

ONE WAY TO ADD A 'TOPPING - LIFT' TO A WANDERER DINGHY

TOPPING LIFT OVERVIEW:-

If you mostly sail with a crew, like to row or use an outboard and sometimes have a picnic afloat while at anchor or secured to a mooring buoy then you will know all about the inconvenience of having to accommodate the boom and mainsail within the boat while undertaking any of the above.

One way to increase the space available on board, and thereby everyone's comfort, would be to leave the boom and sail rigged but with the sail lowered. If this could be achieved then the extra headroom and comfort would be most welcome.

How is this to be done? - by 'borrowing' an additional rigging system from the 'big' yachts, namely the 'Topping Lift'. This system essentially keeps the boom horizontal with the sail down by supporting the outward end of the boom with a line run through a block at the mast head and by retaining the inboard end on the gooseneck. This requires an additional line to be run up the mast [internally or externally], passed through some form of block or smooth eye at or near the top and then run to the outward end of the boom where it is clipped or tied on. The other end of this line is cleated off at the base of the mast or some other convenient point.

Obviously, in a conventional dinghy, it is the raising of the mainsail that drags the boom into the horizontal position pivoting on the gooseneck and it's subsequent lowering that causes the boom and sail to pivot downward and fill the boat with aluminium and sail cloth! By adjusting the length of the topping lift line and then cleating it off it is possible to support the outward end of the boom /mainsail and maintain the boom in the horizontal position [or any other angle] when the mainsail is lowered.

A typical scenario, which assumes that the topping lift rig is left in place between sails as with other running rigging, might be:- rig the boat in the usual way. Before raising the mainsail, eg with boom still lowered but attached to the gooseneck, attach the topping lift line to the outer end of the boom using a suitable hook or bowline knot [see later] and leave loose. Raise, adjust and tension the mainsail as usual and cleat off. By now pulling on the other end of the topping lift line [at the base of the mast or aft position - see later] adjust the line's tension so it is just slack and applying no upward pull to the boom and cleat off. Do not leave too much slack so as to allow it to form a large loop and possibly interfere with the mainsail while sailing - just relieving the tension in the line is sufficient. Stow the surplus length of the topping lift line at or near the mast base or other cleating location and sail as normal. Attaching the topping lift line to a flailing boom once the mainsail is raised is not recommended!

When wishing to stop sailing and to either row or use the outboard, stop afloat for a picnic or make repairs etc, then prior to preparing to drop the mainsail uncleat the topping line and haul on it to apply tension and a slight upward movement on the outer end of the boom and re-cleat. The helm can assist at this point by pushing the boom up while the crew hauls, this greatly reduces the effort need by the crew. The topping lift is now supporting the boom and the mainsail can be lowered flaking it over the boom in the process. If windy then the sail can be secured with a couple of sail ties carried for the purpose wrapped round sail and boom. If done correctly little sail will hang in the boat. Be aware that with the boom up and the sail wrapped over it as described will create a greater windage area will be presented to the prevailing wind and this might well affect the boats behaviour when at anchor, hove to etc.

Make any final adjustments to the topping lift, if necessary, perhaps if the boom is not entirely horizontal or you may wish to rake the boom upward to increase headroom [especially for rowing], but be aware, when un-cleating the line, of the load that that will now be present in the line – namely the weight of boom and mainsail! For this reason it is always better to set the topping line correctly before dropping the mainsail. However if essential to readjust then the helm can reach up and take the weight of the boom/sail or provide the extra push upward while the crew makes any adjustment necessary to the topping lift line.

INSTALLING A TOPPING LIFT SYSTEM – ONE SIMPLE METHOD:-

I guess there are several methods for fitting a Topping Lift to a Wanderer dinghy. I will describe here the simple method I used and the materials needed. See also the sketch that accompanies this description.

I installed my topping lift line to the outside of the mast, to avoid hacking holes and the complexity of fitting a flush sheave and running lines within. For my top most eye through which the line must run, without too much friction, I decided to make use of the existing unused aluminium burgee fitment [hoop or saddle] pop riveted to the side of the mast a little way down from the top. This point is slightly lower than the top of the sailhead but does not cause any problems. You could fit your own similar attachment higher up if you wished but the mast tapers dramatically in this area and I would be concerned about introducing a weakness.

To this I fitted a small single block [using a small shackle], to ensure low friction when hauling on the line. You could try just passing the topping lift line through the Burgee hoop and using that. The slight increase in friction just makes it a little harder to pull on the line if and when under load. It might also wear the line over time. I just happened to have a suitable block in my 'Bosun's Bag'.

A neater but more complex method would involve careful removal of the pin that runs through mast and mainsail halyard sheave/block at the top of the mast. This is held in place by split rings at each end. Replace this with a longer pin [without losing the sheave] and install a single block on the section of new pin that protrudes from the side of the mast – however this is more cost and complexity and I preferred to keep it simple.

To the outward end of the boom I fitted a small stainless steel saddle that again I had in my collection of chandlery. This was fitted on top of the boom very close to the end and across at right angles to the boom's long axis. I drilled the boom and secured it with stainless steel self tapping screws of just the right length not to protrude into the boom too much. Note that the saddle required a little judicious bending to get it to fit the curved profile of the boom. I attach the topping lift line to this point using a small stainless steel sprung hook that I just happened, again, to have in my collection! You could just as easily use a bowline knot or some other snap on hook. Note that if you use plastic it must be capable of supporting the load of boom and a wet mainsail. Should it fail under load then a nasty crack on the head is destined for someone or damage to the boat. I would suggest going for stainless steel or a secure no – slip knot.

I decided that the crew should control the topping lift line and therefore decided that it should be cleated at the base of the mast to an existing cleat once used for the Burgee halyard. An alternative would be to run the line through another block at the mast foot to the rear of the boat perhaps using any existing spare bushed hole in the front of the centreboard casing [facing the mast foot] and exiting via a similar

opening complete with jamming cleat on the rear of the centreboard casing. I believe this route might normally be the intended for the spinnaker halyard. Such a route could be created if it didn't exist but this would again involve extra time and cost, but it is possible. I believe the system offered by Anglo Marine Services employs a similar method.

Rigging the topping lift is easy. You require a length of line, I would suggest a non-stretch type as used for halyards of similar with a dia of about 5mm?. You could make do with a lesser specification especially if you hardly ever adjust the height of the boom when supported by the topping lift with the line in tension.

The line must be long enough to run from your selected cleating position, to the base of the mast, then up the mast to pass through the top eye/block and from there to the fitment on the outward end of the mast. You must also include some surplus to allow for dropping the boom into the boat at some point. All this amounts to several meters – I estimate [sitting here at the keyboard and 11 miles from my boat!] - in the region of 10-12m for an aft cleating system and about 8-10m for a base of mast cleating position. You will need to measure this route for accuracy and your own solution – please don't order 12m of some expansive non-stretch float line to find that it's 2 m short!

Well, that's about it! Others will improve on the basic method given above but it should serve as guidance to those considering fitting such additional rigging. I leave my topping lift line permanently attached to the boat as with the other standing rigging. After use I simply attach the hook from the boom to the standard fitment loop fitted to the front of the mast, pull the line to tighten and tie off to the cleat on the bottom of the mast. To prevent the topping lift line 'billowing' out from the mast while under sail [no tension applied] I pass the line through the saddle/loop fitted to the front of the mast for use with spinnaker systems which I don't use. However an alternate simple guide can easily be fixed to the mast at some intermediate position if this 'billowing' distracts or bothers you.

There are some draw backs with fitting a topping lift system, these are:- i) the amount of extra line in the boat that has to be managed, ii) it's something else to think about when rigging and sailing.

You will almost certainly forget it while coming ashore at the end of a sail and dropping the mainsail in the usual way, pulling the boom off the gooseneck only to find the aft end of the boom still stuck up in the air and flailing about embarrassingly for all to see, but you'll only do it the once!!

See attached sketch of the author's topping lift system fitted to W863.

Terry Pullen W863 'Nebula'. September 2nd 2002.

