Twin Poles for Downwind Sailing

Many times these past two years, while we were cruising around Europe, crossing the Atlantic and sailing in the Caribbean, we ran into sailors who hated to sail downwind. After asking why, they inevitably said that they didn't feel safe while at sea trying to hook a pole to the mast, getting a sheet through the jaw and hoisting or rolling out a genoa with the pole swinging wildly out of control. Instead, they usually favored tacking down wind. Some of these people even had double poles attached to the mast. Once I told them my method for setting my downwind poles, they usually slapped their foreheads and said, "Why didn't I think of that?"

The answer I found to sailing downwind is fairly simple. My downwind rig consists of twin poles permanently fixed to the mast. I have two separate tracks on the front of the mast, one for each pole. The tracks go far enough up the mast so that the poles can hang straight down on their respective side. The length of the poles is equal to my J dimension. Attached to the outboard end of the poles is a topping lift, a fore guy and an after guy. These allow me to keep control of the pole at all times even when setting and handing the poles.

The outboard end on the pole has a normal jaw type fitting and my inboard end has a fitting with an eye (not the round pin type extrusion that goes into a socket type fitting on the car.) The car has a pin going down through a vertical eye in toggle type fitting and the other end of that toggle will have a horizontal jaw and eyes with a pin going through one side of the jaw, through the eye of the end fitting on the pole and then through the other side of the jaw. This arrangement, in effect makes the pole connection to the car a universal joint as it can allow the pole to move both up and down and side to side. I found that the socket type inboard fitting doesn't have the same easy range of motion that this setup has. By the way, Forespar sells a similar fitting along with their poles, tracks and cars. (see page 10 of the Forespar catalogue)

At the top of the track I have a cheek block for the line that hauls the car at the inboard end of the pole up and down the track. There is a swivel block over each track about six to ten feet above the upper end. This is for the topping lift. The jaw fitting at the outboard end of the poles has an eye in the top of it where I attach the topping lift. The eye on my pole is large enough to clip on a fore guy and after guy as well. If your fitting is not large enough, you can easily attach a pad eye on the top and each side.

Now that I have described the hardware set up, here is how I set the poles. First of all, when not in use, I keep my poles attached to the life lines between the forward lower and the upper shrouds. However most boats have a fitting at the bottom of the mast the poles hook onto when not in use. Either way is good. When I am ready to set the pole, I attach an after guy that goes from the outboard end of the pole to a cleat about half way back on the toe rail or some similar convenient place. Then I attach the fore-guy and run it from the outboard end of the pole to a block near the stem head on the bow and back to a convenient place to make it fast. (I use the grab rail on the cabin top) There will be no

real strain on either the for-guy or the after-guy as they are only to keep control of the pole when setting it.

Here is the whole trick is using this system, so pay attention!! 1) The topping lift is permanently made fast to a cleat so that when the pole is hung from the mast with the car at the top of the track, the topping lift will be just long enough to allow the pole to hang just about six inches below the life lines; or if you prefer too keep the pole at the base of the mast when not in use make the topping lift just long enough so that it hangs down to the proper position on the mast when secured. 2) The line going from the car to the block at the top of the track used to pull the car up and down the track, comes down and goes through an eye in the middle of a cleat near the bottom of the mast and back up to a fitting at the bottom of the car so it makes, in effect, a continuous line. Here comes the important part of this line…. **Tie a figure eight knot in this line between the lower fitting on the car and the eye in the cleat at the base of the mast so that when the car is pulled down the track the knot will hit the cleat and prevent the pole from going further down the track.** The location of the knot will be such that the inboard end of the pole will drop to a height just about even with the clew of the jib when rolled out.

Once the topping lift and the line controlling the car are permanently adjusted to the right length I leave them that way. While the poles are still hooked onto to the lifelines, I attach the fore-guy and after-guy to the pole and cleat them off at their respective places. The length of the fore and after-guys are such that when the pole is in the horizontal position the fore and after-guys will hold the pole in place about a foot in front of the lower forward shroud. I have marked these lines with black magic marker so that when I cleat them before setting the pole, I will know where to cleat the lines.

Now… to set the pole: 1) I attach the fore and after-guys making sure to run the lines from the pole to the cleat in such a way that when set, they are on the proper side on the shrouds etc. 2) I unhook the pole from its resting position and take the outboard end around so that it is rests on the outside of the lifelines forward of the shrouds. 3) I ease off on the jib sheet so there is plenty of slack. 4) I run the sheet through the jaw at the outer end of the pole. 5) Now I go back to the mast and pull down on the line attached to the bottom of the car. The car should slide down the mast and automatically stop at the right height on the mast track because of the knot in the line. As the car slides down the mast, the pole goes from a vertical position to a horizontal position with the topping lift, fore-guy and after-guy holding it in place and keeping it from swinging wildly out of control. 6) Finally I pull on the topping lift to bring it to a fully vertical position and cleat it off; but taking care not to undo the original cleated position that allows the pole to fall just below the life lines as the car is pulled back up the track when taking the pole off the jib and stowing it. 7) Once the pole is in place, I can now crank on the sheet and ease off the roller furling line, rolling the jib out to the end of the pole.

When sailing down wind, especially at night, I always set the second pole with a lazy sheet going through its jaw, so that if I want to jibe in the middle of the night all I have to do is first ease off the preventer on the main sail and slowly allow it to come over to the other side. I then reattach the preventer to the new leeward side. Next I ease off the jib

sheet that goes through the jaw of the pole and take it up the lazy sheet, that is rigged on the other pole, as I do so. The jib will come across over to the other pole. However, if I am making a long trade wind passage, I hank on a another jib to a second forestay that is normally stowed next to the lower shrouds and can be attached via a hyfield tension lever to a fitting just behind the roller furling head-stay. With two jibs poled out, one to windward and one to leeward, I take the main down and never have to worry about a jibe, and I can let the windvane steer the boat even in heavy following seas.

Remember that when sailing down wind the main will be held to leeward with a preventer and the jib will be polled out to windward. You will be able to sail with this rig with the wind from about 120 degrees apparent to 240 degrees apparent. You may want to make minor adjustments to the lines when you are sailing. For example, as the wind comes from astern to abeam, I find that I have to raise the topping lift somewhat and ease off on the after guy and sheet to allow the jib the come a little more forward. But you can play around with it as you are sailing. The most important aspect of this rig is that the poles are NEVER out of control and one person can pole out a jib or even set a spinnaker.

Happy sailing

Scott and Kitty