

Getting Out of Irons

Push your tiller and boom in the same direction until you're on a beam reach with your sails luffing. Then straighten your tiller, sheet in and go.



Boom and tiller are facing the same direction while getting out of irons. Which direction will the bow point towards – port or starboard?

The Sunfish has a tendency to get stuck in irons because of its light weight and quirky gaff rig. Understanding WHY this happens is just as important as understanding WHAT TO DO about it when it happens, how to PREVENT it from happening, and how to PRACTICE.

WHY?

When a boat tacks the sail ceases to provide power and creates drag as the sail luffs through the eye of the wind. Your “engine” has not only stopped working to propel you forward, but now it’s in reverse!

As the wind picks up, the tendency for a Sunfish to get stuck in irons increases because there is powerful and EQUAL PRESSURE on both sides of the sail that can prevent the Sunfish from turning. The Sunfish “snaps” into irons if you tack slowly in wind above 15 knots. If you are a lighter sailor it will affect you even more.

WHAT TO DO?

When stuck in irons, push your tiller and boom in the same direction until you are luffing on a beam reach, straighten your tiller, sheet in and go. Here is a quick breakdown of the steps;

1. Be mindful of your surroundings. Are you near a lee shore? Are other boats or obstructions around?
2. Push your tiller to one side. Your bow will swing towards the direction your tiller is pointing.
3. Push your boom out hard and far to the same side as the tiller.

4. Your boat will start sailing backwards and will start to turn. Wait until you are on a beam reach, straighten your tiller, sheet in and go.

PREVENTION

1. Tack fast and decisively. Get pressure back into the sail as soon as possible. (Remember, a luffing sail is your engine in reverse.)
2. If tacking from a point of sail below close hauled, sheet in as you come to windward to keep pressure in your sails until you tack. This is easy to forget when it's windy.
3. If you have a tendency to get stuck in irons stay away from lee shores and obstructions when tacking until you are proficient.

PRACTICE

1. Get into irons on purpose in different wind conditions and practice “WHAT TO DO?” above.
2. Practice sailing backwards by pushing the boom out and keeping the boat going in a straight line.
3. Get your tacking routine down so you can tack confidently and fast in heavy air.
4. Get good at getting out of irons! Try to work towards getting out as fast as you can, and in the direction you want to go.

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Image Credit: yachtingnewzealand (youtube channel)