

## **Fellow Etchells sailors**

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When I started sailing Etchells actively three years ago, I expected to see merely a few teams that didn't wear some form of lifejackets or inflatable flotation device most of the time. Once we started sailing in big events, I was surprised to see how few sailors wore them, even in big breeze and waves. At the Chicago worlds, lifejacket wearers were in a small minority, and I didn't even wear it every race.

I recently had two experiences that have converted me into a full time lifejacket-wearer, and I hope I can convince some of you too.

A few weeks ago, we were drifting in our Etchells in a dead calm. One of our teammates, a 6'2" 185 lb guy who cycles 50+ miles a week, went for a short swim and then tried to climb back in our boat unassisted. After 3 minutes, and several failed attempts to climb in from the stern and from amidships, we were all laughing. Without help, he simply couldn't do it....and he's in better shape than most Etchells sailors I know, and was wearing just a swimsuit. No bibs, no boots, no drytop....just a pair of boardshorts. Completely still water, no waves, and he still needed more than a small hand to get back in the boat (in ideal conditions). We headed home joking that we should have (and wager on the performance of certain participants in) a "climb back in an Etchells" competition at the dock during the Jaguar series next year.

Unfortunately, the next story does not involve any laughter.

Two weeks ago, a 21 year-old drowned within 750 yards of where I was racing dinghies and a few hundred yards from shore and a crowded mooring field. When a squall rolled in, he fell out of a Sonar without a lifejacket on, and they were unable to get a lifejacket to him or pick him up before he went under.

I'm not pushing for a rule requiring it....but wearing a lifejacket (or even just an inflatable belt or suspenders) just seems like the smart thing to do. The ones in stores these days really aren't uncomfortable, bulky or cumbersome, so that's not a legitimate excuse at this point.

If you don't think you should wear one, I challenge you to the following "test":

Next time you are sailing an Etchells in heavy jib conditions with big waves, dressed in bibs and boots and wearing a chinchilla and a spraytop over your long-sleeve t-shirt, after you get the spinnaker filled and frac the jib and are pushing a lot of water downwind, jump off the boat. Seriously. Leave your gear on, don't give your team any warning, leave that lifejacket tied up behind the starboard spinnaker bin, and just jump. You will be conscious (since this is a test, we won't make you hit your head on the boom, or the deck of the boat, or another boat (I have seen Etchells sailors do all of those in the last three years)), so if you want to make this a fair test, do it after you have finished a few races and you are a little dehydrated.

Starting to rethink your approach to lifejackets yet? Yeah, me too.

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