

Keep Cruising in Light Air

By Carol Hasse, of Port Townsend Sails

Now is a wonderful time to be planning a sailing adventure. While working and heavy weather sails are critical for safety, comfort, and speed, light air sails are equally essential to a seaworthy sail inventory. There are many types of light air sails to choose from and a variety of tools and systems for setting, striking, and stowing them. But, not all light air sails are appropriate for every rig, vessel, or sailor. It's important to know which sail or sails will best serve our needs so they'll be used and enjoyed.

Most cruisers are familiar with asymmetric spinnakers, and many racers and cruisers have experience with classic spinnakers and code zeros. All of these sails are attached to the rig only at their three corners, but each is designed for specific points of sail.

The powerful spinnaker works best in 90°—180° wind angles and requires a pole for optimal performance. A sleeve/dousing sock can aid in handling this largest of all "light air

sails," when capable foredeck crew is not at the ready.

The asymmetric spinnaker (asym) is usually about 15% smaller than a spinnaker with a longer luff than leech and is designed to sail best in 60°—150° wind angles without a pole. While capable of sailing closer to the wind than a spinnaker, the camber of an asymmetric spinnaker precludes it from sailing to weather, and (like a spinnaker) it must be jibed in order to change tacks. Jibing requires more sea room and finesse than coming about, and sail handling tools such as a sleeve or a top-down furling system can be invaluable.

A top-down furler is composed of a halyard swivel that is raised aloft with the spinnaker halyard and a continuous line furling drum that is secured forward of the headstay to the bow or bowsprit. Tensioned between the halyard swivel and the tack drum is a free full-length anti-torsion rope or cable around which the asym is

furled. Top-down furlers can work well on a fractional rig, especially with a bowsprit forward of the headstay. The more common masthead rig often requires rig modifications to provide the necessary space for the smooth, chafe-free operation of a top-down furler. Fortunately, a well engineered sleeve such as that made by ATN is a seaworthy aid in handling an asymmetric or classic spinnaker with no need to retro-fit the rig or the sail.

Another category of light air sails consists of large, lightweight headsails shaped more like genoas than spinnakers. These sails run the gamut from nylon drifters and "ghosts" to laminate code zeros, which are referred to as "screechers" on multi-hulls. The square footage of these sails can be half that of a spinnaker, and their flatter shape enables them to work to weather and to tack through the eye of the wind. A sail of this type is the perfect complement to the powerful spinnaker or asym.

The code zero and its furler was first designed for Volvo ocean racing to fill the gap between the asym and the jib. Performing best in 45°—80° wind angles, the code zero is essentially a large, powerful genoa made of specifically engineered sailcloth, the shape stability of which enables it to go upwind fast in light air and in the increased apparent winds experienced on performance boats. Unlike the nylon sailcloth of spinnakers, asyms, and drifters, which can withstand sudden gusts and rough handling on the foredeck (including being stuffed in a sail bag), the laminated cloth used for a code zero must be furled and handled carefully.

A code zero furling system is similar to a top-down furler with a halyard swivel that is hoisted aloft (often on a two-part halyard) and a furling drum equipped with an endless loop furling line. Most commonly, a code zero is set forward of the headstay on the bow or bowsprit. When so rigged, this sail must be furled in order to tack through the eye of the wind. It furls around its own spectra or anti-torsion luff rope, which is sewn inside



Furling Drifter and light air mainsail; Hess 35 Falmouth Cutter; S/V "Moon Raven."

the sail's leading edge. This is a simpler and more failsafe type of furling system than the top-down furler, and it's one that can be used for furling any large, lightweight, overlapping headsail, including a modern drifter.

A drifter is a nylon sail with which many long-time cruisers are familiar. It is beloved for its ease of handling, its power, and its ability to move the boat in barely a breath of wind with minimal fuss or slatting. It also takes very little stowage space below. Before the advent of roller furling jibs and genoas, drifters were usually hanked-on sails. Now, a drifter is most often attached only at its three corners and can be more easily handled by using a sleeve or a code zero style furler. In winds under 10 knots apparent, the drifter's ability to sail close to the wind can bring pleasant days of sailing in our Northwest channels and a measure of safety when we need to work our way off a lee shore or into an anchorage under sail.

A drifter made of 2.2 ounce nylon sailcloth (originally engineered for storm spinnakers) ensures good windward performance in light air and great shape stability and strength in unexpected gusts. When reaching, the drifter can be carried in as much wind as is comfortable and will stay inflated longer than a genoa or jib when near

or in the lee of the mainsail.

A drifter can be set forward of the headstay, similar to an asym or code zero. Alternatively, a drifter can be set abaft the headstay by hoisting it from a spare jib halyard (led through a halyard restrainer) and attaching its tack pendant to a fitting that is roughly 12" abaft the headstay. Rigged in this manner, a drifter can come about like a jib or genoa, and it will be easier to set, jibe, and strike (especially with the aid of a sleeve or a code zero style furler). If the drifter is equipped with a furler, setting it abaft the headstay ensures room at the mast and deck for the halyard swivel and furling drum with minimal rig modifications.

The drifter is a capable upwind sail in light air, and it can be an excellent reaching sail in higher winds. When flown wing and wing with the genoa, their combined square footage can equal that of the asym. Sailing wing and wing with twin headsails is a cruiser's time-honored method of broad reaching and running. It can be accomplished with two poles or with one pole supporting one "twin" and the main boom positioned close to the aft lower lee shroud (with sheet, preventer, and vang) serving as a second pole. A block for the drifter sheet is hung on the after end of the boom; and the "twin" can be further trimmed with a "tweaker"—a small low-friction ring or block placed on the sheet with an adjustable lanyard led to the cap rail. The ability to partially furl twin headsails makes them remarkably versatile. When a roller furling genoa is used wing and wing with a drifter on a code zero furler, the size of both sails can be adjusted from the cockpit to match wind speeds and helm balance.

A cruising couple who recently completed a five-year circumnavigation



Asymmetric spinnaker; Kettensburg 40; S/V "Lady J."

aboard their Crealock 37 raved about the value of using their furling drifter and roller furling genoa wing and wing in the trade winds. Their twin headsails freed them from foredeck drills in changing conditions, including nighttime squalls, and gave them greater confidence, comfort, and control. They said, "Sailing with twins was like putting the boat on rails."

There is one more sail to consider for sailing in light wind—a free-flying, light air mainsail, which is set on the mast and boom when the working mainsail is struck. Because it is attached only at the head, tack, and clew, this sail can be more easily handled with a sleeve. This less common reaching and running light air mainsail can be of tremendous value in the doldrums:

Using classic or modern light air sails can add beauty, speed, and color to our local or bluewater adventures. We are blessed to be sailors in this day and age, enjoying cruising comforts, performance efficiencies, safety gear, and communication capabilities unimagined a few generations ago. And when the appropriate light air sails and their "aids to handling" are set in a "t'gallant breeze", our sailing skills and pleasure are enhanced beyond measure.

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Drifter with sleeve; Swan 411; S/V "Zoe."