may drop open at the sight, or you might scratch your head and point, disbelieving, in his direction. But that's okay; Chao won't see you. That's because he is one of a unique group of competitive sailors who sail blind, and we don't mean that in the metaphorical sense.

But even if Matt Chao could see your incredulous reactions — and he can't; he's been totally blind from birth — he wouldn't take offense. Sometimes, he says, reactions to his unorthodox way of “seeing” the wind by its feel on his face can be quite funny.

“I was driving a Nomad 18 on a downwind leg in a race once, standing at the tiller, facing aft and a woman in another boat yelled, ‘Hey dude, I think you ought to look forward.’ And I yelled back, ‘It doesn't matter; I can't see anyway.’”

What does matter, he says, is his team and the training they do together. Chao, a self-confessed “sailing junkie,” has been at it for 28 years and he's one of about 15 hard-

core competitors in the SailBlind Program of the Carroll Center for the Blind, headquartered in Newton, MA.

Another 25 to 30 blind or visually impaired children and adults from the Boston area participate in SailBlind's recreational sailing activities, all run out of the nonprofit Courageous Sailing Center on Boston Harbor.

While there are several blind sailing programs and a number of blind or partially sighted sailors in other parts of the country, Boston may have more blind and visually impaired people actively participating in sailing than the rest of the U.S. combined. That's because a number of factors come together here, according to Ken Legler, sailing coach at Tufts University. He is one of SailBlind's most active “sighted guides,” accomplished sailors who volunteer their eyes and on-water skills to make the program work.

“We're very fortunate to have so many community sailing centers around Boston and that means we have access to the right boats,” said Legler, who has guided blind sailors for 10 years. “The ideal boat is an

open-cockpit keel boat that can accommodate four people comfortably.

“In our case, we have Rhodes 19s and J-22s, which are very responsive boats,” he noted. But most important, he added, a blind sailing program needs “movers and shakers who can make things happen. And Boston has Arthur O'Neill.”

Sailing Out of Sight

Boston's sailing program for the blind and visually impaired goes back to the early 1970s when Boston College masters degree candidate Arthur O'Neill took an internship at the Carroll Center, which has been in the business of teaching life skills to the blind for over 70 years.

Shortly after O'Neill earned his MS in special education, he went to work for the center “and I've been here ever since,” he said. “We started an outdoor recreation program to introduce the blind to activities like hiking, skiing and canoeing.

“Being a sailor myself, I was interested in getting a sailing program started, too,” he added. “The only resource I had was my own 16-foot Town Class sloop, so we used that to

explore methods for teaching sailing.”

That led O’Neill in 1979 to the late Harry McDonough who operated a nonprofit community sailing program for inner city youth and that opened the door to facilities and a fleet of boats for O’Neill’s blind sailors. In 1987 McDonough’s program evolved into the Courageous Sailing Center at Pier 4 in Charlestown. The sailing center is named for the two-time America’s Cup-winning 12-meter yacht *Courageous*, once berthed there. It is now homeport for SailBlind.

O’Neill perfected his teaching techniques and found that while centerboard boats like his Town Class can work, building real confidence in blind sailors required a larger, less tender, full-keel boat but one not so heavy that the crew couldn’t “feel” it. The center’s Rhodes 19s and J-22s proved ideal.

“We’re not just taking blind people for rides in sailboats, we want them actively involved in making the boat sail,” O’Neill said. “At the start, we get them aboard and orient them to the boat so they can feel where the lines and cleats are, touch the spars and sails, handle the tiller, that sort of thing.

“Underway, the sighted guide lets them experience how the boat moves through the water and what happens when it heels to the wind,” he added. “Sailing is really a non-visual activity, when you think about it.”

Aside from watching the wind indicators aboard the boat, O’Neill says the really visual part of sailing is watching where the boat is headed and avoiding anything in its path, and that’s the job of the sighted team members.

“Sailing is really done by the feel of the boat in relation to changes in the direction and speed of the wind, the pressure of the wind on the sails and the movement of the helm,” O’Neill said. “These are non-visual characteristics of sailing that blind and visually impaired people can learn to enjoy and then master.”

Once hooked on sailing, the blind person can participate in the weekend recreational sailing program where one sighted

guide may take two or three people out and help them master their roles at the helm or trimming the sails. To the blind sailor, the guide becomes just that, the crewmember who guides them, through verbal communication, in how tight to trim the sail, for example, or how to hold the helm on a given tack and even how much and how quickly to move the tiller when rounding a mark.

“The blind, and especially those who lost their vision at some time in life, also lose a great deal of control over their lives, so they have to depend on other people,” added O’Neill, who also chairs the world racing body, Blind Sailing International. “Being in full control of a vessel and making it go where they want it to go and have control



Photo courtesy Carroll Center for the Blind

In addition to racing, the SailBlind program has an active recreational sailing program for children and adults who are blind or visually impaired. Here a sighted guide volunteer, right, helps four boys learn to sail aboard a Rhodes 19 from Boston’s Courageous Sailing Center.

over how fast or how slow it goes there, helps the blind person recapture some of that control.”

People start in the recreational program and some, the more competitive-minded like Matt Chao, move into racing and even go on with their teams to compete in sighted regattas.

20-20 Concentration

Unlike some blind sailors who once had their sight or others who are just visually impaired, Matt Chao has never seen a boat, but he’s been driving boats for more than half his life.

“I don’t miss what I never had and I still have a heck of a good time,” Chao said. “For

me, blindness is a speed bump, an inconvenience, but it means my other senses are heightened; I have different ways of seeing.”

Chao said he’s developed “virtual vision,” that enables him to see in his mind’s eye how certain things should be, like the layout of the racecourse and his boat’s position, or the sound of another boat moving through the water and its position relative to his boat.

Teams of four generally compete in blind sailing races. Two are blind or visually impaired, with one at the helm and the other trimming sails. Two sighted guides call most of the shots when it comes to tactics and safety where other boats are concerned.

Blind helmsmen steer as much by feel for the boat, the wind and the water as by voice commands from the guides but Chao has his own sometimes-startling style.

“Matt developed his downwind technique of sensing the wind on his face and translating that into tactics all on his own and it’s quite remarkable,” O’Neill explained. “He can pick up a wind shift quicker than a sighted person can.”

Chao tells the story of dueling with another J-22 at the start of one race when his boat had to make a quick tack and crash-jibe, right on the start line.

“As we got through the jibe, I sensed the committee boat behind us,” Chao

recalled. “And all of a sudden I hear, ‘Oh my gosh, he’s blind!’ and that almost broke my concentration — I started to laugh, but then caught myself.

“My crew missed it and wondered what was going on,” he added. “I was so focused on steering, I couldn’t explain until we got around the first mark but then we had a good laugh on the downwind leg.”

After the race, a woman who’d been aboard the committee boat told Chao the maneuver had exhibited the best seamanship she’d ever seen.

For further information on Boston’s SailBlind program, visit www.Carroll.org or www.Blindsailing.org for blind sailing worldwide. ■ — By Ryck Lydecker