

J/World students build their performance-sailing skills on one-design J/Boats.

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San Juan Sailing School.

Only 377 of the 700-plus respondents completed the poll, and the number of reviews each school received varied greatly: OCSC had the overwhelming majority with 147 graduates responding. The other top-eight schools had many fewer reviews, ranging from 14 (Colgate) to six (San Juan). The groups of responding grads were not large enough to be statistically significant. This—and the fact the responses are subjective to each respondent’s experience—made it impossible to fairly rank the schools based on the poll, so readers should consider this report an overview and use it accordingly in any sailing school search. The responses do offer some insight into what can be expected of a specific school and what should be considered in the selection process.

Poll-takers were asked which type of sailing school they were interested in, where they would want to attend a school, what they viewed as the most important characteristic of a school (boat/equipment quality, staff experience and instruction quality, school locations, or cost), and which courses they had previously taken. The readers also were given space to comment on the school(s) they had attended (see “Reader Comments” on page 11 for the top eight schools and see the online version of this article for others) and were asked to rate the staff, equipment, and instruction quality of the school.

The majority of the reader responses was positive, as evidenced by the Reader Comments on page 11 and the Overall Satisfaction ratings shown on page 13. Again, these ratings are based on a small poll group and should be considered only a sampling of graduates’ experiences.

PS also looked at each school’s location(s), price, and course offerings, the type of boats used, the number of



The Scoop on Schools

PS engages readers and industry experts to learn the best way to select a sailing school.

It seems there are nearly as many reasons to attend a sailing school as there are schools. Some sailors take classes to improve their basic skills, to prepare for cruising life or a race, to work on man-overboard techniques, or to get ready for a charter vacation. Others simply want to learn to sail.

With hundreds of sailing schools throughout the United States—offering courses ranging from one-hour beginner lessons to weeklong offshore adventures—it’s hard to know which school to enroll in. Our own experience has been that trying to sort through them all to find the best one to meet your needs—and stay within your budget—can be overwhelming.

In past issues, *Practical Sailor* has rated the top sailing schools, based on research and graduate feedback. With the last report being published in the Aug. 15, 1999 issue, we decided it was time to re-visit the topic. We wanted to get the scoop from sailing school grads on their experiences and hear from in-

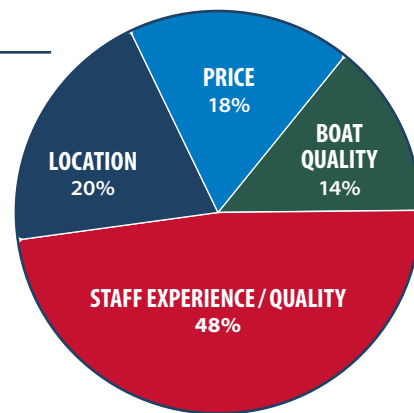
dustry professionals to determine what criteria prospective students should pay attention to when selecting a school.

To that end, *Practical Sailor* recently polled readers on courses they had attended, interviewed representatives from several schools, and talked with the schools’ affiliate certifying associations.

THE POLL/RATINGS

The poll—with 14 questions and about 700 respondents—yielded a ton of information on dozens of schools. While we unfortunately can’t report on each one in-depth, you will find on www.practical-sailor.com a list of and links to all those mentioned in the poll. For this review, however, we’ve narrowed the field to the eight schools that had the most graduates respond to the poll: the Annapolis Sailing School, J/World, Colgate Offshore Sailing School, the Olympic Circle Sailing Club (OCSC), New Jersey Sailing School, Blue Water Sailing School, Club Nautique, and the

PS asked readers and sail school grads what they thought was the most important factor to consider when selecting a school. The majority of the 529 respondents who answered the question said it was staff experience and instruction quality.



years the school has been in business, the number of students the school teaches each year, the number of instructors, and the student-teacher ratio. We also noted whether the schools' instructors are licensed by the U.S. Coast Guard and/or certified by the American Sailing Association (ASA) or US Sailing, the two certifying bodies for U.S. sailing schools.

CHOOSING A SCHOOL

So you've decided to take some courses to beef up your skills—how do you go about finding the right school? Before you begin researching schools, you first should decide what you're looking to get out of the class, what your learning timeframe is, what location matches your goals and time, and what your budget is.

According to ASA Executive Director Charlie Nobles, the trick to school selection is not trying to avoid a bad school but finding one that matches your goals and timeframe. If you're short on time, focus your search on combination classes and destination courses, which usually offer several certifications in an accelerated format. Those not in a hurry, Nobles advised, should take courses one level at a time and practice in between courses to really hone their skills. This is the ideal approach, especially for beginners, Nobles said: "First learn to sail, then go for the stickers."

Once you've set your search parameters and narrowed the possibilities to a few schools, there are some important factors to consider and questions to ask. Take a look at the staff's experience level, instruction quality, and the quality of the teaching equipment, including boats. The best schools, above all else, have good instructors and quality instruction.

"The quality of instructors is the key to the success of a sailing program," explained Annapolis Sailing School Operations Manager Jason Pinter.

The other factors are important—teaching vessels must be maintained to ensure student safety, the locale should be convenient and offer good sailing conditions, and the cost must fit your budget—but none of that will matter if the instructors aren't effective or the course doesn't provide the learning you're looking for.

Nobles suggested checking out websites for graduates' feedback on their experiences and questioning the schools on how much helm time students will get, how large the classes are, how much practice time students get, and whether instructor references are available. The size of the teaching boats is important as well: If your main goal is getting used to a bigger boat ahead of chartering, then be sure to check out schools with large-boat fleets that offer those certifications, but if you're wanting to get a better grasp on sailing techniques, try out classes aboard smaller boats.

Also, if you're looking into ASA- or USS-certified schools, ask what standards will be taught in a specific class. Both associations certify schools based on specific teaching criteria and the school's must meet specific standards in their curriculum. According to Nobles, the ASA and US Sailing standards are very similar; one is not inherently bet-

ter than the other. The ASA program is more focused on the lifestyle aspect of sailing, he said, while many US Sailing schools focus more on performance and competitive sailing.

Deciding which school to enroll in should be based on the school's attributes, its instructors, and its course offerings rather than what affiliate program it's certified through.

ANNAPOLIS SAILING SCHOOL

The Annapolis Sailing School (ASS) opened in 1959, at a time when there were very few organized sailing schools afloat. Fifty-one years later, the school's bread and butter clients are weekend, learn-to-sail students, generally from the mid-Atlantic area, who are looking for a relaxed, low-key atmosphere to learn in.

The school uses what it calls "The Annapolis Way," a hands-on, kinesthetic approach that focuses on onboard instruction, and students are generally on the water within 60 minutes of starting a course. Courses are taught aboard Rainbow 24s and Hunter 36s by the school's 25 sailing instructors. Instructors are ASA or ASA-affiliate certified, and those teaching aboard the Hunter

Photo courtesy of Annapolis Sailing School



The Annapolis Sailing School keeps class sizes small, with a maximum of four students per instructor.



J/World students spend the majority of their class time on the water: six hours each day, with only one hour in the classroom.

36s also hold Coast Guard captain's licenses.

Annapolis Sailing School, which offers beginner, intermediate, and advanced courses, has a student-teacher ratio of 4 to 1. Teaching an average 3,000 students per year, the school's most popular course is Sailing 102, an intro-to-sailing, two-day class offered on weekends aboard Rainbow 24s. It costs \$495/per person, which includes textbooks. Other courses offered include a \$700, beginner three-day course, advanced courses, and coastal navigation.

The majority of *PS's* poll-takers who attended the ASS took the basic cruising and basic sailing courses and rated the school Excellent for staff experience and Good for instructional materials and instruction quality. This put it below the top-ranked schools in this poll category. The school's facilities and boat quality earned an average Good rating. The majority—four out of seven—of the ASS grads who responded to the poll rated their overall experience at the school as Excellent.

Sailors can get all of their ASA certifications at the school, and in the winter, there are seminars and courses on first-mate skills, seamanship, navigation, and piloting. The main campus in Annapolis operates seasonally from April through November, and the Tampa Bay location operates year-round.

J/WORLD

J/World, the Performance Sailing School, has been in the business for 29

years. Its focus is courses for sailors who want to fine-tune their skills with an emphasis on performance, whether learning to sail, cruise, or race.

"These courses are for sailors of all levels who believe there is something else you could learn, every day," explained J/World's John Alofsin.

Perhaps because of *Practical Sailor* readers' demographics—generally well above beginner sailors—J/World is always popular among our reader poll respondents; it has done well in our past sailing school reviews, ranking at the top in the August 1999 review.

The US Sailing-affiliated school uses J/Boats—the J/80, J/24, J/105, and J/120—as the platforms for its courses, and offers instruction in six locations, all well-known as sailing havens: San Francisco; Puerto Vallarta, Mexico; Annapolis, Md.; Key West, Fla.; Newport, R.I.; and San Diego.

The respondents in *PS's* poll were split 50-50 in their ratings of the school's boats and equipment, with half giving Excellent ratings and the others Good. However, most rated the locations' sailing conditions Excellent.

Alofsin said that one driving force in the sail-school industry is clients preparing for a bareboat charter, those who want to get their sailing to a level where they feel comfortable chartering a boat. "We offer that, and we branch out well from there."

J/World offers learn to sail, cruising, and racing courses in both weekend and midweek formats; costs range

from \$495 for a weekend class to \$995 for a five-day course. J/World also offers multi-day live-aboard cruising classes, which range in price starting at about \$2,000 per person.

Depending on season and course demand, the school has 20 to 35 instructors who are US Sailing-certified and carry a USCG captain's license. Like many schools, J/World operates on the belief that the instructors are the key to a good program. They spend an extensive period as "students," sharpening their observation and listening skills, while learning J/World's teaching method.

Nine out of 10 poll-takers gave J/World an Excellent for staff experience, but only 67 percent rated instruction quality as highly. However, eight out of the 10 gave J/World an Excellent for overall satisfaction.

"The ability to teach as well as a passion for sharing the joy of sailing is a prerequisite for all J/World instructors," Alofsin said.

COLGATE OFFSHORE SAILING SCHOOL

Steve and Doris Colgate's Offshore Sailing School has carved out a niche as a sailing vacation destination, with couples and families committing their vacation time to learning and building sailing skills. Headquartered in Fort Myers, Fla., with seven locations—three in Florida, two in New York, one on Chesapeake Bay, and one in the British Virgin Islands—the school has graduated approximately 3,000 students each year since it opened in 1964.

Colgate Offshore offers 19 courses, including Fast Track to Cruising, private family courses, bareboat cruising preparation and certification, a live-aboard course, and stay-ashore courses. There are three-day learn-to-sail courses, seven-day race training courses on the Colgate 26, and one-day sailing lessons. The most popular course is Fast Track to Cruising, a one-week curriculum that offers students US Sailing certification for bareboat cruising and big-boat sailing.

Most classes are offered as vacation-style packages, with lodging included. Prices vary, but to give you an idea of cost: A five-day Learn to Sail class

CLUB NAUTIQUE: “The staff, the boats and the instructors are top notch.”

- “One major problem is that one instructor teaches a procedure one way, and in the next class, students get chewed out by another instructor for performing the ‘wrong’ procedure (but it’s the one they were taught).”

BLUE WATER SAILING SCHOOL: “Excellent program. A big ‘plus’ is the fact that you live aboard the boats for the week.”

COLGATE OFFSHORE SAILING SCHOOL: “Fantastic experience with a fun instructor and awesome location.” (BVI)

- “All of the resort fees and sailing fees should be included in the upfront pricing.”

J/WORLD: “Conditions were hairy (25-30 knots) but

made for challenging experience. Highly recommended for the serious student.” (San Francisco/Oakland)

- “The quality of the education was as good as it could possibly be.” (Newport and Key West)

NEW JERSEY SAILING SCHOOL: “The instructors were great; it’s just the equipment and boats were not in good shape.”

OLYMPIC CIRCLE SAILING CLUB: “The location is a bit intimidating for some beginners, but the instruction is excellent and gets you over any anxiety you might have.”

ANNAPOLIS SAILING SCHOOL: “Great people and captains with a high level of experience.”

- “Would like to see older instructors instead of know-it-all teenagers.”

package in Fort Myers ranges from \$1,695-\$2,100, including lodging in an oceanfront studio; the same class in a more intense three-day format ranges from \$1,495 to \$1,795; and a seven-day Fast Track to Cruising class with bareboat cruising prep runs about \$2,995 to \$4,100, with tuition and accommodations ashore. The cruising class can be done as a live-aboard for a similar price. And then there’s the popular kids pricing: With two paying adults, kids and teens learn free.

According to Doris Colgate, chief executive officer and school president, Offshore is developing an online “school” for students to get endorsements for advanced courses.

The Offshore fleet comprised only Olympic Class Solings until 1996, when Steve Colgate helped develop the Colgate 26. Now, the Colgate 26 is used exclusively as the training boat for the school’s learn to sail, performance sailing, and racing courses. It also is used for the first two days of Fast Track to Cruising; then students move up to a 42- to 49-foot monohull or catamaran. Thirteen out of 14 poll-takers who attended Offshore rated the boats and

equipment Good or better, with nine giving them Excellents.

Offshore assigns no more than four students per instructor; for the coastal passagemaking and offshore passagemaking courses, there are six total students and two instructors. The school’s 16 instructors are US Sailing certified and hold USCG captain’s licenses. They also must be certified by Steve Colgate, who describes them as individuals with true teaching skills, keen sailing knowledge, and vast cruising and racing experience.

The Offshore school has a long track record of happy customers, many of whom have written glowing reports to *Practical Sailor*. In the recent survey, 12 of 14 polled grads rated the staff and instruction quality as Excellent, and 10 of 13 rated the overall experience Excellent.

OLYMPIC CIRCLE SAILING CLUB

The Olympic Circle Sailing Club, known as OCSC, started at the Berkeley Marina on San Francisco Bay 31 years ago and is now the largest single-location sailing school on the West Coast. OCSC’s 6-acre campus hosts approximately 1,000 new students per year and houses the active OCSC Sailing Club.

Strong, consistent winds on San Francisco Bay provide OCSC students with challenging conditions for their coursework in performance sailing. “All sailing schools have their advantages. Our’s is San Francisco Bay,” said Tony Sandberg, OCSC founder and president. “Try setting the asymmetrical spinnaker here in 25 knots.”

Judging by the 147 OCSC grads who responded to our poll, the location and conditions are ideal for learning: All of the respondents rated them Good or

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Olympic Circle Sailing Club classes are taught on San Francisco Bay, which grads reported to be an ideal setting for challenging your skills and building confidence.





better, and 136 rated the locale Excellent.

OCSC's core US Sailing certification courses are basic keelboat, basic cruising, and bareboat cruising (big boat skipper certification). OCSC also offers advanced certification courses in coastal navigation, coastal passagemaking, celestial navigation, and offshore passagemaking. Specialized courses in performance sailing and crew courses are popular, and OCSC has specific programs for women and team building.

To be sure students select the course that's right for them, Sandberg suggests they call the school manager to discuss options or go in and take a three-hour on-the-water review course to see where they should be placed.

The OCSC courses are held onboard a fleet of 50 boats that range in size from 24 to 82 feet. The majority of *PS*'s poll respondents (96 out of 147) gave the boats and equipment Excellent ratings; only four rated them Fair.

OCSC course prices vary but all are based on retail and club member pricing. For instance, the five-day Learn to Sail course costs \$746 for club members or \$995 for non-members.

The school currently has 45 instructors, all of whom have a Coast Guard captain's license and US Sailing certification. According to OCSC, instructors join the team only after a rigorous selection process that sees about one in every 10 candidates hired.

"They've each been carefully screened for outstanding seamanship and communication skills, and when each new instructor joins our team, they go through OCSC's Teach the Teacher pro-

gram," said CEO Rich Jepsen. "A big part of what they do, on the water and off, is inspire confidence."

OCSC's screening and instructor training are apparently paying off, according to the grads who answered the poll. All of them rated the staff Good or better, and 136 said the instructors were Excellent. All but 11 of the respondents rated the instruction quality Excellent, and 129 of the 147 rated the overall experience Excellent.

OCSC doesn't advertise; business is simply word of mouth. "Friends tell friends. Friends take friends sailing," Sandberg explained.

NEW JERSEY SAILING SCHOOL

Opened in 1973 and based in Point Pleasant, N.J., the New Jersey Sailing School offers classes and excursions out of several New Jersey and New York locations. Students can take basic sailing on Pearson 26s and coastal bareboat courses on 30- to 35-foot Pearsons and O'days. The school also uses Cal 22s. A basic sailing two-day course at the New Jersey school is \$359. A four-day basic coastal cruising course costs \$664.

Eleven New Jersey school grads responded to our poll; most of them had taken the beginner and basic keelboat courses. Seven rated the school's boats and equipment as Good, and the majority rated the locale and conditions Good or better.

The school draws mainly from the New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania regions.

"Our students range in age from 15 to 70 years old," explained owner and

California-based Club Nautique is known for its offshore program. Its classes are guaranteed, so if a student doesn't pass, he can repeat the class for free.

manager Stephen Dinklage. "Some are looking for a new adventure, and some are looking to perfect skills. We try to get a feel for the student's expectations and cater to the goals they are shooting for."

Dinklage, who has been with the company for 25 years, recently took the reins at the school when longtime owner, Mike Landers, passed away. Dinklage plans to continue with many of the school's current programs, but he is also working on revitalizing and expanding the company, he said. The school's boats are being refurbished, and additional programs, along with an updated website, are being added.

The New Jersey school employs 10 to 15 instructors who are Coast Guard-licensed and ASA certified. Classes have no more than four students per instructor. The grads who answered the *PS* poll liked the school's small class size, and 10 of the 11 rated instruction quality and staff experience Excellent. All but one rated the overall experience Good or better.

BLUE WATER SAILING SCHOOL

The ASA-affiliated Blue Water Sailing School, based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., has been in business for 21 years and has been named ASA School of the Year several times. Blue Water, a top-rated sailing school in past *Practical Sailor* reviews, has four locations: Fort Lauderdale; St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands; Newport; and the Bahamas.

Course offerings include basic sailing and cruising, along with advanced cruising, passagemaking, and navigation. The school caters to two categories of students: those who want to learn to sail and then charter a boat and those who want to cruise full-time. Members of the latter group generally take several levels of courses at Blue Water, explained owner-manager David Pyle.

The school's weeklong courses are live-aboard cruises, mooring at a different location every night. Beginning and intermediate courses sail from Fort

The PS poll on sailing schools asked graduates to rate their overall experience. The results, at right, are the average of the ratings. The number of respondents per school varied greatly and the sampling size was small, making it impossible to draw any firm conclusion as to which schools are better than others.

Lauderdale to the Florida Keys, while advanced courses cross the Gulf Stream to the Bahamas, and offshore courses make a passage to Bermuda or a destination in the Bahamas or the Caribbean. Classes are taught aboard 40- to 50-foot Bene-teaus and Lagoon catamarans.

Eight Blue Water grads responded to the PS poll; all of them rated the instruction quality and equipment as Good or better. Six said the instruction was Excellent.

Blue Water has 12 instructors, most of whom have been with the company for years, and all hold Coast Guard captain's licenses and ASA instructor certification.

"Our instructors are teaching, sailing, and living with the group for a week," Pyle explained. "They have to be unique individuals to live with students, to teach them, and to socialize with them."

Most of the eight poll respondents (five) rated the Blue Water staff's experience as Excellent, and seven rated the overall experience as Excellent.

A one-week, live-aboard cruising course, from Fort Lauderdale to the Florida Keys and back, costs \$1,895. The same course is offered out of St. Thomas and Newport for the same all-inclusive price, which covers accommodations (the boat), instructor, provisions, running expenses, books, certification fees, and sales tax.

CLUB NAUTIQUE

Club Nautique is a San Francisco Bay-based sailing school with locations in Alameda and Sausalito, Calif. In business since 1980, Club Nautique specializes in certifying intermediate and advanced level students in coastal and offshore passagemaking, but the school offers many levels of instruction on both sailboats and powerboats. Students also can join the club for services, boat rentals, and chartering.

The US Sailing-affiliated Club Nautique has a fleet of 50 boats that range

in size from 26 to 50 feet. All instructors are Coast Guard certified and have extensive sailing experience. The school offers a basic cruising skipper's package (basic keelboat and basic cruising combined) that runs 8½ days with 67 hours of instruction for \$1,295.

According to Don Durrant, Club Nautique president, most CN students complete at least up to US Sailing bareboat level (Basic Keelboat, Basic Cruising, and Bareboat Charter). The school graduated more than 800 students in the last year.

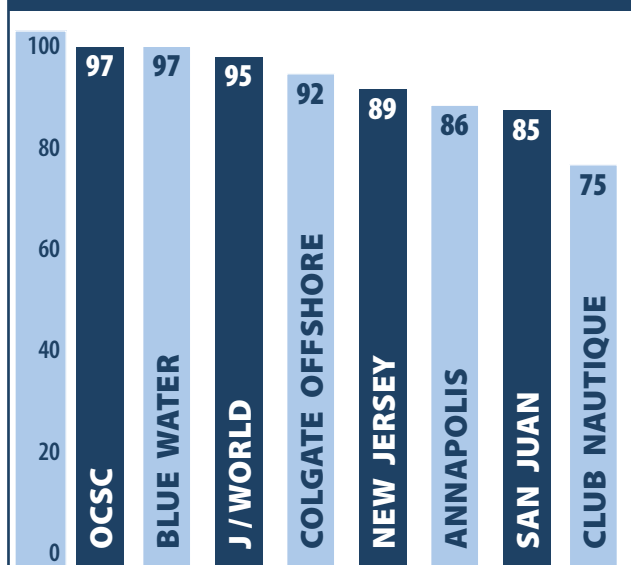
Eight poll respondents listed Club Nautique as their marine alma mater, and they gave the school some mixed reviews. The majority (five) rated both the staff experience and instruction quality Excellent, but two rated both Poor. All rated the equipment Good or better, and all gave Excellent ratings for the San Francisco Bay sailing conditions/location. Four of the eight students rated their overall experience as Excellent, two Good, and two Poor.

SAN JUAN SAILING SCHOOL

When you hear of the San Juan Sailing School, think Seattle, not Puerto Rico. The school is based in Bellingham, Wash., in the San Juan Islands of the Pacific Northwest. Specializing in learning vacations in the San Juan and Canadian Gulf islands for 28 years, the family-owned school also offers weekend courses, basic coastal cruising courses, bareboat chartering, cruising catamaran classes, and docking classes. The teaching vessels range from 30 to 49 feet.

Courses include a Desolation Sound advanced coastal Learn-n-Cruise course that takes you one-way through the Desolation Sound area, allowing you plenty of time to explore the region. The course

OVERALL SATISFACTION RATINGS



qualifies students for ASA Advanced Coastal Cruising certification. The week is priced "by the stateroom" at \$1,400 per stateroom, or double berth, so the cost would be \$700 per person for a couple.

The San Juan school is a smaller institution that claims, "We've never tried to be the biggest, but we work hard to be the best." It keeps teacher-student ratios to three or four students per instructor per boat.

Given the small size of the school, it's no surprise that only five poll respondents listed the San Juan school. But all five gave it high marks: Four rated the staff as Excellent, all rated instruction quality as top-notch, and all gave the boats and equipment Good or better ratings. Of the five, two said their overall experience was Excellent, and three rated it Good.

CONCLUSION

If you're looking to boost your sailing know-how with some on-the-water education, the data we've gathered will give you a good idea of what's available, what others have to say about it, and which schools match your needs and goals.

While most of the schools we reviewed welcome all types of sailing students, most cater to specific groups or specialize in a particular education niche. For instance, if you're a racing sailor or are looking for a performance-oriented course, OCSC or J/World likely would best suit your needs.

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