The Cruising Spinnaker Revisited

For use in a Sail Magazine Article
By: Tim Yourieff 1 1999

One of the most popular sails in the cruising sailor's inventory these days is the asymmetric, or cruising spinnaker. It is known by a variety of sailmaker trade names, such as Gennaker, Flasher, MPS, and Spanker. Unlike the conventional spinnaker that is symmetrical on either side of its centerline, the cruising spinnaker has a definite luff and leech, with the luff being the bit longer of the two. The sail is about 25% smaller in total area than a standard spinnaker, but it is about twice as big as a conventional 150% genoa.

The cruising spinnaker is designed specifically to enhance a boat's downwind performance. It also make downwind sailing safe and easy—even when sailing shorthanded. Fulfilling this criterion leads to another major difference between the cruising spinnaker and the conventional spinnaker.

The cruising spinnaker does not require a spinnaker pole because the tack remains attached to the forestay no matter which tack the boat is on. Gybing a standard spinnaker with a pole means moving the outboard pole end from one clew to the other, and this is the moment when most spinnaker-handling problems occur. This is what discourages many cruising skippers from using the sail. They don't like to handle a conventional spinnaker with a pole unless they have a crew of experienced sailors on board.

Sailing Angles and Apparent Wind

Apparent Wind Strength	Apparent Wind Direction
5 knots	55^0-155^0
10 knots	60^0-155^0
15 knots	85^0-155^0
20 knots	120^0-155^0

Figure 1: The table shows the direction and strength of apparent wind in which a cruising spinnaker can be effectively used.

The good thing about the cruising spinnaker is that you gybe this sail very much the same way you would if you were flying a genoa, thus avoiding the risk of an uncontrolled sail during the gybing maneuver.

What makes the cruising spinnaker especially attractive is, first, that it is bigger than the conventional genoa and, second, it is effective over a wide range of wind strength and directions. The table in *figure 1* shows the optimum apparent wind speeds and sailing angles for this type of sail.

There are two ways to hoist the sail. You can use either a spinnaker halyard or a genoa halyard, depending on the setup of your boat. There are, however, different attachment procedures and different sheet leads, depending on which halyard system, you use.

Using the Spinnaker Halyard:

Our definition of a spinnaker halyard is one that exits the mast *above* the point where the headstay is attached. The halyard must also pass through a free-swiveling block, allowing it to pull from any direction without chafing.

To set the spinnaker using this halyard, first attach the halyard to the head ring on the sail. If your boat has a roller furling genoa, we recommend that you use a set of parrel beads (Figure 3) that have been wrapped around the furled genoa and then snap-shackled to the tack of the sail. Parrel beads are solid nylon balls with holes drilled through them, through which a wire cable passes. The cable has stainless-steel thimbles at either end that are then shackled to the tack, making a closed loop of beads around the genoa. The parrel beads roll over the furled genoa allowing the tack of the cruising spinnaker to be raised and lowered with ease that keeps the tack near the centerline of the boat.

Next, tie the tack downhaul line to the tack ring, lead it through a turning block on the deck near the bow, and run it aft to the cockpit. Set up the tack downhaul so the tack of the sail is about five feet above the deck when the sail is hoisted.

Attach the spinnaker sheet to the clew ring of the spinnaker and make sure the line is led aft outside the lifelines to a turning block on the toerail located just forward of the stern pulpit. Then run it forward to a winch. The sheet that is not being used — the lazy sheet — should also be attached to the clew of the spinnaker , led forward *in front of the headstay*, (figure 2) and then back on the other side of the boat — outside the shrouds and lifelines — to another turning block positioned just forward of the stern pulpit. Then take that sheet and lead it to a winch.

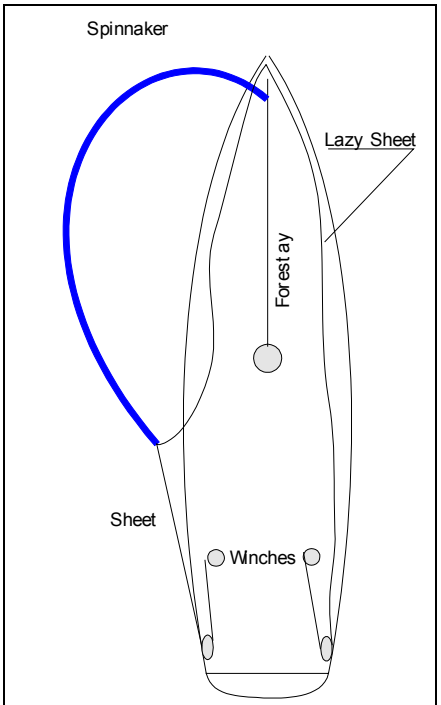

Figure 2

Now you are ready to hoist the spinnaker. Start by heading off to a square run. Leave the mainsail fully out during the hoisting procedure as it will blanket the spinnaker and keep it from filling until you are ready for it to be set. A good place to raise the sail is from the leeward side, just ahead of the boom.

Once it is fully hoisted, slowly head up to your desired course and pull in the sheet until the sail sets. Make sure you have at least three turns of the sheet around the winch. Now you are off and sailing with your cruising spinnaker.

Gybing the Spinnaker:

Ease out the spinnaker sheet until the sail collapses in front of the boat. Don't lose the end of the sheet. Then bear away to a dead run and pull the mainsail to the centerline. To complete the gybe, ease out the mainsail on the new gybe, and head up onto your new course. Pull in the new spinnaker sheet (the lazy sheet on the previous tack) until the sail is set correctly for the new course. This completes your gybe.

Lowering the Spinnaker:

Bear away onto a dead run, but this time keep the mainsail out. Do not ease the spinnaker sheet. The sail will collapse once the mainsail blankets it. Have one person ease the halyard while another pulls the sail down by pulling on the leech. Ideally, whoever is pulling the sail down should be positioned on the leeward side of the boat just in front of the boom. This position will ensure that the spinnaker remains blanketed by the mainsail until it is completely lowered to the deck.

Using the Genoa Halyard:

A genoa halyard exits the mast through a sheave *below* the point where the headstay is attached. The halyard is restricted in its motion and must pull in an essentially forward direction to avoid being chafed by the edge of the sheave box.

To set the spinnaker with this halyard configuration, attach the genoa halyard to the head ring on the sail. Next, tie the tack downhaul line to the tack ring, lead it through a turning block on the deck near the bow, and run it aft to the cockpit. (Figure 3) Set up the tack downhaul so the tack of the sail is about five feet above the deck when the sail is hoisted.

Now tie the sheet to the clew ring of the sail and lead it outside the lifelines aft to the running block on the toerail and then to a winch. The lazy sheet should also be tied to the clew and led forward outside the shrouds. But this time lead it between the mast and forestay and *not* in front of the forestay as is done with the spinnaker-halyard arrangement. Lead the lazy sheet aft on the other slide of the boat, outside the shrouds and lifelines to the turning block, and then forward to a winch.

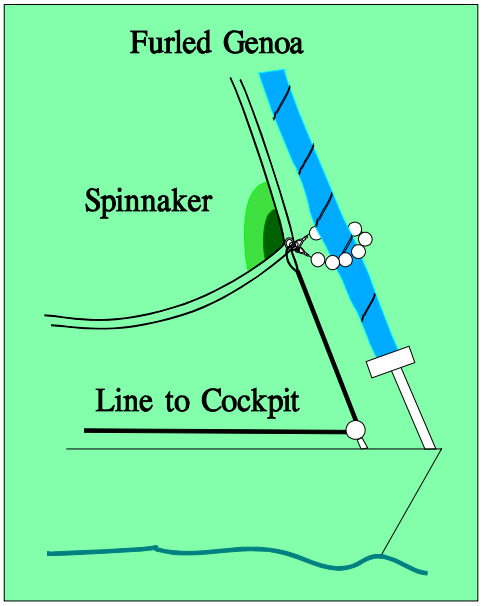

Figure 3

To hoist the cruising spinnaker with the genoa halyard, the procedure is exactly the same as it is with the spinnaker halyard. Head off, blanket the spinnaker with the mainsail, and hoist the spinnaker in the lee of the main.

To gybe the sail, first bear away to a dead run. Leave the mainsail eased out. The main will blanket the spinnaker and cause it to collapse. Pull in the lazy sheet after you have made sure you have at least three turns on the winch. At the same time, ease out the old sheet. With this procedure you are pulling the sail through the space between the headstay and the mast. This is different from having the sail going in front of the forestay during the gybe, which is what happens when you use the spinnaker-halyard method.

Bring the mainsail to the centerline and then complete the gybe and head up to your new course, trimming the sails as you come closer to the wind.

Basic Cruising Spinnaker Trim:

There are two basic adjustments that you can make; the first deals with the height of the tack above the deck, and the second is the amount of sheet you should pull in for any given point of sail.

As a general rule, on a close reach (with the wind at about 60 degrees) the tack should be pulled down so the luff of the sail is nearly straight. On a very broad reach or run (120-155 degrees), the tack should be eased off considerably—approximately three feet on a 35-foot, 4 feet on a 45-foot and 5 feet on a 55-foot boat. On this point of sail you should have the tack as high as possible, but not so high that the sail starts to oscillate. This

Equipment for the Cruising Spinnaker	
2 sheets	Each approximately twice the length of the boat
Parrel Beads	Required only if roller furling headsail is installed.
1 tack downhaul	About the length of boat, if it is to be adjustable from the cockpit
3 Blocks	Two for the sheet leads and one as the turning block for the downhaul
1 Halyard	Either the spinnaker or genoa halyard

makes the sail — and the boat — unstable. On a beam reach, the tack height should be adjusted somewhere between the high and the low positions. A cruising spinnaker should be trimmed just enough to stop the luff from curling. Adjust the tack height so the middle of the luff curls first when you head the boat up into the wind. If the upper part of the luff curls first, the tack is too high and must be lowered. Conversely, if the lower part of the luff starts to curl first, the tack is too low.

Dousing Socks:

Finally, a few words about the merits of the dousing sock; the purpose of the sock is to contain the spinnaker in a "sausage" bag during the hoisting and lowering process for safety and ease of handling. We recommend using a dousing sock if your boat is over 30 feet long.

Hoisting: When you hoist the spinnaker, it is inside the sock and will not fill until you are ready for it to do so. Once you are ready to set the spinnaker you raise the sock to the top of the spinnaker by pulling the Sock's Control line.

Lowering: When the time comes to drop the spinnaker you should bear away onto a square run so that the spinnaker collapses behind the mainsail. Then pull the Control line so that it pulls the sock down over the collapsed spinnaker.

Then the spinnaker halyard can be eased and the sock, which now contains the spinnaker, can be lowered to the deck.

Once lowered, the sock still containing the spinnaker can then be stowed in a sail bag ready for the next time you want to go faster downwind, which is just the time you want to use your cruising spinnaker.

Where to Find Socks

ATN
Socks and Tacker
1509 S.W. 1st Ave
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33315
800-874-3671

VF Shaw Company
Socks
4801 King Court
Bowie, MD 20720
800-367-9046

Neil Pryde Sails
Parrel Beads
354 Woodmont Rd. #18
Milford, CT 06460
203-874-6984
admin@neilprydesails.com

Care and Maintenance of your Cruising Spinnaker:

Never store your cruising spinnaker wet and inside the spinnaker dousing sock. The colors may bleed under certain conditions.

To dry the sail, hoist it in light air and let it air dry, or lay it out on a yard in the sun... it will dry in no time at all.

Tim Yourieff, a veteran ocean racer and cruiser, manages the worldwide operations of Neil Pryde Sails.