New Owner Gets Up to Speed FAST!

Joerg Esdorn took delivery of #324, KINCSEM, in March 2000. In his first regatta, the AYC Spring Series, he took fourth of 17 boats, but finished the six race regatta with a bullet. In his second regatta, the Greenwich Cup, he was first with 2-2-1 in a 14 boat fleet. We asked Joerg what it took for a new owner to get up to speed so quickly. Here are his impressions of what worked for him:

1. Information, information. Ever since I ordered the boat, I've perused the class and fleet 6 websites on a regular basis. There's a lot of information on those sites, including tuning guides, suggestions on how to handle the A-chute, suggested allocation of responsibilities for the crew, experiences with various equipment, such as electronics packages, etc. It's also easy to just see what's new on the owner's forum of the class website - just hit the "last week" or "last day" buttons. With these sites, you can know a lot about the boat the first time you step on it! I've also asked specific questions (like whether I should get a tiller boat or a wheel boat) and have found people very eager to give their views.

2. Rig. One of my friends who has some experience with other J-boats told me that it would be very important to have the forestay at maximum length. He was right! The reason is that - just like other J's - the J-105 is very neutral on the helm. You want to avoid leeward helm at all cost because you'd lose all the lift from the rudder. See the National website for instructions on how to measure and set up for maximum forestay length. Otherwise, just like on any other boat, the mast setup has to fit the sails. My sails are from Doyle and they're made for a fairly straight mast. Paul Beaudin from Doyle/City Island was very helpful with the setup. He told the yard initially how to set the mast and then came out and went sailing with us to make sure it was right. We started out at having the back of the mast at 10" forward of the main bulkhead (measured at the bottom), and we've moved it to 9 3/4". That gives just a little bit of prebend - I have a hard time telling exactly how much - looks like a couple of inches maybe.

On the rig tension, I have seen in tuning guides (North, Quantum, Doyle) the recommendation to start from "handtight" and then add a specified number of turns for the three shrouds. I had a hard time with that. (There are guys that are fairly small (like myself) and then there are others who have the grip of a mainsheet in 30 kn .... Imagine the difference in "hand-tight"!) So I was very happy when Andy Skibo reported on the class website that he used the new Loos Tension Gauge for rod and published his

winning Key West settings to boot. I bought one of these gauges right away and have been experimenting with it ever since. Paul Beaudin initially had me set up at 63 on the uppers, 29 on intermediates and 20 on the lowers. I changed that later to Andy Skibo's settings of 51/17/slack. With those, we sailed the AYC spring series and were pretty fast. Between races at the Greenwich Cup, I noticed that with those settings, the mast was not quite in column when sailing upwind with the backstay on a couple of inches. So we changed it on the water to make the mast in column with the backstay on - with those adjustments, it's now 43/20/slack. It took some experimenting with the "slack" tension of the lowers to get the mast be in column in the middle. There is about 2 inches of play at about 5 feet up from the deck. Following a suggestion from the website, I don't have splints in the turnbuckles at all - just small lines tied through the holes in the threads. These prevent the turnbuckles and rod from turning just fine.

These are the light/medium air settings and the uppers are visibly loose at more than 15kn true. We learned at BIRW that others have even looser settings and we'll try that next. For heavy air, I've added a full turn to the uppers and lowers, but I'm still experimenting with heavier air settings. (The main advantage of more tension on the lowers is a straighter forestay).

3. Trim. I looked at a number of tuning guides (they seemed to arrive with every quote for sails from a sail maker) and those I looked at were pretty similar. We're not very mechanical about trim, though. We start with halyard tension - wrinkles in the main and jib up to 15kn or so true. (My personal light air rule is if the jib looks good from back at the helm, the halyard is too tight ...) We bring the backstay on at around 10kn true, maybe one inch and at 18kn we have it at maybe 3 (we taped a short batten on the cylinder and marked it in 1/2 inch increments). The key is to make the main a little flatter and to make the helm balance - conversely, the backstay comes off immediately when it gets light and the helm is too neutral or leeward (mark the center position on the wheel for your mainsail trimmer to see the position of the helm).

It seems very important to have the top telltale on the main flying much of the time in light air. Also, as mentioned before, you want to avoid leeward helm at all cost, which means you have to have the boom in the middle in most light stuff. These two guidelines together mean that the traveller has to be up a lot in lighter air. You also need to heel the boat to leeward in drifting conditions.

To help in jib trim, I put tape markers on the lower spreaders as

suggested on the class website by Mark Washeim - one at the end of the taper and one halfway in between that and the shroud. In light/medium stuff, you can really feel the boat go dead if the jib is in further than the end of the taper on the spreader. Also, there are telltales on the back of my jib and the idea is to have the top one flying most of the time. We trim the jib to have an exit parallel to the centerline at the bottom spreader in any sort of breeze - but the helmsman should feel if it's too tight or not tight enough. The base position for the jib car is the fourth screw from the front just showing and we go up one hole in light air and back two (or three) in heavy air. In light air, sheet tension is key - you have to have a nice, full bottom in the sail. We've experimented with barberhauling, but we're not sure it makes a big difference (it may make more of a difference in the older boats which have the tracks further outboard than the new boats).

4. Driving. If we're not in depowering conditions, I almost always foot upwind - telltales on both sides of the jib streaming. The boat is a lot faster that way and probably has much less leeway as a result. In light air, I'm in acceleration mode a lot (leeward telltales wiggling a bit). We've installed a second set of telltales in front of the ones that came with the jib and they're very sensitive, which makes it easier to stay in the groove. I find it takes a lot of concentration to drive this boat upwind in most conditions. Initially, when I looked around for 5 seconds, I was down 1 kn in speed. It's gotten a little better, but it's still good to avoid all distractions. If you have to call tactics in addition to driving, at least have someone else do the looking around ....

Downwind, I find that the polars for the boat (those from the National site) are quite helpful to give a general idea where you should be heading. Often, though, you have to head higher to keep your air clear and generally, I've found that it's less of a problem to sail a little higher and faster than to sail even a couple of degrees lower. The A-chute is very unforgiving if it gets blanketed.

5. Crew. I've been lucky with my crew. First, there's my son Daniel, who's 15 and is the bow man if school doesn't interfere. He and I sailed Vanguard 15 together for two years until he lost the appetite for being with Dad on this "boring" boat without a trapeze and a chute. (He now sails 420). I also have two of Dan's friends as regulars. The rest of my crew is filled in mostly from people I frostbite with at American. They're all good sailors who're used to close racing. I've done some PHRF racing with them as well. Paul Beaudin helped us quite a bit with setting up for maneuvers and I got a lot of info on that from the class website as well. I also recommend highly the

article in the June 2000 Sailing World about A-Chute take-downs. We're generally using the cabin top winches for the jib sheets. In light air, we sheet to the leeward one, in heavier air we sheet to the top one. Trouble is, in heavy air when it really would matter to keep the weight up, some crew are barely able to move those handles. Then you have to make sure trimming is done very quickly so that the trimmer is back on the rail in no time.

6. Weight. My boat is pretty heavy, I believe, since I have almost all extras. So I try to empty out what I can before races - for Block Island, we even took out the autopilot ram! One wonders how important that is, though. The more important thing probably is to have maximum crew weight in almost all conditions. That weight has to be on the high side at all times in more than a few knots of breeze. Also, the weight should be forward to get the stern out of the water - my bowman sits right at the shrouds going upwind and all others line up right behind him.

7. Conclusion. The J105 is a great sailing boat which is quite sensitive to changes in trim for its size. I don't think it's all that different from other keelboats as far as mast setup and sail trim are concerned. So reading a good book about this (as I've done), really helps. And - in my view - once you know the basics, what really matters isn't boat speed anyway - being in the right place on the course wins any day. This is why we've had so many different winners already this season in the Fleet 6 events.

-- Joerg

PS: I'm often asked the origin of name KINCSEM. Kincsem is the name of the most successful race horse of all time. It won all races it entered as a 2, 3, 4 and 5 year old - back in the 19th Century. The name means "my treasure" in Hungarian. My wife and daughter came up with that one!