



The pitman

Can you contend with shouting from both ends of the boat simultaneously, run a tidy ship, and ensure all the sails go up and down smoothly? Welcome to the role of the pitman, as **Harriet Prest** explains.

The housewife of the crew, a good pitman (or woman) should regard rope management and fastidious drills as a delight, as well as forming the link that marries the brains at the back of the boat with the 'manoeuvre makers' at the sharp end. The position dominates all sail hoists and drops as well as playing a vital role in spinnaker gybes.

From his spot in the middle of the boat, the pitman has a wide angle view of the workings at the front of the boat, and – depending on who you are talking to – a good pit makes the bow team look good, or is it the other way around?

The pit tails the halyards through their clutches as they are pumped up at the mast for a hoist; controls the descent of the same sails and sets the pole height with the topping lift and downhaul in kite hoists, drops, gybes and adjustments downwind.

Vital connection

Jonathan Taylor, known as Boycey, has made the position of pit into an art form. Starting his professional sailing career in the role onboard the Mumm 36 'Barlo Plastics' in the 1999 Admiral's Cup; he ran the pit onboard GBR Challenge and went onto the same role with



PHOTO RICH PAGE*

Victory Challenge for last year's Louis Vuitton Acts, while most recently he has been pitman onboard the TP52 'Christabella'.

'I think quite often the role is overlooked, as in how important it can be,' he explains. 'In the amateur-professional restricted fleets quite often a pitman is chosen above someone else [to be one of the professionals onboard] because he will run the front of the boat. Even on a small boat, all the way down through the ranges, you need someone pretty solid in the pit because the corners are fairly important – there are gains and losses to be made.'

Especially on smaller racing yachts, the roles of crew boss (see July 28 issue) and pit are often combined. Even if there is a separate crew boss onboard to co-ordinate manoeuvres, the pitman needs to be a great communicator, as he often has to make the call on whether the bow team are ready for the next event. Boycey explains: 'You have to be able to explain yourself without sounding like you are shouting and being bossy. From where you are on the boat, your communication is an obvious link from the front to the back meaning that there aren't too many raised voices. If you keep that channel really tight and just have your loops of communication, anything that needs to go from back to front goes through the middle, through one person, not by Chinese whispers up the rail.'

Job credentials

As the crew member responsible for controlling the halyards and pole controls, you are dealing with a lot of bits of string – all running through clutches on the coachroof and into the same area – you must keep this tidy!

You need your halyards to run smoothly when the clutch comes off so look after them. 'Spinnaker halyard – you must flake that,' commands Boycey, and you should get into the habit of flaking as many halyards as possible. 'You can figure of eight it round a winch and lay it downstairs or you can just take the end and just run it through your hands and send it to the bottom of the boat. If you are in a hurry, just make sure you've got no knots in it by running it through your hands and drop it down below – to keep ropes out of everyone's way in the cockpit.'

'You have got to be pretty anal, plus you are the man that knows where everything is downstairs. Which side all the jibs are stacked, where the chutes are packed. Not Minister of Interior necessarily, but when they call for a spinnaker you should know where it is.' Make sure you have a



PHOTO RICH PAGE*

knife and sail ties to hand, plus a spare sheet and snatch block for an outboard lead – often tied securely in the companionway.

You need to think logically and make lists. 'Coming into the top mark you go through a mental checklist: jockey pole; pole; topping lift; which halyard you are on and if the jib halyard is flaked ready to drop.'

However, you also need to be able to react to the unexpected, as Boycey explains, 'I think it is a mechanical role when everything is going nicely. However, when there is a problem, it's a different story! Problems involve quick thinking and prioritising what job needs to be done first.' When you consider the loads in the sails that you are responsible for, if you often need to blow a halyard – for example when broaching – this is not the role for you if you are a little slow on the uptake.

For the team dynamic to work, the bow team needs to trust you: 'They have to believe you and trust you behind them. Always back them up. How do you make people trust you? Do your job well!'

Eyes forward

You are the eyes inside the boat so it is important to look forwards to the bow. 'You don't want to start pulling a halyard if it is not attached to anything. Again it is the simple thing of looking at what is happening at the other end of the piece of string

Above Keep looking forwards and watch what the bow team are doing. Don't be afraid to get someone to come in and help – either the crew boss or float, or navigator on smaller boats.

Above left Boycey Taylor does pit onboard the TP52 'Christabella'.



Right Make sure you have a secure stance in the companionway and that all lines are tidily fed down below.



PHOTO MAX RANCHI



Above Label all your clutches and jammers with which halyard or control line they hold.

you are pulling – it's a fatal error to be chatting away and not seeing that there might be a foul-up.

A pitman also needs good all-round awareness. 'I think a pit-person has to have a very good idea of what's going on around him on the racetrack, as well as on the boat so you can pre-empt what the back of the boat are going to be thinking.' He continues, 'You are always looking upwind to see where the top mark is so that you have got a good idea of how long you have got on each layline and then from there you try and prioritise what is important, find out what spinnaker they want to

use downwind, talk to the trimming loop, find out what they want to use.

'You should be talking all the time about the next possible move, and downwind, you are asking the navigator what is happening at the bottom mark.

Mark roundings are exactly the time when your eyes need to be in the boat, no matter what's going on around you. 'If you get caught boat-watching coming into the bottom gate your timing can fail. You must concentrate the entire time!' Even when other boats are making some dramatic mistakes – otherwise you'll give them all something to look at!

Asked to work the pit on a big boat?
Here's our cut-out and keep guide...

Key points

- **Communicator:** In the pit you often take on the role of crew boss, extracting information from the back of the boat and translating it into a set of commands for the front of the boat to follow. If there is a separate crew boss, you should work closely with them when preparing for manoeuvres.
- **Tidy space:** The messier your ropes are the, the more chance of a knot in a halyard and a fouled-up spinnaker drop – keep your area tidy, flake your halyards and know each of your clutches like the back of your hand.
- **Eyes forward:** Watch what is happening on the bow at all times so that you can pre-empt when they are ready for hoists, drops and adjustments.
- **Controls:** Mark all clutches clearly, and think before letting any clutch off – just to make sure!
- **Manoeuvres:** Make mental checklists! Run through your role step-by-step in each manoeuvre before it happens.
- **Prioritise:** There may be three different communication loops, all calling for different things at the same time, but you need to be able to prioritise which needs to happen first.

Pit preparation

The actual pit area seem like a confusing muddle to a first-timer. Make sure all clutches are marked: two masthead kite halyards (SPIN 1; SPIN 2) a fractional kite halyard (FRAC), jib halyard (JIB), and tackline (TACK). The topping lift (T/L) and downhaul may be run through clutches or cleats – check whether the boat is small enough to end-to-end gybe, for example on a Mumm 36, or dip pole (most racing yachts 40ft and above). If you are stepping onto a new boat, check that all the labels are still correct!

All halyards should have a mark on them and calibration numbers drawn along the deck so you can quickly replicate settings, and the topping lift should have a mark for dip-pole gybes – or better still a piece of whipping that you can feel through your fingers whilst still looking forward.

When it comes to using clutches, Boycey advises: 'Never open the clutch if you have only got a couple of wraps on the winch behind it, plus the self-tailer – because it could just run through. Make sure you have got enough wraps – leave the clutch shut, load up wraps, then open the clutch.

'I always hoist a spinnaker halyard with the clutch shut because then if there is a problem, it does not just come straight back down. A spinnaker you can hoist without the use of a winch, you can just free-hand it behind the clutch, so if you have got the clutch shut and the mastman says it is "made" it cannot go anywhere.

You generally have to have halyard tension on a jib so if you have a wrap or two on the winch, it doesn't matter if the clutch is open or shut. After the jib has gone up, you will have to put halyard tension on it so if you already have two turns on the winch, it just gives you a bit more time loading up the halyard – then you can lock the clutch.'

Practice drill

Each manoeuvre around the racetrack will call for a different drill so practice time is vital to ensure you have all the actions worked out for each corner:

■ **Mainsail hoist:** 'As a pitman you can take this on from the very start – you are in charge: you say, "Main's going up" and the same people should do the same job every day so that there are less mistakes. Lead from the start and that includes the mainsail hoist.'

■ **Jib hoist:** 'It is very good to have one mark on the jib halyard so that you yourself have a good idea if the trimmer says "I need a little bit more". It is also good when you come to the bottom mark to hoist the same jib, he says "Same settings", and you can put it up to the identical setting as the previous beat.'

■ **Jib halyard tension:** 'Being the pitman you are sat quite close to the upwind trimmer and he will be talking to you all the time and if he says that he needs more halyard, generally you do it while the boat is tacking when the jib is de-loaded. Have a handle in it, have it all prepped up, then through the tack put on a few turns and go straight back out. Generally it is hard to wind the jib up when you are sailing upwind as there is a lot of load in it.'

■ **Kite hoist:** take the uphaul with you on the last tack so you can set the pole from the rail, and hike out until you're needed to tail the spinnaker halyard. 'The leeward trimmer will call you into the mark, so that you haven't got to get off the rail too early. Everything is set up, the pole is on the rig, the tack is out to the end of the pole. The mastman goes in a boat length before and starts to sneak [the kite up]. You will get a clear indication as you go round the top mark, generally

from the helmsman, when to hoist. As you hoist, the mastman often has marks on his halyard so that he can call when he is getting to the end – when it hits the top, drop the jib.' On windy days also make sure somebody eases the vang – often led into the pit – for the bear away.

■ **Jib drop:** 'The mastman will give you a nice clear call when the spinnaker is at the top of the hoist, as soon as the spinnaker sheet is coming on – you have already got the jib halyard winch de-loaded – then you can start to drop it. Obviously quick is good – but a controlled descent! If you drop it in the water then it is quite slow! Keep an eye of the bowman again, if is going too quick for him, slow down, if he is pulling down hard on the luff, then speed it up.'

■ **Dip pole gybe:** 'The mastman raises the inboard end of the pole to where it swings through the forward triangle, then you open the clutch so that you lower the outboard end of the pole down to a mark which says it will go inside the forestay. When the bowman has made the brace, bring the pole back up to where it was before. Set it to where you think is right and when the boat is settled, ask the trimmer if he is happy with where the pole is set and adjust it accordingly. Make sure in the gybe that the downhaul isn't going over the side – grab a handful, but don't lock it off so that it always goes back to the same tension. Without adjusting the downhaul, you can get a pretty good idea of how much topping lift to pull on.' After the pole is set, make sure all the slack is always taken up on the downhaul, but ease it whenever the guy trimmer brings the pole back.

■ **Kite drop:** 'You should get a good idea how quickly you are coming into the bottom mark. For instance on an America's Cup boat we have to be going into the manoeuvre two and a half minutes out – in fact a jib should be going up. Inside of a minute, it is very late! Drops are where it gets a little bit more complicated and little bit more confusing. If it is just one leeward mark, then it is okay, as you know which way you are going to go round it. But in bigger fleets there is often a gate

Below left Raise the outboard end of the pole to roughly the correct height before setting the spinnaker.

Below Flake all halyards, especially the spinnaker – use a winch to coil it in a figure of eight.



PHOTO SIMON RAMSHAW

PHOTO MARK HANCOCK

Crew like you...

...amateurs share their secrets

■ 'Always ensure after every manoeuvre that all ropes are coiled and tidied away neatly. Good housekeeping works a treat ensuring all ropes run smoothly in tight situations.'

Simon Hunter, Pit, Corby 30 § BH42

■ 'Make that marker pen your best friend - it is vital to ensure that the spinnaker pole clears the Bowman's head by at least an inch and a half because the Bowman will certainly let you know if he cops one on the head! It can also be used for replicating halyard tensions at the bottom mark.'

Emily Davies, Pit, Ker 55

at the bottom - the tactician will tell you which one he wants to go through - left or right. That's when it changes quite quickly and how it pans out is often very different to how you expect. You have just got to be very flexible.

'With a symmetrical sail, if you are coming into the mark and it's a standard drop: pole to the headstay, drop it on the leeward side. Or the pole can come off first, and the chute would be flown without a pole - this can be done on a boat up to 50ft or even bigger to be honest if the spinnaker is being flown nice and square - the chute will be stabilised and then you can drop it on either side. For a weather drop, the pole has to come off first - more than likely you wouldn't do a weather drop if you are reaching although you could do this on little boats - the bigger the boat, the more dangerous that becomes.'

Get your priorities straight

You need to be able to prioritise; Boycey explains his thinking if the kite hoist falls short of the top

of the mast: 'As the pitman, you have to then prioritise what to do next - the jib still has to come down, so get it down. If the halyard is a metre short, it doesn't matter, it's still pulling, the boat's going nearly full speed, get the jib down and on the deck, then winch the kite halyard up.'

'If it is a long way off, you still have to prioritise having a team letting the jib down so maybe someone else comes and lets the jib halyard down, as you load up the winch and start winding the spinnaker halyard up. If it is windy, and it is a long way from the top, maybe you have to have a word with the trimmers, and get them to collapse the spinnaker once or twice to get it up - you don't want to do that ideally but sometimes you might have to. I think the key word there is prioritise what you need to do to keep the boatspeed at its optimum and the less shouting from the back!'

Don't be afraid of asking for help in this very busy role: 'Often it is better to have a second pair of hands in the pit. It's a job which all happens very quickly, and when you do a corner, you want everything done immediately, so bring in another person as you are bringing the halyard up, he will drop the jib halyard, and let the outhaul off and the cunningham if the main controls come into the pit rather than the back of the boat. Don't ever be afraid to have someone in and back you up - call it 'pit assist'! Quite often it is the float position that does that.'

As pitman you are rarely able to blame anyone else and, when it goes wrong, it's generally pretty visible! 'You can get halyards caught under sails, you can get them caught under feet - and the chute doesn't come down if it's trapped under something!' But Boycey's worst memory is about more of an accidental hoist: 'I do remember a time we did a drop on a 70ft boat. The spinnaker was all down the forehatch, I made the call that it was safe, turned upwind - the chute wasn't safe and it all went out of the back of the boat - we had to let it go. It whistled out the back pretty fast.' In the face of disaster, Boycey grins - the man has a solution to every situation: 'We just let the sheets, halyard and everything go, and carried on sailing upwind. Otherwise known as a chase-boat drop.' Do not try this at home. ■

Right At the leeward mark make sure the jib halyard is around a winch and tensioned correctly, and watch the bow team to match the speed of the drop to their takedown.

