
Taming the Chute

Short-handing the Tri-radial “Symmetric” Spinnaker

Frank Belchamber - August 27, 2014



Introduction

There are lots of them kicking around in basements and garages. Your good old boat probably came with one. It's the dreaded old-fashioned symmetric spinnaker, the tri-radial. Most non-racers believe that these sails are too much work, too hard to master, and too dangerous to use when out for a day sail with the kids. I'd like you to think again - the spinnaker can be tamed, and could be the most fun for the dollar you have ever found.

Less Work is Good

It's the spinnaker pole that makes the classic spinnaker technique so much work. Eliminate the spinnaker pole and you immediately eliminate the pole uphaul and downhaul. You also eliminate the attachment and storage issues.

What the pole is for, is for holding the windward spinnaker corner (the "tack") out so that you can run straight downwind with the chute directly in front of the boat. We cruisers and day sailors prefer to set our genoas to windward with a whisker pole when running, because it's so much easier than poling out a chute. In a practical sense, if there is enough



wind to hold a spinnaker out in front, then most of us would not want to fly a spinnaker unless we had a trained racing crew on board.

I recommend that you get rid of the spinnaker pole, and forget about flying the chute straight out front. Here's why: in light wind you will end up "reaching" the spinnaker and so if you are using a pole, it will end up resting against the forestay. Why not simply attach the spinnaker to the forestay in the first place and forget about the pole? Now, you're talking about easy.

In Light Air, it Makes Its Own Wind

My first "aha minute" happened when I realized that my spinnaker was making its own wind. That was very welcome, because there was so little true wind that I was about to fire up the "Detroit spinnaker" to make the run home. I was lucky if I was getting 1 knot downwind with the genoa. Nuts to that, something had to change! I decided to fly the spinnaker.

The spinnaker slowly billowed out and filled. It was pretty. I headed as far downwind as I could, with the spinnaker attached to the forestay using a line wrapped around the furled

genny. In a minute or so, the knot meter showed some improvement. That moved the apparent wind a bit farther forward and I had to pull the spinnaker sheet in a bit. Well, that got us going a bit faster and the apparent wind moved forward and I had to sheet in the spinnaker again. Of course, that speeded us up some more and I had to sheet it in some more. After a while, I had the spinnaker hauled way in and we were moving right along at a good clip with lots of apparent wind in our faces. Remember, there was not enough true wind to be bothered sailing in, and here we were galloping along in a bunch of apparent wind created by the spinnaker. We were actually running in the direction of the true wind, such as it was, but were close reaching into apparent wind with the spinnaker. Magic! It's as if it made its own wind! After all, sailboats actually do sail in apparent wind, not true wind direction.

On a light wind day, when it's not fun to run before the wind with the sails hanging loosely and sweat running down your back, the spinnaker saves the day. Now you're having fun sailing along with a cooling breeze, doing maybe 4 or 5 knots instead of 1 or less. And it's pretty, too.

How to Do It

The easiest way to think of rigging a spinnaker, in my opinion, is to remember that it is the one thing that is farthest away from everything else attached to the boat. It goes higher up the mast, in front of the forestay, outside the shrouds and lifelines, what else is there?

You need a spinnaker halyard, of course. If there is no block at the mast head, then you will have to rig one. Most boats at least have provision for a spinnaker halyard. It is above the top of the forestay, unlike the jib halyard that is below it.

A spinnaker is sheeted from outside the life lines to a block on the toe rail or close to the toe rail at about the helmsman's position aft of the wheel, then forward to the winch and cleat.

If you have a genoa furler, then you need to protect your genoa from chafe while the spinnaker is attached around it. You will eventually want a collar (brand name "Tacker" is recommended) but you can experiment by wrapping a line with a snap shackle several times around the furled sail and tie it off to a deck cleat. Snap the shackle onto the spinnaker tack. Set the spinnaker tack about three feet above deck level and experiment with height from there.

It is said that anybody can raise a spinnaker, but it takes a sailor to get it down. It's not too bad in light air, but for short-handed sailing a sock (or "snuffer") makes it easier when there is more wind. I use one, and I recommend them. Whether you have a snuffer or not,

you stuff the spinnaker down the hatch as you lower it, so it doesn't go into the lake. You tidy up down below later. Those who do not use snuffers (Richard Tielen, for example,) will pull the spinnaker down behind the main sail and stuff it down the companion way. With a snuffer, it is common to stuff the snuffed sausage down the fore hatch like I do. In light air, you can do whatever you want.

Lazy Sheets and Gybing the chute

Let's talk about the lazy sheet and gybing the spinnaker. You cannot "tack" a spinnaker through the space between the mast and forestay. Don't believe me? Try it. You will have a twisted mess at the top of the mast. You have to gybe the spinnaker across in front of the whole boat. The sheets need to be twice the length of the boat. That can create another kind of mess if you don't do it right. The first time I did it, I ran the boat over the lazy sheet and had to sort that out.

You can prevent the problem I had if you pass the lazy sheet between the spinnaker and the forestay, above the attachment point of the spinnaker tack. It's not the intuitive way of rigging it, but it's the way that works.

You need to gybe slowly, and ease the spinnaker clew through the narrow opening between the spinnaker body and the forestay. It's not like tacking a genoa, where you want to move quickly. The spinnaker gybe has to be slow and smooth. Both sheets need to be controlled at the same time. The single-hander has a sheet in each hand. With practice, it gets easier.

The above method treats the tri-radial as if it were an asymmetric. Another way is to take advantage of the symmetry by releasing the "tack" from the tack shackle and pulling it aft until the former "clew" reaches the forestay. Now you can snap the new "tack" to the forestay. The lazy sheet only goes to the tack, and does not need to be twice the length of the boat using this method. In light air it's not difficult but it can be a problem in a bit more wind if you don't have a snuffer. Personally, I abandoned this approach after a few tries. Too much work. Defeats the purpose.

Experiment in Very Light Air

That's all I know. Experiment in extremely light air, and work up to a bit more wind. If there are white caps, forget the chute - you don't need it. We're not talking about racing, here.

Take it Slow and Easy, and Have Fun