

If I could only see the wind! How many times has that thought run through a sailor's mind? To some extent we can see the wind, or at least it's effect on sails using a very simple tool - telltales. Placed in the right areas, telltales are easily the best way to improve your boat's speed through proper sail trim, whether cruising or racing.

Telltales are usually wool or synthetic fuzzy yarn about 6 - 9 inches long. Have the ends of the tells tales burned so they do not fray. Replace them every once in a while as they flatten over time and become far less sensitive. If you sail in a rainy place or put the sails in the water, apply a dry spray to stop them from becoming waterlogged and ineffective.

Mainsails

Mainsails require telltales to indicate a) twist and b) fullness. Most sails will come with telltales on the leech of the mainsail. The telltale at the top barren is the most critical. It is on the part of the sail which will twist the most and will stall first. On most boats (i.e. Optimists to Whitbread 60's) the main is trimmed properly upwind when the top telltale flows about 50-90 % of the time, depending on wind speed and the sea. If it flows more than 90% or less than 50%, the sail probably needs adjusting.

The second place to put a telltale (or many telltale tales) is one quarter of the way down from the head in the middle of the sail. This telltale indicates mainsail fullness when sailing upwind. If the inside telltale luffs when the leech is trimmed it means the sail is too full. Conversely, if the leeward one breaks or stalls this indicates the sail is too flat. The one quarter telltale is also used when going downwind. When the spinnaker is up, it shows whether the mainsail needs to be eased or trimmed.

Jibs

Placement of telltales on jibs is straight forward. Three sets of telltales 1/4, 1/2 and 3/4 up the luff are standard, and the telltales should be placed 10 - 18 inches back from the luff depending on sail size. The helmsperson steers to the bottom telltale tales. The other two sets are secondary guides to steering and are primarily used to help in the fore and aft trim of the Genoa lead. If the top telltales stall before the lower ones, as the boat heads into the wind, the lead should go forward. In many one design classes which have jibs with battens it is helpful to have a telltale 1/4 of the way down from the head on the leech just like the top telltale of the mainsail. It seems that unlike the mainsail it is never fast to have the jib leech telltale stall.

Spinnakers / Asymmetrics

Telltales on the leeches of spinnakers or on the luff of an asymmetrical spinnaker have become more popular. Telltales on spinnakers are appearing on many boats from top 505's and J-24's to IMS boats. They work basically like the telltales on the jib, and the spinnaker trimmer uses them to keep the spinnaker adjusted properly. The telltales should be placed about 1/3 of the way down from the head about 24 inches in from the leech/luff for a standard 35-footer. If the leeward telltale is stalling on the luff, ease the sail until it flows. If the luff of the sail begins to collapse before the telltale flies, the pole is too low. If the weather telltale stalls without the luff of the sail curling, the pole is set too high.

Single-Handed Boats

Three sets of telltales 12 - 14 inches back at 1/4, 1/2, and 3/4 up the sail luff seems to be good. The bottom set give feedback on the steering groove. The upper set show how full or flat the sail is as well as helping to indicate relative twist. If the upper telltale tale is stalled, but the bottom telltales are both flying properly, then the sail needs more twist.

Source: Jason Rhodes