

From Sailing World, August 1996

Think Simple Thoughts

Hold her steady, tiller is balanced...NICE PRESSURE...Trim...TRIM!...If you can't pay attention, we'll get someone ELSE!!!...Now we're feeling fast...Lower and FASTER...boy, that new chute looks fine... There's the mark...we're almost making it on this jibe, and we've got a lane of clear air...Those boats on the other jibe are sailing away from the mark, and they're JIBING...I HEAR YOU...No, we're NOT at two boatlengths yet... All RIGHT! You've got it...Listen to that guy to leeward. He's LOSING it...DAMN it, that's three boats we've lost on this run. Must have been out of phase...One down, two to go, hold it steady...

Does this sound familiar? As complicated as we try to make our sport, success often comes down to avoiding basic mistakes.

by Ed Baird

In my frequent role as a coach, I see a lot of talented sailors doing extraordinary things: straight-leg hiking for hours in Lasers, getting out of crowded mark roundings with strong positions and speed, sniffing out windshifts that shouldn't have been there. It's fun to watch how the good guys do it. But it's also fun to see how they blow it!

Everybody has bad days. Even the best can only expect to win occasionally. If they win a lot in one year, you can be sure they went to a lot of events and didn't win a bunch, too. And those who do win regattas rarely win every race. It's nice to know that everyone makes mistakes.

In the debriefs we have at the dock, I'm always interested to hear what sailors were thinking at different times during the race. We talk about what was on their minds when they made an error, and what risks they may not have seen in their chosen plans. What's fascinating is how complicated they often make their race. The mental gymnastics they can put themselves through are amazing.

My suggestion is to keep the thinking process simple. There's enough going on that you don't need to add to the potential confusion. Every sailor I've worked with has been able to trace the majority of their disappointing finishes down to either being slow or trying to be too fancy. In being "fancy," they concentrate on the wrong aspects of the race. This leads to missed opportunities or taking large risks without realizing the danger.

Be assured that the winners win by looking at the same variables as you do; they just sift through them better. Take these examples: I sailed a Laser race with 107 boats in 10 knots of breeze. One sailor jumped off to an early lead and was quickly extending in the small shifts and bumpy conditions. He was doing everything right, until he sailed right

past the layline for the mark. In fact, just this past March at the SORC, a Mumm 36 did the same thing. And this boat had eight people on board! What were they thinking?

Perhaps the most common brain hiccup happens when we get a great start at the pin, but our strategy is to go right. We'd like to tack, but there's one boat pinning us down, so we try to out-boatspeed them. Meanwhile, the fleet begins to tack away, and by the time we force that one boat to tack, everyone is hopelessly launched to the right and uncatchable. Could it be that this one boat was not worth the fight?

And speaking of fights, we've all battled for the inside at the leeward mark, only to round with the jib half up and the spinnaker half down. Wouldn't it have been better to take the spinnaker down a little earlier?

These are all examples of misplaced priorities. I like to continually ask myself these two things: "Am I doing the right thing, right now? Am I taking any risks that aren't necessary?" Don't let frustration or anxiety cause you to take risks that aren't warranted. If the strategy is to go right, get there. If it was correct, it won't matter that you ducked a couple of boats to get there.

When you are suffering from misplaced priorities, my suggestion is to refocus on the basics. So here are some simple rules to live by. I'll bet you'll be surprised at how often these truly basic concepts are forgotten, or replaced by something more, well, complicated.

Rule No. 1 is fundamental: You've got to be fast to look smart! If you play the shifts well, but still drop places, you're slow. I've been in a number of situations when it seemed like we were getting good starts and sailing lifts all day long, but still getting beaten to the mark. There's nothing more frustrating than feeling good about a leg or race, but still doing poorly and not knowing why. When this happens, it's normal to be frustrated and start second-guessing your 20 tactical decisions. But often the real culprit is a lack of speed.

You must have good, reliable equipment, and know how to use it. This sounds so simple, but ask yourself, "Do I have the best hull finish on the course? Are my sails from the loft that is winning in our class or fleet? Is my crew ready for every condition? Are all the systems on board working well?"

If your answer is anything other than an absolute "yes," then you're not going fast. Improving in this area means you'll accelerate off the starting line from difficult positions and not be forced to tack. It means you can round behind another boat at the leeward mark and hang on their hip until things clear out and you can tack freely. Can you do that now?

Don't kid yourself; this is the most basic, and yet the most overlooked, area of racing. You need to ask a lot of questions. How do I set up the boat for light air and heavy? What are the rig tensions that others are using? How are my sail shapes holding up? These are

things you can find out with an easy phone call to your sailmaker, or casual chat at the bar. Then spend the practice time that it takes to be prepared. If you're slow, it's hard to look smart!

In every sport, the best equipment makes winning easier, and in sailing it may be more so. If you refuse to put in the prep time or spend the money to have someone else do it, then you must also refuse to get angry when you don't win.

This brings me to my second rule: You can't win every race. Even the most dominant teams don't win all the time. When you look at scores, figure what the winning average might be. In most events with 20 boats, for example, an average of third in each race will easily win a six-race series. If you round the weather mark in seventh, don't panic that it's a long way to first. Look at how far it is to third, and try to get there, a little at a time. In other words, let the other teams take the risks and make the mistakes!

A common mistake is not keeping track of the wind. You can't tack on a shift if you don't learn the range of the windshifts before the race begins. When the start goes off and you look at your compass, you should know whether you're headed or lifted. In the stock market, the corollary would be whether to "buy or sell." Sounds easy, but in either case it means doing your research. Get out early enough to sail upwind on both tacks.

Too often I see teams get out early, only to use up their time tying on sheets and hoisting sails, or worse, repairing something instead of researching the racecourse. Make it a rule that when your team leaves the dock they're ready to race. Assign preparation jobs for the whole team. And then don't just stand around the coffee urn! Prepare the boat early, so you can think about strategy as you're sailing out to the course.

So now the race has begun, and here comes your first crossing. What is going through your head? Think of this: In every crossing, someone's going the wrong way. This thought is critical as far as strategy goes. You should "check in" — decide if you're headed the right way — by comparing yourself to the fleet every minute or two. If people are running from a burning building, you don't go in to see what it's like. Likewise, if the fleet is mostly going left, should you be going right? The answer can be yes, but you'd better have a strong reason to buck the common thinking. Again, let the other teams take the risks!

Along that same train of thought, remember this: You need a good reason to tack away from the fleet. So many people let the wrong things dictate their thinking. Have you ever tacked because you were cold and the other tack was in the sun? Or changed tacks when your legs hurt from hiking? Answer honestly. Have you tacked because you were angry, frustrated that someone just passed you, or just plain bored? I have. But I try not to.

The right reasons to tack are that you can make a gain or limit a loss, or position yourself to minimize risk. If you tack for any other reason you could be making an error. Force yourself to do what's right at the time. And don't let laziness or a lack of confidence in your crew work keep you from tacking when the time is right.

When I first started sailing bigger boats, sometimes we would talk ourselves out of tacking (or changing sails, or whatever) because we didn't want to make the crew work too hard. Wrong! They are there because they want to win and are willing to work for it.

So come up with a strategy and then get on the best tack to follow it. If the rest of the fleet thinks differently than you and chooses the other tack, keep "checking in" to be sure your plan is working. The less confident you are, the more you should be on the same tack as most of the boats around you. Only if you're confident that the shift will go your way should you split more. That's managing the risk.

Here's another simple strategy rule often taught in junior sailing: You shouldn't have to turn your head to see the mark. Being on the closest tack to the mark doesn't make it the correct tack all the time, but many top sailors put a priority on staying away from the laylines until the end of the leg. Especially when the wind is fairly shifty, a quick way to confirm this basic strategy is to look for the mark. If it's within a few degrees of the bow, you have a strong reason to stay put. If the mark's over your shoulder, however, you have a strong reason to tack. Generally, the closest tack to the mark carries the smaller risk for failure.

And speaking of junior sailors, as adults we need to teach by example that yelling is a sign of being under-prepared. Whenever I hear voices raised on the racecourse, I know they come from a boat that won't win consistently. I believe that preparation breeds calmness. Being organized and prepared means things don't catch you off guard. It means you're ready for any situation.

Winning teams spend a lot of time talking about what they'll do if such-and-such happens. Don't fill in the long beats with chatter about last night's party; talk about whether you're on the right tack. Decide what you will do if other boats in the fleet start tacking. Top teams are rarely surprised by a sudden change in circumstance. They've been expecting it. There's no excitement, and especially no yelling, when the change happens.

Your team should make this commitment: no matter what happens, no one yells. If you blow something, talk about it after the race. If you get frustrated and want to scream, save it for when you're in the shower. Take your situation and make more of it than the next competitor. That's part of the challenge of the sport.

Next thing you know, your team will enjoy itself more, the race will slow down and be more clear, and you'll find that you're thinking ahead. You'll be prepared, and you'll be laughing as you pass the "yeller" on the course. Remember, let the other teams make the mistakes.

Finally, when faced with a frustrating race, I calm myself with this thought: Most of the fun is in the learning. People who enjoy competition the most are learning every day. The more you learn and improve, the better you feel about yourself. By taking the focus off the goal of winning, the pressure of the race goes away and it's easier to make clear

decisions. Concentrate on setting goals for the day, and get them accomplished. Don't measure yourself by finishes alone.

Try to keep the crew talking about the potential good and bad of each move before it happens. After each race, be sure to talk about why things went as they did. Remember that everyone is trying hard, but that people will always make errors. When they happen, look for ways to avoid them next time, not punish them this time. Smile when you talk!

I think it's great fun to see sailors start to think this way. Suddenly they are more relaxed. They don't get the pre-start jitters; they get their heads out of the boat and onto the racecourse. One tremendous bonus of using each race to learn is that you laugh a lot more, and worry about trophies a lot less — what a great way to get around the course. And remember, the more you learn, the more likely you are to win!

So there you have it. The basics of our sport are where we win and lose most races. Pay attention to them, and you'll have your share of good days. Forget them, and you're sure to be disappointed. Because as complicated as we like to imagine our sport, it's basically a simple game of starting first, protecting your lead and finishing strong.

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