Safety Officer Report 2026

Doug Reid, Safety Officer

Two basics keep a passage safe: prepare a safe boat, and sail it safely. This season's lessons centre on fast downwind sailing and protective headgear.

Introduction

As my first year as Safety Officer, this is kept concise and hopefully useful to members to think about Safety, and to put simple things into practice.

With a hundred plus pro's zooming off across the Atlantic after today's Route du Rhum start on the world's most advanced offshore machines, and with the sun out in Cornwall in soft Autumn conditions, it seems to have been another successful year packed with cruising and racing for the rest of us. Albeit this is from a slightly biased viewpoint of the South coast of England, the English Channel, and around Plymouth and the Solent.

This season hasn't been without its events and 'near misses' afloat. For example for us on trimaran Trying, whilst 15 miles from shore on another lovely sunny breezy day back in early July (remember that heatwave?), a steering sheave failed under load (we were doing 14kts downwind) and the boat rounded up uncontrollably. Had the now-rudderless helm not been quick to dump the sheet and somehow collapse the large asymmetric spinnaker without breaking anything, whilst down below all the contents spilled across the boat with disconcerting crashing noises, we could have been in for much worse. What I learned in that moment (and that evening over rum once safely moored in Poole harbour) was that attempting going downwind fast is hazardous and things can happen quickly. Sure we got away with it, but next time do things differently, like slow the boat down, change down sails sooner, incurring the time & work penalty in the interests of control & ultimately safety. We've done so since. We are also reinforcing the whole steering system this winter. This was just one moment, on one boat, whilst delivering, not even whilst racing, in relatively clement conditions. Most near misses go unreported but they are best for learning the 'easy way'.

As such there are two main elements of Safety in sailing offered here:

1. prepare a safe boat
2. sail it safely

Both are required to ensure consistent safe passage making. Future articles/reports can explore this more deeply. The list is long: tenders, tethers, lifejackets, e-stops, batteries, storm sails, fires, capsize, anchoring, clothing, tiredness etc etc!

Protective head gear whilst sailing

One topic that's come up a lot this season is use of protective head gear. Although I don't believe it is currently mandated (nor even officially recommended) in rulesets or SIs, head injuries remain unfortunately too common, and wearing of headgear is an increasingly normal safety functional way to mitigate a bad thing happening. Atop the benefits of protecting against sun exposure in the day and getting cold at night, impact protection is a feature built into more and more products:

Bumpcaps are now integrated into peak-caps and all-round sun-hats. Also, rugby-style scrum-caps are seen more and more afloat (they keep your ears warm too); better still are full-on extreme sports helmets which are generally super-light and favoured by the professional foiling race yacht teams we see on TV and online. All can have chin straps so they don't blow away. Increasingly the pro's use this sort of headgear (combined with crew comms if that's what you need) to protect themselves and so can everyone else.



Protective headgear: peak-cap with bump cap, scrum cap, extreme sports helmet

In discussions with sailors throughout the year the point was made that prevention is better than cure and yes – bringing it back to the example at the start of this report – sailing downwind is hazardous, and things like a boom preventer line will indeed prevent boom swing should an unexpected gybe occur. Either way, better safe than sorry.

Feedback and data

- Visit the World Sailing proposals portal to view the latest change proposals (and submit your own).
- The extant World Sailing Offshore Special Regulations (OSR) 2026–2027 (see Mu4 – Mu0 depending on what event you're planning).

Further reading

The Cruising Club of America has just published a Report of the Yacht-to-Yacht Crew Rescue Review Team (October 2026). This is the result of an extensive study into 28 incidents drawing on a wealth of knowledge from highly experienced sailors across cruising and racing communities. It includes for example Pete Goss's famous rescue of Raphael Dinelli during the 1996 Vendee Globe race. Key insights include decision making, effective communication for location and status, rescue vessel response preparations, boat abandonment, as well as post-rescue issues. The full report is available here: CCA Report of Yacht-to-Yacht Rescues (63 pages).

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