

# Follow the Leader



Liz Matthews idotphoto

A popular exercise used during sessions afloat is to get our dinghies to sail in formation around the water. But ensuring that students gain value, knowledge and skills is trickier than you might think. **Simon Winkley**, RYA Coach Assessor, looks at when and how to use Follow The Leader exercises to improve sailing skills and to maximise group control.

## Justifying the exercise

A useful question to ask yourself when planning a Follow the Leader (FTL) session is, 'What are my objectives?' The session brief should justify the exercise to the students and suggest what they should expect to gain from it. Also ask yourself whether you feel the group is actually ready to sail in such close formation or could such an exercise place too much pressure on the students at their particular level in the prevailing conditions?

## Improving skills and setting up the session

If using FTL for skills coaching, some elements to focus on include:

- » Speed control and stopping
- » 5 Essentials
- » The benefits of proximity sailing

Beginners should start with about three to four boat lengths between boats, which can be decreased for more advanced sailors to around one boat length. Basic rules of 'no overtaking', and 'no being overtaken' should prevail in standard FTL exercises, alongside the normal safety and group control signals in case things need to change or be abandoned.

When and where to get the group to turn is a crucial consideration. Initially getting each boat to tack where, not when, the boat in front tacks will aid group control.

As the group advances, all boats could be tacked simultaneously on the whistle which will change the leader to the person at the back of the line. Getting all the boats quickly back into a neat formation will really test their speed control and boat positioning, similar to race starts.

A key objective for all levels should be to focus on the five essentials. Intermediate and advanced students worked hard in areas such as exaggerating trim (sinking the stern) and sail setting (oversheeting downwind for turbulence) to slow the boat in stronger winds and avoid overtaking any boats in front. Avoid providing your students with too much to focus on and this will enable them to put each point into action and to understand the outcome or effect.

Remember that the close proximity of other boats automatically adds a thrill to the exercise that is not always felt when sailing as an individual around a course!

## Group Control

Setting a group off from a beach to a distant sailing area could lead to loss of control and a starburst situation. FTL is an effective means of controlling the group in transit to and from the nominated sailing area.

FTL is also a great method to sweep up a group who have begun to spread out (or look like they are at risk of doing so). Act early to maintain group control, selecting one dinghy to follow the powerboat as you drive back and forth adding more and more boats to the back of the line. Then, when all the group are 'in tow', the session can either continue or the group can return to shore. Zig-zagging beginners upwind as they follow you can help them with early upwind success.

If the first boat is unable to maintain the required distance from the powerboat, one option is to send them to the back. This tests their lying-to skills as they hover before accelerating to rejoin the end of the line. This can also be used as a fun challenge.

## Who will lead, and safety considerations

Nominating a well-briefed instructor or assistant to lead in a dinghy has best effect. Alternatively the instructor can lead from the powerboat but safety needs careful consideration.

Use of a student as the leader needs to be carefully managed as there is a risk of group control being lost.

The RYA resource 'Effective Use of a Powerboat for On Water Training and Coaching' details good practice that should be observed while running sessions such as FTL. Here are some considerations:

- » When leading from a powerboat the driver must take care with regard to the boat's angle to the wind.
- » Any point of sail can be utilised but care should be taken to avoid creeping into the no-go zone or driving too deep downwind which could cause the group to either lose power or to gybe unexpectedly.
- » Communication from a powerboat is likely to be minimal as shouting instructions over the engine noise to multiple boats might fail to get a clear message across.

These are fundamental safety considerations, and a driver or spotter, where available, allows the instructor to communicate as clearly as possible.

Used effectively, FTL exercises provide dynamic opportunities for group control as well as adding a little extra zest to coaching sessions as the challenges increase and the sailing becomes more fun. But remember, objectives need to be clear and the session set up safely.



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