

Picnic Cat Capsize Stories

Capsize Story #1

I had a capsize New Year's Day last year. I was sailing in constant 13-knot winds with full sail, regular conditions for Bonaire in the Caribbean. A strong, sudden gust of wind hit us while on a close reach, I would guess 20+ knots. It was at the end of the sail and I wasn't as alert as I should have been. By the time I could grab the main sheet, I saw the mast about to enter the water. It was a knockdown of fast proportions.

I was sailing with a friend with no sailing experience. Fortunately, he could swim. We were in 400 feet deep water. The boat had turned 180 degrees, mast straight down. I dived under, released the main sheet, pulled the sail "down", and tried to tie it around the boom with the sheet as best as I could. Then I swam back up and tried to get to the centerboard to pull it up and attempt to right the boat. The hull was slick from growth, but I finally reached the board--could not pull it up. My friend was just treading water, not really knowing how to help and slightly shocked.

I flagged down a rental power boat. They threw me a line that I tied on the port midship cleat and tossed the line over the hull. I instructed the boat to slowly pull away. The PC righted itself, I hopped in, but the power boat continued to pull after my boat was righted and it capsized once again. By this time, the PC had taken in a lot of water below the hatches and only the bow was above water. I knew if I didn't do something fast, I was going to lose her. I asked the power boat for the line again and tied it on the bow foredeck cleat. My friend and I got in the power boat and they towed the PC to shore, about a 10-15 min tense ride.

Once in shallow water, my friend and marine park ranger, Dean, came to the rescue. He righted the boat from underwater. We moved it with two dingies to the shallows. Five people steadied the PC while I got in and baled. Long story short, we emptied the boat and got it back on the mooring.

I've sailed my PC a hundred times since this bad day in winds ranging from 12-20 knots. I ALWAYS have the mainsheet in hand. I have installed foam blocks from the back edges of the side hatches to the stern. I have put sealing on all the hatches so that water will be slowed entering. I attached a waterproof emergency bag on the inside of the cockpit with distress mirror, whistle, and cell phone. I love my PC but factory-installed flotation is nonexistent. Mine has it now and I sail it 4-5 times per week with confidence and a big smile.

Fair winds,

Patrick Holian
Kontentu PC 285
Dutch Caribbean

Patrick,

Thanks for this story. I find it a cautionary tale, and quite sobering. The other two capsizes I had heard of were eased on incompetence due to lack of experience and unusual conditions. But you are an accomplished sailor, and 13+, gusting 20+ is common here.

Do you remember how much board you had down? I am actually quite shocked that the boat did not round into the wind fast enough to spill the air. But more board could 'trip' the boat, and less board would mean rounding up more slowly, I guess.

You said that the boat was inverted, after she re-capsized after you got it up once because it was swamped. She then floated only by the air trapped in the bow? Did you and/or your crew have on, or put on life jackets?

You were then able to get her towed to shallow water 10-15 minutes inverted? Amazing!

I am going to have to think about some stern flotation. We use all the below hatches area except the rather large area aft of the hatches, so that is a good spot. How did you install the foam blocks??

Roger Shoemaker
Katty Bay
PC 123
Cape Cod

Roger,

I may have understated the severity of the gust that capsized my boat. It was immediate. With mainsheet in hand, I may have gotten the line out of the jam cleat on time, but the gust was very sudden. I had my back to the wind at the time so I didn't see the wind's print on the water as it came across the sea. I usually anticipate the puffs and at these times, have the mainsheet out of the jam cleat, ready to release it if necessary.

Yes, the centerboard was fully down as you thought. And yes, the boat usually does tend to round up even with the board down. But again, the suddenness of this gust was unusual and so was its velocity. The blast was like a mini weather cell.

After the knockdown and the re-capsize, the boat did stay afloat with only the air trapped

in the bow. That was in spite of a 4hp Tohatsu lashed to the stern. But I felt that was a temporary situation at best. If the boat had turtled again at that awkward angle (about 60 degrees), it would have taken on more water and that probably would have sunk her. BTW, when we did get the boat to the coast, I dropped the motor underwater to the soft sand on recommendation of my friend, Dean. It is better to keep the motor submerged in salt water rather than take it into the air and wait for repair. Within an hour, a motor expert hauled the Tohatsu out and immediately began to flush it out with fresh water and then recondition it. \$100 later, he had it running and it still powers my boat today, albeit infrequently. I usually sail on and off my mooring.

I always carry life vests on board but few choose to wear them including myself. Our water temperature is never below 80 degrees and we probably get too down island casual about these things. I do, however, have USCG approved seat cushions with arm straps. They were floating about during the madness and I think my friend on the boat may have grabbed one of them. I, however, was too busy trying to save the boat, I must say it was a bit scary when I was underwater trying to tie up the sail when the PC was turtled. You can easily get caught in the stays and halyards suspended about. I was extremely aware of this and avoided getting tangled. It helped that the water here is gin clear with about 100-foot visibility. One other note--my emergency bag was not tied to the boat (it is every time now). The waterproof bag floated away and landed on our offshore island, Klein Bonaire. I know this because a man called me a month later on my phone. He was walking the beach of the island and found the bag. That bought him a day use of my kayak, which he just used the other day.

For stern flotation, I went to our local appliance store and talked to Sammy, the warehouse manager. Over the course of two weeks, he saved foam blocks used for protective packaging of fridges, washers etc. The foam is usually just thrown out. I cut the foam in lengths about 3-feet long (they were approximately 3"x3" or so) and put them in horizontally on top of each other from the back edges of hatches to the stern. Once full, I used small pieces and jammed them into any airspace that I could see. Then I crafted a bulkhead out of 1" thick foam and used that as a vertical cap to cover the rather ugly ends of the foam strips stuffed below. I fixed that in place with spray foam around the perimeter. Later, I gave Sammy and his wife a day of fishing aboard my PC. They are enthusiastic fishers, not sailors, but greatly enjoyed the boat even though they didn't catch anything.

In closing, there was a rough start to 2010. But in a month, I had the PC back in the water, got back on the horse, and started sailing again. I changed a number of things on the boat as mentioned and never let my guard down just in case that "rouge wind" reappears. Along the way, I met some great people who all generously helped me get the PC back on the water. Now it's back to the pleasures of catboat sailing. We sail this morning to Klein Bonaire for some snorkeling and a picnic. Life is good.

Patrick Holian
Kontentu PC 285
Dutch Caribbean

Capsize Story #2

My second boat was a Picnic Cat and I was a new guy with low experience. I loved the boat but San Francisco Bay was too much for me, and I capsized when furling the sail in 12 to 15 knot winds. Fortunately, I was just outside the marina and Vessel Assist was there in less than ten minutes. That water was cold! I thought about it, decided it was primarily operator error, and upgraded to a Sun Cat. That was eleven years ago and I like to think that I could handle it now.

I highly recommend the boat, with its excellent construction, ease of rigging and launching, and gentle manners. Just remember, it is a 14 foot boat.

Roger Shoemaker asked for additional details:

At the time, I had a long conversation, think debrief, with Gale Stockdale, our local trailer sailor guru. As best I can reconstruct, I headed into the wind, locked the mainsheet, and went forward to douse the sail. We got caught in a gust of wind and went over, because of the locked mainsheet. My bad, not the boat.

Live and learn.

Capsize Story #3

On Mar 13, 2011, at 7:46 PM, Roger Shoemaker wrote:

I seem to remember another story of a tangled sheet/ jibe capsize, but am unable to search the archives. Anybody remember?

Roger
Katty Bay
PC 123
Cape Cod

Here's the story, Roger. The original poster's name has been 86'd.
GHaycraft
former owner of PC#29

May 24, 2001 2:25 am Subject: Going over

This is super embarrassing episode to relate, but maybe it will benefit someone else.

I kind of learned to sail by the wet "seat of my pants" so to speak; so please excuse my lack of proper sailing terms. Ok, I'll get on with it.

Anytime there was much wind at all, and I wanted to change my sail from the port side to the starboard I would first turn the boat almost directly into the wind. I would then gradually let out the sail to the side I wanted it on, and then concern myself with whatever tack I wanted to be on.

Well then one day, a friend and I take the boat out into the ocean at St. Augustine, Florida. He introduces me to what I believe he referred to as "Jibbing" or "Jibbing". Anyway, in order to change the direction of the boom from one side of the boat to the other, when he had a tail wind, was to pull tight the line attached to the pulley on the boom, so that the boom was pointing directly to the stern (directly in the direction of the wind). He then gradually let the sail out to the side of the boat he wanted it on.

Well, a month or so later, I'm on the St. Johns River in Jacksonville, Florida, and the wind isn't too strong, and I think that it would be a good time for me to try the maneuver for myself. And heck, with such little wind, and such a stable boat, I'll just wait to sit on the other side of the boat.

So, I've pulled the line tight, and the sail is pointing to the back of the boat, and suddenly the wind hits the sail from the other direction. Now when I've more wind than I wanted to deal with in the past, I was used to quickly turning into the wind. And that was my sudden reaction this **time. However, this time, instead of being headed into the wind, I was dealing with a tail wind. And instead of my line being loose it was taunt. So my reaction of pulling the tiller hard towards me left the boat perpendicular to the wind, with the line taunt... and just make things worse, I was sitting on the side of the boat opposite the wind.**

If my hand was on the line and I was mentally prepared, I would have released the line holding the sail taunt. But in no time I was off- balance, going backward towards the water (and of course the boat was on its side).

So then I was in the water and it was in the cold time of the year, and the mast was pointing downward. It was choppy, but at least I was in the river around other boats and not **out in the ocean. My cell phone that I kept with me for any emergency was no good in the worst** of emergencies.

A motor boat came by and with pliers I loosened one of the stays (while **still in the water). In hindsight, I just should have loosened the line holding** the boom taunt. Of course I would have had to release it by swimming completely under the upside-down boat.

With my other sailboat, I would've put all my weight on the daggerboard and the boat would've popped up (I verified this during a storm one year). However, I was not dealing with a daggerboard this time. Now, I was fighting against the weight of the centerboard which was being pulled back into the **boat by gravity. When I would get the centerboard out from the hull, I couldn't keep it out and at the same time use it as lever to righten the boat. It kept slipping** back into the hull.

I was fortunate that someone with a couple of huge engines came along. I was fortunate that I had some really strong rope to fasten to key points of the boat, and that I was able to righten the boat. And I was fortunate that I was able to get it close to a nearby shallow area to bail out the water.

When it was finally upright, it had to be held level to keep water from pouring in from the sides while I bailed it out. I had to replace my sail cover, my mast, and had to have my motor serviced. I also had to replace my cell phone. It was a very expensive day. But for a while I feared that I might lose my whole boat.

Anyway, the lesson I'm trying to pass along here (at my own embarrassment) is this: Although the Picnic Cat is **extremely stable, if you manage to do EVERYTHING wrong, you CAN tip it. And if you do tip it, you have** a major problem.

Knowing **what I know now, I would've had my hand on the line (and of course changed the side of the boat** I was sitting on). And if I found myself with the boom still taunt while in the water, **I would swim under the boat and loosen the line** holding the boom. **I then would do everything I could to get** the mast down. But mostly, I would not assume that just because the boat is stable, it can't go over. And once it goes over, you're going to need help.

One other thing, any type of phone or radio will be useless unless it's kept in a waterproof container.

I suppose most of this is as obvious to you as it is to me. And you think that you're pretty knowledgeable and pretty careful. But hopefully my horror story will add to your vigilance.