



LJ photo/Alan Dep

John Connolly, co-owner of Modern Sailing Academy in Sausalito, teaches expert sailing classes off the coast of California. He has invented Lifescoop, a life-saving device to retrieve bodies overboard.

THINK FOR A MINUTE on how difficult it would be, under duress, to haul a 180-pound body from the water up onto a boat on your own.

It's a deeply worrisome thought that never leaves the mind of a sailing instructor — that he or she may have to one day retrieve an unconscious student from the water. They realize that someone's life is in their hands, yet full well know the inherent dangers involved in attempting to pull an injured or unresponsive body from the chilly water of San Francisco Bay.

For Sausalito instructor John Connolly, who just completed his 100th class teaching advanced sailing skills on the unforgiving California coast, the risk always lurks. He's been teaching on these waters for some 16 years and, from the outset, has focused on boating safety issues with due cause. Now he's doing more.

Deeply concerned about the lack of equipment available to pluck an unconscious or injured person from the murky waters inspired Connolly to organize a series of crew aboard safety events, to focus on methods to retrieve both conscious and unconscious victims. After running a few of these, he realized that there was no real alternative to getting an unconscious or injured person back aboard a sailboat.

"There was no way around having to have someone get into the water, which always puts another individual at risk. We tried getting the body in a sail and rolling him into a dinghy; we tried all sorts of things," Connolly said.



MICHELLE SLADE

Enter the Lifescoop, a retrieval device invented by Connolly after about 12 years of research. The device comprises a full-size stainless steel stretcher with a long handle designed to retrieve a victim at a short distance from a boat without having to put another person in the water. Using the handle, the crew on deck maneuvers the stretcher out from the boat and under the victim, pulls it and the victim to the boat, and hoists them on deck with the jib sheet and a tackle suspended from the boom.

At a 2005 national symposium on boating safety hosted by Connolly at his

OTHER SAILING NEWS

The San Francisco Yacht Club has set a date for a US SAILING/YRA/SFUC sponsored Basic Race Management Seminar on Jan. 31. It is for anyone interested in race management, but especially those wishing to become certified as race officers, qualified by US SAILING to run local club regattas. Visit www.sfyc.org for information.

Midwinter Racing Series

► The Corinthian Yacht Club is offering four days of mid-winter racing on challenging and interesting courses over two weekends: Jan. 17-18, and Feb. 21-22. The club guarantees wind, or the commodore will do a hula. Visit www.cyc.org, to sign up or for information.

► The Sausalito Yacht Club invites bay sailors to come out for its annual mid-winter series, which commenced in November. Races are held the first Sunday of each month from November through March. Racing will take place in the Knox/Yellow Bluff area using courses optimized for conditions. Future race dates: Jan. 4, Feb. 1 and March 1, 2009.

► The Tiburon Yacht Club mid-winter races are scheduled for Jan. 10, Feb. 14 and March 14. Other TYC winter cruising activities include February's Sweetheart Chocolate Cruise to Emeryville and Charles Chocolates, and in March, the club's Ski Cruise and Mustard Festival Cruise to Napa. For more details: www.tyc.org/westerlies.

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SLADE: Connolly putting his mechanical skills to good use in sailing

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Sausalito sailing school, the Modern Sailing Academy, the Lifescoop got a thorough work out.

"We had victims fall into the water four hundred times over four days, and with this new Lifescoop, a coast guard guy was able to get an unconscious victim onto the boat in under one minute," Connolly said. "That's faster than we can get a conscious victim aboard."

While Connolly is unsure how practical the device will be for smaller sailboats because of its size, he sees a market for it in larger vessels such as ferries and ships. He hopes the Lifescoop will be a step toward developing a similar device appropriate for smaller sailboats.

There is obviously a need for it.

"Falls overboard and people drowning from not wearing a life jacket are still the number one preventable cause of boat-

ing fatalities," said Paul Newman, boating safety program manager for the 11th Coast Guard District. "Related to that is how difficult it is to get someone back on board; it's near impossible for a single person to manage."

Yet Connolly is single-minded in his effort to help.

John Rousmaniere, a sailor and the author of "The Annapolis Book of Seamanship," participated in the 2005 crew overboard rescue trials held in Sausalito.

"Few people other than John have done more to advance sailing safety," Rousmaniere said. "We tested lots of unfamiliar gear and learned that some methods or rescues that are reliable in calm water may not work when it's blowing hard. John has gone to tremendous efforts to develop and publicize techniques and gear, and to encourage others to do their own work. The people who came to these events and

participated in them formed relationships that have helped the sport of sailing for years."

The Lifescoop has been patented and prototypes have been manufactured by CD Designs in Oakland. Connolly has more fine-tuning to do before he's ready to go commercial with it, and can often be found testing the device out on Richardson Bay in front of the Modern Sailing Academy.

Formerly a mechanic, Connolly is no stranger to figuring out the nuts and bolts of making something work. Before his sailing career, Connolly owned the largest English sports car shop in the country, in Beltsville, Md., where he became an adept mechanic. His first job in California in 1988 was as a mechanic in a sizable boat yard in Los Angeles.

Connolly has developed the Lifescoop in between his busy travel schedule teaching advanced sailing classes both locally and in exotic

destinations overseas.

"My mechanical skills have kept me in very good stead as a sailing instructor," he said. "Being familiar with the mechanical aspects of a boat has also been a very effective teaching tool."

Fortunately for Connolly, and the hundreds of students he's taught sailing, he can't recall a particularly forbidding moment at sea where he's felt at harm. Yet he's always prepared. Witness his recent milestone teaching class.

"We were anchoring in a very technical spot at the point of a drop-off at Ana Nueva," said Scotty Watterworth, a sailing student from Mill Valley. "Conditions were very foggy, but John knew just what to do. He's a wonderful teacher."

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