

## Sailing with Big Spinnakers by Wendy Loat

Well, dare we say it? This is the very best rule change in the T-Bird fleet since the new rudder was introduced (thank you Peter Gilson for that one) and it sure put smiles on our faces this past weekend (thank you Vidas!).

Fleet 10 agreed prior to the start of the season to move to the bigger chutes now. As has been the case in the Seattle area, many of the J24 owners, happy to get their old spinnakers out of the basement, have thrown in the longer pole for free as they are moving to carbon fiber. Our first regatta of the season was this weekend past – May 28-29. We were all ready to go, and so out came the big chutes.

Looney Tunes had used the bigger sail a couple of times, and no one really believed me when I mentioned that I was surprised at how much more stable in waves the boat was with the bigger sail. (Perhaps we lost our credibility the evening we hooked it up wrong and flew it sideways). As it turns out, everyone experienced the extra stability for themselves on Saturday. The first race was sailed in about 8 knots with a leftover chop. The wind gradually increased, and was about 12-14 knots for the second race and 14-16 for the third race. Every one of us enjoyed the moment in the second race when we rounded very close together and were mixed in with the Etchells, who were on their second time around. All boats launched spinnakers, and then, well, nothing happened. Nothing. The Etchells could not get by us. They couldn't sail through our lee any more, and they had to go very high to get away from us. It was a beautiful thing. We were all smiling. They looked confused and grumpy. Our speeds were pretty well matched on that leg in those conditions.



Sunday the winds started out light – 6 – 8 knots. Then suddenly, as we approached the first weather mark of the third race, the wind shifted dramatically to the right. The leeward leg on the windward leeward course became a reach as the lead boats approached the dog leg mark. We launched our spinnakers, gybed (some of us sooner than others) and headed to the leeward gate on a reach which got tighter and in winds that became very heavy very quickly. Yes, our booms were in the water and the poles were definitely bending around the forestay when we doused as we were now on a close-hauled course in about 25 knots of wind. What was interesting was that none of us rounded up. The weather helm was less due to the bigger headsail, even though we were all over on our ear.

These kites were the talk of the fleet. But, as T-Birders, we learned we must do a few things differently. So, here are the points we learned this weekend:

As the spinnakers are bigger, they take a few seconds longer to douse. All of us got caught unprepared at the leeward mark on at least one occasion during the regatta. Better be starting the douse at least a boat length sooner than before from the mark in a breeze.

The pole may well need bridles – at least if you are planning to do much reaching in a breeze with them. Mind you, we were all caught off guard so quickly we didn't really have time to get the poles back off the forestay. Although we all saw our poles bend, no one had one break.

These bigger spinnakers create a much bigger wind shadow. You cannot afford to stay underneath a competitor at all or they will be overhauling you in no time.

It is hard to recognize your competitors downwind. We all had old sails with J24 numbers and different colours than we were used to seeing. We all found it totally weird not knowing who was whom downwind. The Race Committee had to ask us what our numbers were after Saturday, and most of us had to go and look at the sail to find out. Oops.

It was fun! I have never seen so many big smiles on all of us as there were on Saturday following the racing. And while some may think that we are biased because, as Vidas has mentioned, he was encouraged to proceed after meeting with the members of Fleet 10 in Toronto, I can assure you that you will love the boat's performance downwind, even with an ancient and worn out J24 spinnaker.

It was a great weekend to be racing here in Toronto. Sunshine, good breeze, the occasional line squall, free beer and a bottle of rum to the victor. What a great way to start the season!

Top three finishers:

1. Looney Tunes – Wendy Loat/Nick Bailey
2. Full On – Drew Robertson
3. One Too Many – Chris Reil