

Sailing Coach Profile

Lukas Koch

An interview by Tim Harvey



The SSISC's Summer Sailing School is known around Salt Spring as one of the community's most rewarding summer activities for youth. This is largely due to the quality of its coaches. Many of those coaches are products of the club itself, while others bring a breadth of experience in racing and coaching at other clubs. Today, we'll meet Lukas Koch who, at 25, is head instructor for SSISC's Summer Sailing School and a big part of what makes the sailing school such a resounding success.

I caught up with Lukas as he stepped out of the coach's zodiac after a breezy day in Ganges Harbour. Around us, students hoisted dinghies from the water and rolled up their sails. Lukas agreed to answer a few burning questions I had about how his passion for sailing led him to the Salt Spring Island Sailing Club, and the impact he is making on young sailors. We sat down at a table in the clubhouse, and Lukas shared his story.

TH: Thanks for the interview, Lukas. Let's start with how you got into sailing.

LK: I started at a summer sailing camp back home in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, similar to the sailing school here. I enjoyed it and came back every year. Around that time, my dad bought a little sailing dinghy, so I got out sailing with him a bunch as well. At fifteen, I bought a sailboat for myself and did the Wednesday night races in Niagara-on-the-Lake. It was recreational racing, a lot of fun.

I came to Victoria in 2016 when I started at UVic. I joined the UVic sailing team that ran out of Cadboro Bay. We raced the universities along the west coast right down to Oregon and California, travelling to take part in their events, racing FJs. Those are very similar to a 420, but it's what they use in the States. We were part of the Intercollegiate Sailing Association.

TH: What was the highlight of that period?

LK: Going to Cali in November and being able to swim! The teams down there were highly competitive, which was nice.

TH: How long have you been coaching kids?

LK: When I was sixteen and had finished all the Cansail levels, the next step to stay involved was coaching. I did that in Niagara-on-the-Lake, first helping different groups, and soon they needed someone to coach the race team level, so I got thrown right into that. I enjoy coaching; it's awesome to be on the water, and to watch kids pick up a new sport and improve, and just enjoy themselves on the water. That part of coaching is so appealing, being able to contribute to kids loving the sport and getting better at it.

TH: What are your interests outside of sailing?

LK: Boats! [Laughs] Well, I like tinkering with electronic projects, 3D printing, that sort of thing. At UVic I studied engineering and Computer Science. Now I'm at Comosun College in a program called "Electrical Engineering Technology – Marine and Industrial." I'm excited to get into the field and do it. For example, it would be really cool to go to ships with electrical issues and fix whatever problems they have.

TH: What are your plans for the future?

LK: Again, boats! I'd like to keep coaching; I'd also love to get a bigger boat, and to learn more about the cruising side of sailing. I'd like to get involved in racing again, as I haven't been doing much of it recently. I'm not sure if it would be in smaller boats or in keel boats; the Laser is interesting. It's the most popular dinghy class, one that adults can enjoy.

TH: What are some of the challenges you have overcome to put yourself on this path?

LK: One challenge was coming out west and getting integrated into the sailing community. I didn't know anyone in the community when I first came out here, and it took a year or two to get coaching again.

TH: What brought you to the Salt Spring Sailing Club?

LK: In 2020, I was looking for a job with more of a leadership role. The guy who ran the program in Victoria mentioned to me that the SSISC was looking for a senior head instructor. I like coaching in new places, as I get to meet new people, see a new place. I decided to try it out for a summer. In 2021 I coached in Halifax, and then was invited back here last year. This is my third year at the club.

TH: How does the SSISC compare to some of the other clubs you've coached at?

LK: This one is similar to Halifax. The club there was also a smaller, friendly and welcoming club. One summer I coached at the Royal Canadian Yacht Club in Toronto, a big exclusive club. When it gets down to it, the experience was much the same as here, as you run into the same kinds of issues, and you're still just teaching kids to sail. It was interesting to do it in a big fancy club, but still very similar.

TH: What impact do you aim to make as a coach?

LK: The goal is to get kids onto the water and to make sure they have a good time. I hope I'm achieving that! And I guess it's also to make sure we produce sailors that can be instructors going forward, to keep the program going.

TH: How is the SSISC's coaching pipeline?

LK: Sixteen is a key age to have kids able to do instructor certification courses. That allows for some coaching seasons before reaching that age where people commonly finish high school and might move away. Some of our current instructors are reaching that age, so next year might be a challenge. But after that, we have a lot of keen, promising young people coming through.

TH: Why is it so important to have a sailing as an option for youth?

LK: A whole bunch of reasons! There's the social aspect; they get out with a new group of people. There's a lot of teamwork involved, but you still learn leadership roles, as it's such small groups on the boats. A lot of kids really enjoy that feeling of independence of being able to sail a boat by themselves. And there's that thrill and adventure factor that is appealing to many people as well. It gets them moving; you improve your balance being on a little tippy boat.

TH: How do you find Salt Spring Island?

LK: Salt Spring is such a welcoming place. I have been able to stay with club members, and it's been an awesome spot with super welcoming folks. Being able to stay there makes it possible for me to come here to coach.