

## Crew Selection – January 2011

Choosing crew members for an offshore sailing event is just as important as choosing the right liferaft. Both your life and theirs depends on it. You want and need to have the confidence in each and every crew member, so when you put your head down on your pillow during your off watch, you have the confidence that good decisions will be made. **Safety for the boat and its crew members always comes first and prudence is always the rule.**

There are many qualities to look for when selecting crew members and the same is true for crew members who may be interviewing to sail on a boat bound to or from Bermuda. This is a two way street, as much as a skipper wants good crew members to sail aboard his boat, crew members should also be diligent about who's boat you're willing to sail on. As part of a crew member's due diligence, he too should check out the boat and the CV's of other crew members before committing to becoming a crew member.

What are the basic requirements to look for when considering a crew member and what is the best procedure to approach this important step? When possible, have a face to face interview with each potential crew member, one on one, before committing to them as an official crew member. Begin by reviewing the potential crew members written sailing CV. This gives you as skipper, the opportunity to have a first look at someone's experience level without having to make a commitment. You may find some insurance companies also want to review the sailing CV's of the crew members who have signed on for the trip.

Every crew member should bring something different to the table and having an overlap of qualifications is a good thing. As we discuss qualifications, it is not necessarily in an order of priority as all the qualifications are important. Offshore sailing is quite different than coastal sailing/racing and a lot of new things are introduced that have not been experienced in coastal sailing, such as a new level of fatigue and being at the ready 24 hours a day. Also, it goes without saying, at some point you will be 300 miles from the nearest point of land. In choosing crew members, racing experience is helpful and it's also important to have people with offshore experience.

Chose your Watch Captains wisely, they're making the boat's decisions when you're off watch and that's the reason they were chosen as Watch Captains. A Watch Captain should have offshore experience, be weather knowledgeable, know the boat almost as well as the skipper, possess good people skills and have the ability to be relied upon if things get ugly.

Crew should be chosen for what they bring to the table not because he/she is your best friend. Although it's assumed that all crew members are friendly compatible people, occasionally the interaction with other crew members can change the dynamics. Look for happy, easy to get-along with people and any known grumps are just not considered as part of the crew. Maintaining a good ship's morale is far too important to have one person bringing the others down.

Having a “MacGyver” onboard every boat is a real plus. He’s the guy who can fix anything with his Swiss Army knife. Often the skipper is the ship’s MacGyver since he knows the boat and its systems so well, though not always the case. I refer to MacGyver as the ship’s engineer, especially if he is knowledgeable and experienced with diesel mechanics.

At least two crew members should be “current” in First Aid and CPR. If a crew member is a Doctor or an EMT and an experienced sailor, he or she would be on the top of my crew members list.

Keeping all those onboard warm and well fed is a skill not to be overlooked. A general expectation is that all crew members will share in the cooking and housekeeping duties on a round-robin basis. In an ideal world this is a great approach, however, experience has proven that some people are so lost in the galley that serving something more than a peanut butter sandwich can be a challenge. Generally, the off going watch cooks for the new on-coming watch as well as themselves. This enables most crew members the ability to eat together with the rest of the crew and have only one meal prep time per meal. A member of the off going watch (not the chef) cleans up after. If things are not over challenging on deck, one of the on-coming watch may chose to clean up after the meal prep allowing all the off watch crew to hit the sack. In short order we will know who has good cooking skills and may be willing to participate in the cooking more frequently. Those crew members who are more active in the galley should be relieved from some of the other routine chores such as the daily head cleanings. Remember, a happy crew is an efficient crew and everyone needs to participate to keep the boat orderly and clean.

Everyone’s contribution is important and a crew member with a good understanding of short term weather prediction is vital to sailing fast as well as sailing safe. The ship’s weather prognosticator should not only know where to find useful weather information but know how to interpret it. Having a clear understanding of what the weather information inserted in the log book at the change of each shift means in forecasting your short term weather. Being aware of what the wind direction, barometric pressure and its history and cloud cover are telling you relative to your present conditions and anticipated weather ahead. You’ll feel more comfortable knowing if the light number one genoa is the next sail to be hoisted or the number four heavy weather jib.

It should go without saying but occasionally I see a crew member who does not own some of the key offshore components a crew member should posses. I’m referring to having one’s own foul weather gear and safety harness; there is no sharing of gear, period. I know this sounds silly but it does happen.

All crew members should be reasonably physically fit. The nearest hospital may be 300 miles away and an air lift at sea is not something that was on your “bucket list”. Some medical emergencies may not be avoided but try to balance the risk through in-person crew interviews, both for your well being and the well being of the crew members.

Having a few crew dinners well before the date of the starting gun will go a long way to bringing together a good cohesive crew. Consider including a few alternate crew members in case a crew member has a last minute change in plans and needs to bail out.

The same crew selection criteria should apply to return crew as well as the race crew. Once again, choose your crew for what they bring to the table and you'll have a more rewarding offshore passage.

~ Article posted by Ed Stott who has sailed to Bermuda twenty one times and has logged 80,000 offshore miles ~