

SailingTalk Xpress

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Learning to Fly

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As the 2006 British Champion in the International Moth, Sam Pascoe was ideally placed to become the test pilot for the new RS600FF foiler. This is set to introduce foiling to a whole new group of people who were too heavy for the Moth, but now have a way to get up and flying.

However, there are some elements to this new sport that are very different to conventional sailing. At the moment, the learning curve in foiling remains steep, but pioneers like Sam Pascoe are paving the way for the rest of us to follow. Here are some of Sam's best tips for anyone getting foiling for the first time.

Sam's Rules

Rule 1. Don't stand too far back. Whenever the boat starts to take off out of the water, people's natural instinct is the same as in a conventional boat, they step back. If you do this the boat is likely to rise too far out of the water and you'll lose control. So as the boat rises, step forwards! It's the opposite to what your mind is telling you to do, a bit like wanting to lean back on your skis down a really scary steep slope, when actually the best thing you can do is to lean forward over your ski tips.

Rule 2. To get foiling, first sail on to a nice broad reach, get the boat up and foiling, going fast. Then take one small step back, or even just lean on your back foot. At the same, give one short sharp pump to the mainsheet. As you ease the mainsheet out, the boat will lift up. To go up you let the mainsail out, because as you do so this takes the pressure off the top of the main. Once you're foiling, step forward to keep it flying level.

Rule 3. To lose power on most boats, you ease the mainsheet. The opposite is true of foilers. If you want to get out of trouble and you're flying too high, you heel the boat to leeward, pull the mainsheet in, and the boat will drop down.

Rule 4. The RS600FF goes like a beauty upwind - once you've mastered a few techniques. First thing is you must put in some windward heel, lean the mast over on top of you. Not as much as the Moths do, but maybe 5 or 10 degrees of windward heel. Stand slightly behind the mainsheet strops, so you've got a little bit of nose up to get your lifting. Get the boat foiling on a broad reach, then point it up, so you're then pointing upwind, keeping it in that groove, the mast heeling over on top of you. You don't point that high, maybe a tacking angle of just more than 90 degrees, but your speed still gives you great VMG upwind. In 10 knots' wind, a good speed through the water would be about 12 or 13 knots, similar to the Moth. Certainly faster than the wind.

Rule 5. Gybing on the foils is proven to work on the Moth, and should be possible on the RS600FF although I've not yet perfected the technique. I've been trying to come in off

the trapeze, unhook and go straight into the gybe, but I've had some trouble with that because as you come in, the nose tends to point up into the air, as you've no longer got the pressure on the mast. We need a bit more practice, but what will be possible sooner is to do a gybe on the foils just by moving from rack to rack, sitting down to sitting down as opposed to trying to trapeze your way through.

Rule 6. Tacking on the foils is the holy grail of Moth sailing. The very best guys have done it once or twice. It should just about be possible in the RS600FF, although only in fairly light winds. You might dip the hull slightly through the middle of the tack, and then rise up again if you're smooth and fast enough.

Rule 7. You can use the big rig on the RS600FF up to about 20 knots, then you should switch to the reefed rig that Clive Everest so kindly provided when he designed the original RS600. Once we know what we're doing, sailing in 30 knots of wind should be possible.

Rule 8. Sailing in waves should be a lot easier than the Moth, because you can gunnel run along the wingbar. You'll need to play the mainsheet a lot, it will be hard work, but good fun. Bring on the Round Isle of Wight Race!

Rule 9. Launching will be exactly the same as a normal RS600. Go out with the foils down a little bit. When it's deep enough, push the foils down, put the retaining pins in, and off you go. The difference with the rudder is you push it straight down and pin it, whereas the standard RS600 rudder pivots into place and is held by a rope and cleat.

Rule 10. Not so much a rule, but an observation. A lot of people are scared that foiling on a trapeze is a bit nuts, that you're going to have some bad crashes. Well, I've had two crashes where I've gone round the front of the boat, and I don't hurt myself. In any case, that was caused by problems with the set-up of the foils. Once the foils are correctly set up you shouldn't have any crashes at all. The more common loss of control is where the boat rises too high, the foils come out of the water and the whole boat slips away to leeward - away from you. You mind end up getting tea-bagged, but at least you're only landing in water, a lot softer than glass and epoxy!

I concluded by asking Sam about the speed potential of the RS600FF. "So far top speed has been 23.4 knots, and I think we should hit 25 knots this summer. Ultimately 30 knots is the goal for the RS600FF. I think it's achievable once we're more experienced with the boat."

Andy Rice

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Next week: an interview with the best catamaran sailor in the world.
No prizes for guessing who that might be, though...