Three ways to Douse an Asymmetric

Edited by Marvin Pozefsky from Sailing World Magazine

The general rule we use now is: unless we absolutely have to, we won't do a leeward drop in more than 7 knots of wind. Only if you're laying the mark, or worse, if you're overlayed, should you attempt a leeward takedown. Here's how to do it properly. If you have a very competent crew, and enough people, keep heading toward the mark and blow the halyard—release it completely. If you leave the tack nailed and the foot stretched tight, you usually won't shrimp. Like a symmetric spinnaker, the a-sail should float just over the water. Then grab the middle of the foot and haul the sail into the boat through the forward hatch.

If you don't have 100-percent confidence in your crew work, you'll want to run off for two or three boatlengths as you douse the sail. This will blanket the chute behind the main, depressurizing the sail so you can gather it in, under control. But running off will take you away from the mark. You'll lose those boatlengths, which become double when you head up toward the mark. It's better to not approach the mark on layline, because then you can do one of the two preferred a-sail drops: either the weather strip or the Mexican.

The weather strip and the Mexican are the bread-and-butter moves at the leeward mark. A weather strip keeps the sail on the weather side, so there's no chance of shrimping. The first step in a weather strip is to raise the jib. Then the bowperson grabs the lazy sheet, which is used to pull the sail around the headstay to the windward side.

Steering the correct course is the key to this maneuver. To help rotate the spinnaker around to the weather side, the boat must be turned almost dead downwind. After the bow has been turned down at least 20 degrees from the usual downwind course, the foredeck team starts pulling hard on the last sheet to start the spinnaker around the headstay.

The chute must collapse as the boat turns down. If it doesn't, you won't be able to pull it around. If the chute won't collapse, release the tack completely. Don't ease it part way—easing it only five feet or so will only make the sail deeper. Release it all the way and the sail will collapse. Here's another tip: keep the jib sheeted in so that the chute collapses into it. Then the spinnaker can't go anywhere except on deck.

After the chute collapses and the clew is pulled around the forestay, you can begin easing the halyard. When most of the sail is pulled to the weather side, you can release the halyard completely and the chute will just fall down the jibe and onto the deck. The helmsman must keep the bow down during this part of the maneuver. If he heads up too quickly, you can loose control of the spinnaker as it's coming down.

This type of drop is called a Mexican because, in the 1992 America's Cup, San Diego's prevailing winds were so consistent that every time crews rounded the leeward mark and performed this maneuver the boats were pointed toward Mexico. The name has now become so universal that I often hear it used in Europe. With a little practice, this takedown can be completed in about two-and-a-half boatlengths. Unless you've got a top crew, you don't want to tackle this in a big breeze or you'll end up with the spinnaker in the water. But it's the fastest and most efficient way to get around the mark if a jibe is required.

Before the jibe, raise the jib and have the foredeck team grab the lazy spinnaker sheet on the leeward side. As the boat jibes, four things must happen. The foredeck crew pulls on the lazy sheet and then grabs the foot of the chute as it comes across. The cockpit crew jibes the jib, but doesn't release the old spinnaker sheet. A spare crewmember pulls the spinnaker leech forward to keep the sail from blowing behind the mast. The pit crew begins to ease the spinnaker halyard just as the boat begins to turn.

By the time the boat is in mid-jibe, the halyard is well down, the spinnaker sheet is now being eased, and the chute should be ready to collapse into the foretriangle, on the weather side of the jib. Like on the weather strip, the jib is oversheeted on the new leeward side to funnel the chute down to the deck. The helmsman needs to watch the drop and turn the boat fast enough to keep the spinnaker on the new weather side. If he turns too slowly, it will drop into the water as the jibe is completed.

With a good rate of turn, the chute will drop onto the foredeck, but it's important not to ease the tack until the sail is fully under control. If the sail ends up in the water by accident, you won't lose control of it if the tack is still nailed. But, if the sail hits the water with the tack eased, then all three corners of the sail are loose and you'll end up with the sail trailing behind you—shrimping. And we never want to do that again!