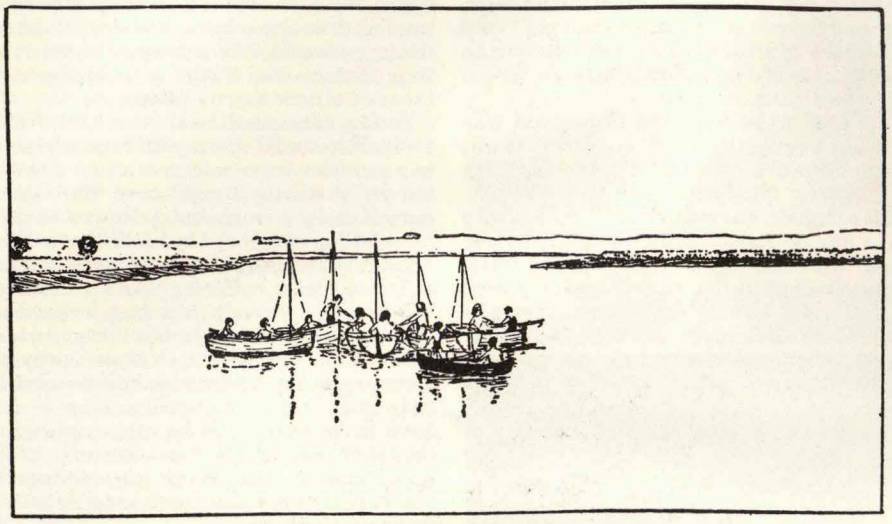
the value of pottering while young

Racing is the best and surest way of learning to sail. Or is it? ALEX STONE debates that question.



DRIFTING UP WITH THE TIDE

A scene from "Secret Water" by Arthur Ransome (used by kind permission of Penguim Books).

From day one, racing has been part of sailing. Its beginnings go back as far as that first pirate ship remorselessly bearing down upon a laden merchant vessel, or that smuggler desperately trying to outpace the Kings Cutter. Racing then was no sport though — the outcome had more relevance to ones life expectancy than merely to the ego, and the finish gun was rather more final. In less distant times, only economic survival was at stake but that still provided plenty of incentive for the tea clipper skippers and crew.

Sailing has always been with us (one wonders if Noah's boat didn't have a sail which perhaps was left out of the description, because it seemed so obvious) and so has racing under sail. Our sport has deep roots in our culture, and it's no surprise that yacht racing is so popular, even in a land with so little suitable water.

Sailing provides one with a rich variety of experiences, but racing is not the everthing. This struck me as I was watching the Junior Nationals recently. All those young little sailors being groomed to become Junior Elvstroms before their time. I was amazed at how young some of those yachtsmen are, being thrust into a highly competitve situation, racing in a fleet of 90 boats. I don't believe that all young minds are ready for that. It could be a damaging experience. You might think the same when you see the protestee dissolve into tears after being told he's out, for some infringement he can't understand or remember. Children should only get into racing when they want to. Racing should be fulfilling for themselves first, and Ma and Pa's egos come second.

Sailing should be, can be, FUN from the start. And enjoying racing will come, I believe, only after a solid grounding of messing about. Our best sailors and perennial champions were all bred in this way. Rick Nankin spent his early years bashing around Cape Town harbour in a gaff-rigged dinghy. Jean-Jacques Provoyeur only entered his first race after years of sailing. There's the story of John Martin stealing his fathers boat to go for a cruise on False Bay, in a howling South Easter. David Hudson spent his youth pottering around in a funny old boat that looked like a 20 foot Enterprise. It took about five of his little friends to ballast the boat in a breeze. A mishap occurred one day out on Durban bay, when the mast collapsed in a shower of cockroaches! Fun experience, fond memory. . . . . The point is, all these successful yachtsmen gained a kind of instinctive seamanship, before they ever entered a race, and its stood them in good stead.

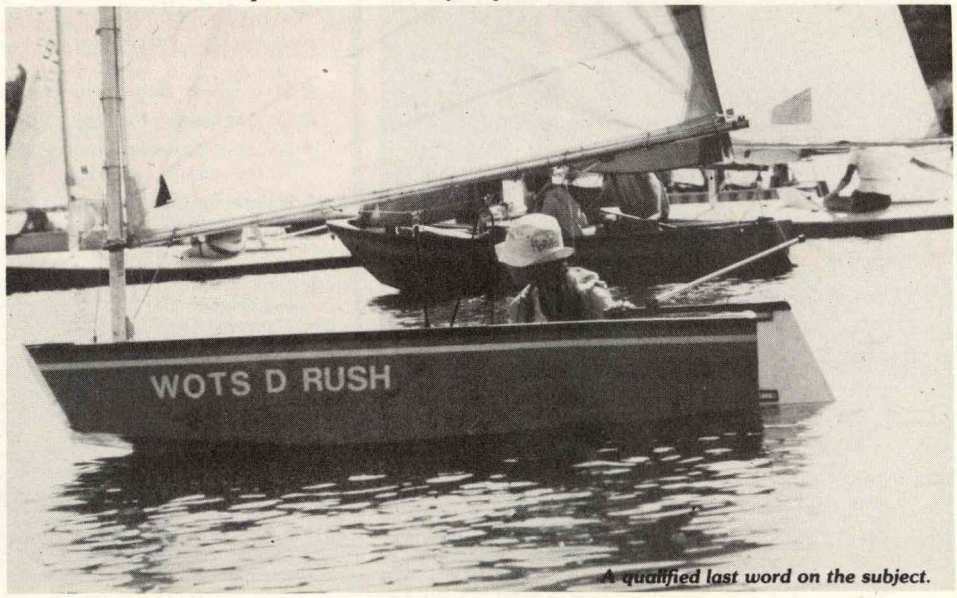
THE NEXT GENERATION

David Hudson's young son Roger is dead keen on sailboats, and everything that goes with them. So much so that he spends every spare moment sitting in the Fireball that's parked in the garage, sweating under an old cut-off wetsuit, sailing imaginary voyages. Although only four, Roger Hudson can steer a boat quite competently already, and having learnt in an atmosphere of calm confidence, has no nervousness or phobias. He's ready, you may say to start sailing his own Optimist, and sure enough that's what he wants more than anything. David is looking around for an old boat, preferably one that doesn't measure, because they're cheaper. Some people are horrified — "That means he won't be able to race the boat", but David is equally firm that Roger should have plenty of time just to potter about by himself. If he ever decides to race, well that's for him to decide. A new boat will have to be obtained, but that will only serve to remind Roger of its value. it will be something special.

As a child, I was an avid reader of the Arthur Ransome stories — Swallows and Amazons, Pigeon Post, Secret Water, Coot Club, I read the whole lot, and reconstructed similar (even imaginary) adventures for myself whenever I was near a boat or water. That sort of experience must not be bypassed by our future generation of champions — indeed I believe it will surely help them to become champions in the long run. Like they say, "Slowly, slowly catchee monkey" Remember that child prodigy who seemed so young to be winning all the races?? Chances are, he's not so visible now. Perhaps he never did get to discover all that sailing could offer him. The Arthur Ransome experience is closer to a childs psyche, and must come before the Ted Turner / Rodney Pattison /Paul Elvstrom trip.

Remember the time you and your shy new girlfriend took dads boat and went off for a solitary, heart-thumping picnic out of sight behind the trees on the headland?? And remember how in your excitement, you forgot all the utensils?? Remember the pride with which you brought the boat around head-to-wind to scrunch softly on the beach?? And how the wind died on the way back, and you had to row in the gathering dusk, and how you were enjoying it all in spite of the worried reception you were sure to get from the parents —???? Remember, it was a sailboat that took you both to that magical place . . . . .

Remember? Sure you do. So don't forget to allow your child the same, before he is exposed to the harsh world of recalls and rules, protests, postponements and finishing points.



A qualified last word on the subject.