CAPSIZES or "I didn't know this was a submarine race!"

by Dave Permar (T-165)

One of the more frequent questions that I hear from new and prospective Tanzer 16 sailors is whether or not the Tanzer 16 will capsize. Also in reviewing the archives of the Class Association, I noticed that some of the more interesting photos were of Tanzer 16s in a less thin upright position, so I thought it might be fun to rerun these photos and talk about my experiences in capsizing.

The Tanzer 16 is a very stable boat for its weight and size. Nevertheless, any sailboat without a keel will capsize and every sailor must be mentally and physically prepared for this possibility because it will happen sooner or later. It is certainly true that some people do not have the physical ability to deal with a capsize. On the other hand, there are some pretty poor physical specimens in Fleet 1 (myself not excluded) who have survived many capsizes without permanent injury. Nevertheless, I have seen a lot of new sailors or their crew become intimidated by the fear of capsizing when I was sure they did have the physical ability to deal with the situation. As is frequently the case, capsizing's bark is worse thin its bite. Churchill's adage that "all we have to fear is fear itself" certainly applies.

One of my first regattas was at Oriental and right at the start of the race a thunderstorm rolled down the Neuse River canceling the race and causing many of the boats to capsize. I was fortunate enough to be able to keep my boat upright and sail back into shore without great difficulty. After that experience, I thought I could handle almost any situation without capsizing. Much to my surprise, during the very next regatta, I capsized while sailing in a nice, steady, breeze of approximately 15 knots simply because neither my crew nor I were quick enough in getting back up on the windward rail after tacking. The moral or the story, of course, is "don't get too cocky - there are probably as many ways to turn the boat over as there are fish in the sea." Fleet 1 sailors remember the time, two or three

years ago, when Dave Gilbert capsized his Tanzer- in a little puff or less thin five knots while he and his crew were sitting on the leeward side of the boat.

I personally consider myself a fair conservative sailor. Nevertheless, I usually average about one capsize a season. (Although, last year I didn't have any and the year before I had five.) It has always been my experience that the apprehension of the capsize is worse than the actual event itself. Once I am over and in the water, I usually find that I am enjoying myself. Some Tanzer sailors enjoy sailing their boat “all-out" and use their spinnaker in almost any wind condition. These sailors are assured of gaining a great deal of experience in capsizing their boats. Jim Strickland, Roy Rysdon, and all-time capsize champion, Dave Gilbert, immediately come to mind. With all the practice, capsizing can become a part of the racing routine. If the captain or crew can go over the windward rail and step immediately on the centerboard as the boat is being knocked down, and before the mast and sail become submerged, the Tanzer can be righted quickly. This will also prevent the boat from becoming completely, swamped. Under these circumstances, it is possible for a Tanzer to get right back in the race. In their younger days, I have seen Roy Rysdon and Dave Gilbert perform this feat of magic on several occasions. Once, even I had a young, athletic crew who could perform this feat. However, for the rest of us mere mortals, a knockdown results in our falling in the water on the leeward side of the boa t. By the time we swim around to the centerboard, the mast and sail are under water and righting the boat becomes a major task. This usually means we are through racing for the day.

My procedure for recovering from a capsize is as follows: I send my crew around to the bottom of the boat with instructions to hold onto the centerboard to keep from slipping into the hull and to keep the boat from turning turtle (yes, Virginia, the Tanzer will turn turtle). I grab the scat cushion and go immediately to the end of the mast where I put the scat cushion or a life jacket on the top of the mast to keep the mast from going to the bottom. If the mast goes to the bottom and the water is less than 25 feet deep, the mast will probably become stuck in the mud or sand on the bottom making it very difficult to right and increasing the chances of ending up with a bent mast. Then, I return to the boat and free all the halyards and sheets and attempt to pull the sails down. (You do this so you don't have to lift too much water and to keep the boat from capsizing immediately again after it is righted.) Then, if my crew is female, I go help her stand and pull on the centerboard to right the boat or, if my crew is heavy and male. I return to the end of the mast to try to

lift the mast out of the water. Once the top of the mast breaks the surface of the water, the boat will spring up fairly easily, but there are times when that is easier said than done.

If there is a crash boat helping, give them the tender so that they can gently pull the bow into the wind. If there is no power boat, you might try pulling the bow into the wind yourself. If you are in the middle of a thunderstorm, I suggest waiting until after it is over before attempting to right the boat. I have spent many a pleasant summer afternoon floating in the lee of my capsized boat waiting for a storm abate. Once the boat is up, one of the crew must crawl into the boat over the stern. The gunnels will be almost awash and you will need to begin bailing to gain freeboard and stability. It is not a good idea to tow the boat while it still has a substantial amount of water in it.

For a Tanzer sailor who is a reasonable, good swimmer and comfortable in the water, a capsize is not an unpleasant experience. The ever-present possibility of a capsize adds a zing to the effort to balance the forces or wind and water- you know that your indiscretions will be promptly punished. However, this very real possibility makes it imperative that we not go sailing when the water is too cold. In my opinion, anytime the water temperature is below 60 degrees there is good reason for caution. If you are sailing when the temperature is below 60 degrees, you need to make sure that help is available to get you out of the water quickly. This is one of the advantages of participating in group activities with your fleet or yacht club. This danger is greatest not in the Fall, but in the Spring, when sailing fever hits. Here in North Carolina, we get some beautiful, balmy weather in March and sometimes even late February when the air temperature is well above 70 degrees F, but the water temperature is still too cold for sailing. Remember, safe sailing is good sailing.