How to Get Started Sailing an A-Class Catamaran

You’ve heard about the A-Class over the years. You’ve heard rumors about incredible speed, amazing responsiveness, addictiveness, expense, and maybe even fragility. As one A-Class sailor - who used to sail Santa Cruz 70’s and other big, high performance boats - said, “It is simply, by far, the most fun boat I have ever sailed; there isn’t even a close second.” He spent a pretty reasonable $9,000 to buy a used boat, road trailer and boat covers and, after two or three years of use, will be able to sell it for $6,000. Further, since the boat only has one fully battened sail, he will likely only need to buy one new sail over that time. So, all the rumors are true – except for that bit about the expense.

To answer a few common questions:

1) What exactly is an A-Class catamaran?

The A-Class catamaran is an ISAF open development class established in the late 1960’s. The design is constrained to the following basic parameters:
• Twin parallel hull design, no longer than 18’, no wider than 7’6”.
• Sail area no greater than 150 ft2.
• Minimum total sailing weight of 165 lbs.
• Top load daggerboards which when fully inserted hav tips at a minimum of 1.5 meters apart.

2) Am I the right size for an A-Cat? Or am I too big/small to be competitive?

Unlike with most one-design classes, variations in sail and mast design allow for a much wider competitive size range on the A-Cats. A bigger sailor will want a slightly deeper cut sail and different flex in the mast than a smaller one but that’s about it. With recent World Champions ranging in weight from 145 to 220 lbs your weight really isn’t going to matter much.

3) So, how do you go about picking a boat? (And how fast/responsive are they really?)

What kind of boat you should get depends on what you want to do with it. The A-Class boats tend to be very durable because they are most often built entirely out of carbon and epoxy, are generally well cared for, and are built on an open market where the builders must compete for business (unlike single manufacturer boats like the Laser). This means that any builder who wants to sell a second boat needs to produce a high quality product the first time out of the gate or the class will quickly become hesitant to invest. So, many builders will prototype a design long before they release a hull to the market.

This is a great thing for the A-Class because, as a result, there are really not that many badly built or designed boats out there. Sure, some are fully autoclaved and others aren’t. Some may be better designed than others, but there are very few that are just bad boats from the get go. When you are trying to sell a new boat to Olympians like Jay Glaser or Randy Smyth, there is no way to hide bad build quality.

Currently there are three principle design categories. The major difference is not in the hulls; it’s all about the dagger boards and the stiffness of the boats.

**Straight Board ($4,000-$7,000)**

Straight boarded boats were the standard until 2010. These boats are still the fastest light air boats (6 knots and below), are simply rigged, and are an incredible value. Masts and sails for these boats will not transition optimally to the newer boats. While
straight board boats are no longer considered generally competitive across the entire wind range, be careful underestimating the guys who still race them. Some of the sailors who own these are crazy good on the water and have been known to still win races from time to time.

You can buy a boat that is 15 years old, will still weigh 165 pounds all up, and get you flying a hull in 6 or 7 knots of breeze for $4,500 or so. In 10 knots of breeze, you’ll be able to sail tight angles at 10 to 12 knots upwind, passing a Melges 24 at the same point of sail but twice as fast.

Sailing these is much like a Volvo 65 in heavy wind, lightning fast upwind in heavy air but throwing a lot of water downwind. (Why would anyone ever buy a Laser again when you can get an A for less???)

12 year old, 110 lb sailor on a carbon boat born before he was. *photo by Ocean Images, all rights reserved.*
Curved Board ($5,000-$18,000)
Many call these “C” board boats. They were dominant between 2010 and 2014 and still win races against the foilers in lighter conditions or against foiling sailors who aren’t able to extract the performance available to them. C board boats are the perfect boat for a serious racer to get started with in the A-Class. You can take the mast and sail from a C board boat and use it on a foiler as well.

Ideally, a C board boat comes with a modern, flexi mast that lets you power up the sail for pushing downwind while keeping a flat sail upwind. With a flexi rig and powerful sail, C board boats can be sailed from the trapeze downwind using the lift from the board to keep the bow out of the water.

Many sailors recommend winglets on the rudders of these boats. The winglets, normally set to neutral and often in the configuration of a “+”, help keep the boat stable in pitch so that the C boards always lift. People who are pushing their C board boats hard downwind from the wire really benefit from winglets on their rudders, and if your boat doesn’t come with these, they are an inexpensive potential improvement.

A C board A-cat is your chance to sail an ORMA 60 or MOD 70 trimaran with its curved boards letting you push harder and keep the bow up as you sail it hot downwind from the trapeze. You have the potential to sail 5% - 15% faster than a straight board boat in trapeze conditions downwind.
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Foilers ($12,000-$35,000)

Foiling boats have J or > shaped (which we call “z”) boards to provide more lift. As soon as you can trapeze upwind, you can foil downwind from the wire with these boats. Some, but very few, potential racers can jump into a foiler. Most who haven’t driven from the trapeze before will be more competitive starting with a C board boat and transitioning to a foiler in a year or so.

The beauty of the A-Class foiler compared to other foiling craft is the lack of capsizes. A competent but not world-class sailor can race all day and not capsize because the platform itself is a lot more stable than most foiling boats. You can also back off and sail the boat like a traditional A-Class if desired. The best foilers stay on the trapeze all the time and drive their boats the hardest.

Foilers in particular seem to be quicker with a lower center of effort and more
aerodynamic deck sweeping mainsail along with a sealed trampoline to reduce parasitic drag. The improvements in the rig development are opening the door to beginning to foil upwind with upwind boatspeeds in the mid to high teens and super fast and thrilling rides downwind with speeds reaching over 25 knots. Sailing at 18 knots upwind is pretty incredible.

This is your chance to jump on board an AC50, but solo, and without all the lawyers, at your local lake, beach, or club.

Regardless of the type of boat, the A-Class will continue to push your skill level. The boat can be sailed “backed off” with caution or it can be pushed from the trapeze.

A traditional single manufacturer one-design sailor will wonder how so many different types of boats can race together. Someone who sails in the A-Class understands that the skill of the
sailor dominates and that most sailors’ biggest need is to develop their own abilities to push the boat they already have. Because of the challenge the A-Class brings, even someone in the very back of the fleet can feel victorious as they come back to the beach with a sense of accomplishment and improvement.

The fundamental nature of the class as a developmental class means you can join the class now and be sailing a radically improved boat in 20 years with the same friends you make now. You will learn skills and techniques that emphasize apparent wind sailing well beyond traditional skiffs and fast dinghies. Being in a development class also means you will continue to be at the forefront of sailing throughout your time with the A.

4) Anything else I should know?

a) Because many sailors sell their boats to buy another one, it is not uncommon to see a boat listed as ‘platform only’ or ‘platform and foils.’ This means that the seller is keeping the mast/foils that normally goes with the boat. Used masts are often available, and a lot of guys have two masts and don’t really need the second. Used foils are harder to come by and can be expensive, so check the listings carefully.

b) The class is very open and sailors will gladly offer any feedback or guidance to get you a little quicker on setup, tuning, tactics, or boat handling. Don’t be surprised to see those same sailors actually follow up with you at the next regatta or ask you how the changes you made worked for you. The class really does want to help you be a better sailor.

c) An absolutely critical piece of equipment is a set of CatTrax or other commercial dolly. Please do not try to save a couple of bucks making your own, it is possible (kind of), but no one has ever really been able to duplicate them well and these are expensive boats to put on cheap dollies. Just please don’t do it (trust us and our yard bills on this).

d) If you are ever going to store the boat with the mast up (and most of us always do), you need to invest in a set of tie down anchors. Screw-in anchors or even better, The Claw, work fine, cost about $20, and will keep your boat from flipping over in a strong breeze (the boats are really light, remember?). You also need to make sure you have a way to lock down the rotation of the mast while stored so it does not oscillate freely.

e) You will be best served with a launch venue where you can roll the boat into shallow water. Launching and sailing away from a bulkhead is typically not feasible and will result in damage to the boat (and possibly the sailor). Some sailors do launch from floating ramps, but the best way to safely launch and recover any small multihull is from a beach or grassy shore launch into shallow water. It’s a good idea to have a quick release on main too so you can easily connect or disconnect the sail as you depart or approach the shore.
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f) The US A-Class google group has almost 200 members. The class is the well organized with events throughout the country, a map of all member cities on its website at http://a-cat.us, etc. Get in touch if you need help with the class president, the Facebook group, or Google group.

5) Will I get smoked when I come out to race? What happens if I buy a slow old boat? Yes! Most people will get the hang of upwind speed pretty quickly but will be poor at maneuvers and downwind. Just part of the fun and learning curve.

Our class makes sure that no matter the boat you have you are part of the regatta. We break out scores for Classic and Foiling categories and generally give trophies for each category. There is a strong contingent of very good classic sailors (straight and C board) who have no intention of migrating to foilers. You will see speed improvements over time regardless of the boat you buy.

5) What else? Even if you are not interested in racing or don’t think you are ‘there’ yet please come to a regatta anyway. There is nothing close to as helpful as having a whole fleet of A-Class sailors going over your boat with a fine tooth comb to show you better ways to run rigging, where you
should be standing, or suggest different mast rake to get you up to speed quickly. Since, by nature, many A-Class sailors are tinkerers and interested in what other people are doing on their boats, expect to need to swat them away, not beg them to show up. (Seriously, we can be like mayflies when someone does something new.)

Finally, the class officers’ contact information is available on our website, feel free to get in touch. We field a couple of inquiries a month from people who are interested in the class and openly welcome more. Quite obviously, we love sailing these ultra lightweight speed machines and are always excited to share that feeling with others.

6) You talk too much, anything else?
(I told you we like to talk about the boats.) Yes, the boats are a little fragile. With a weight of around 165lbs, 18’ long and 7’6” wide they have to be. But they are not delicate. No, you cannot just drive an A-Cat up the beach like you can a Hobie Cat, but the boats are designed to take punishing loads at high speeds. Almost all of the damage done to an A-Cat is from hitting something; it is extraordinarily rare for a boat to be damaged from normal handling. So if you treat them, well, like race boats, they are generally pretty free from damage. You will be amazed at the knowledge you’ve gained….it all begins here.

We would love to stay and chat even more, but the wind just picked up….

Here is a recent video of class regatta in the winter circuit: https://vimeo.com/215935521