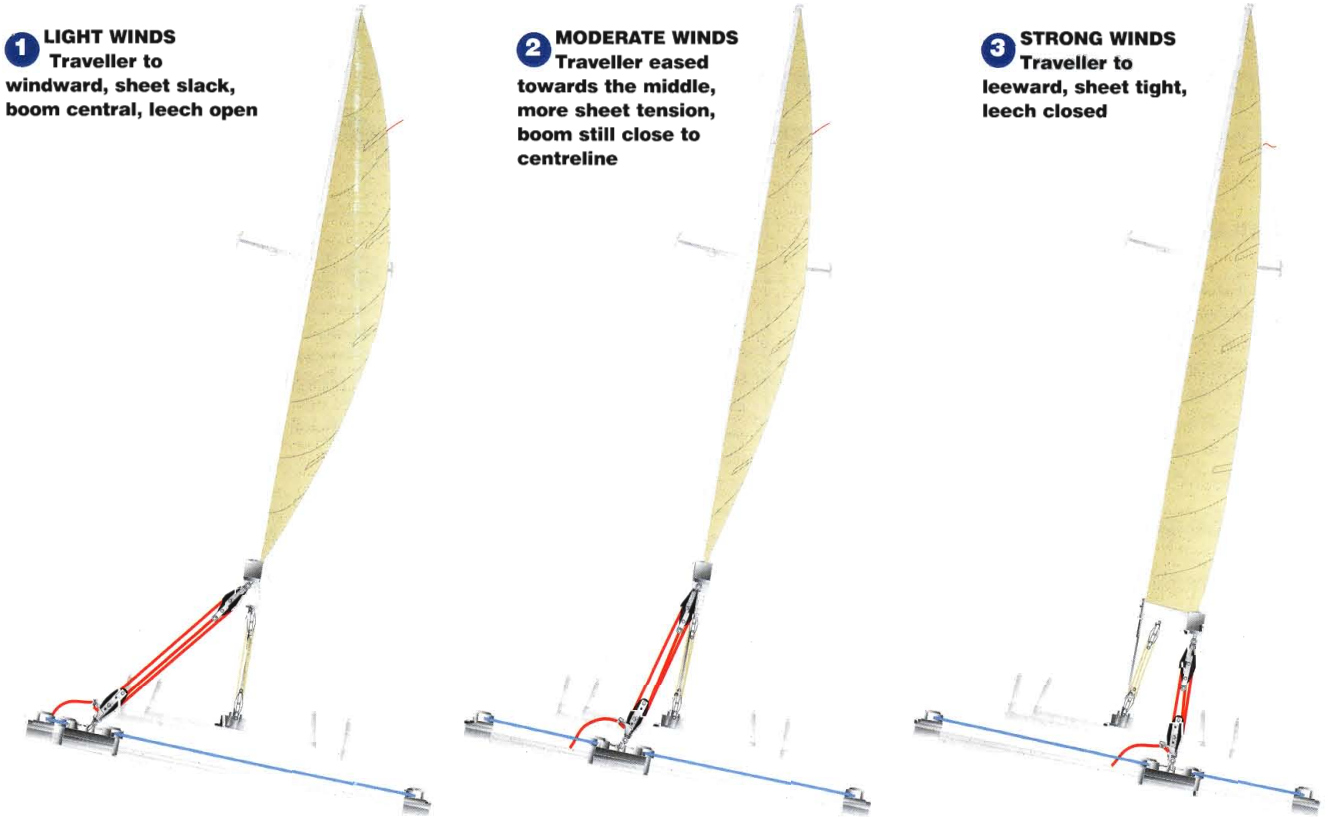
The cruisers' alternative...

If cruisers were like big dinghies, they could adopt the same solution – but it would be virtually impossible to fit a kicking strap of the same power in relation to the size of the rig without breaking something.

Instead, the answer to controlling the mainsail lies in the traveller. In light winds, you can centre the boom with minimal downward pull on the sheet by sliding the traveller all the way to windward (diagram 1). You're aiming to keep the top telltale streaming, with the top batten pointing well outboard.

In fresher conditions, you want to start closing the leech with more sheet tension – and a more vertical pull on the boom. That means easing the traveller towards the middle the track and sheeting in until the top telltale begins to stall occasionally, but still keeping the boom as close to the centreline as heel and weather helm allow (diagram 2).

In strong winds, drop the traveller all or most of the way to leeward and sheet in really hard: you'll be unlikely to stall the top telltale no matter how tight you pull the sheet (diagram 3).



1 LIGHT WINDS Traveller to windward, sheet slack, boom central, leech open

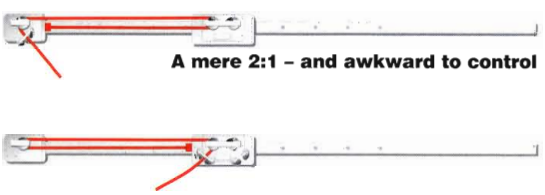
2 MODERATE WINDS Traveller eased towards the middle, more sheet tension, boom still close to centreline

3 STRONG WINDS Traveller to leeward, sheet tight, leech closed

Making life easier...

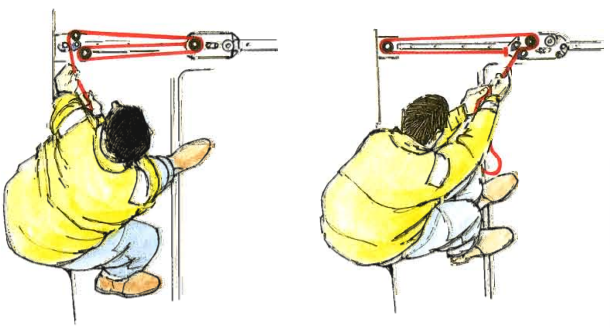
When you have to spill wind occasionally in gusty conditions, it's much less effort to drop the traveller down the track and haul it up again in the lulls than it is to play a heavily-loaded mainsheet.

If it's not easier, maybe your traveller needs attention. Does it have enough purchase? Most small cruisers should have at least 3:1, while anything up to 6:1 is called for on bigger boats. Traveller systems also grow old. Corroded cars and pitted sheaves add friction: if you take your sailing seriously, some new hardware could be a good investment. Another major factor is the angle from which you're controlling the traveller. It's often easier to adjust with the cleat on the car itself rather than on the outboard end of the track (right) – though much depends on your cockpit layout.



A mere 2:1 – and awkward to control

Moving the standing end of the control line and the cleat to the car gives you a 3:1 purchase and, quite possibly, an easier angle of pull.



And finally...

Remember that the traveller's position has an enormous effect on helm balance. If you're not pointing or there's no feel to the helm, try bringing it up to windward. If you're heeling too far or there's too much weather helm, ease it down the track.