

## Fleet 55 Starting System

The following are the key elements to making our sailing club a success story. They include many of the points made in the September issue of Sailing World article on the subject.

1. We have strong leadership in our officers, especially Rod Nystul, the commodore for several years, who is very enthusiastic.
2. We have well-organized social events (3) throughout the summer months.
3. We have two Fun Races during the season that race around the islands and through some narrow channels rather than around the buoys.

And:

4. We have a unique starting system that accomplishes the goals of competitive club sailing. The Fleet 55 Starting System has helped achieve these results:
  - new members joining every year, some just for the social events
  - members staying with the club for a very long time
  - sailing members, sailing most of the races
  - all sailors improving every season

Our club for many years could be characterized by the following statements:

- The same sailors winning every season, almost in the same order
- The same sailors in the middle of the pack
- The same sailors in the back
- In almost every race, the leaders are leading at the first mark and the rest of the pack parades somewhere back there for the balance of the race.
- The lead sailors say, that if the other guys would get out and practice, or go to a few regattas, they could lead too.
- The pack sailors figure that they won't ever finish ahead of the fast guys.
- It is generally felt that the better sailors have the better boats.

Our club had all these characteristics until we got the bright idea of having the slower boats start early. It occurred to us that during the first leg, everyone would work hard to get to the first mark, but once it was clear to all that the leaders were again leading, the followers followed until the end of the race. What happens is that the intensity that is part of the early minutes of the race is lost as soon as the followers find themselves in their "expected" positions. The key word here is intensity. So we sought a method that would keep the intensity in as many racers as possible for as long as possible. Not just so they can finish better, but during the intensity, is when they are trying their best and learning at their peak.

Our system works like this. Everyone starts at the 5-minute gun for the first race of the year. The two boats that finish 1&2, move back and start at the 2-minute gun for all subsequent races of the season. Whenever a boat starting at the 2-minute gun finishes in the top 2 places, he then moves to starting scratch, 10-minutes after the first gun, for the balance of the season.

This is what happens. The fastest boats find themselves starting scratch after the first 2-3 races. The middle of the pack boats then begin finishing ahead of the fast guys and drop to the 2-

minute start. The slowest boats are now starting 5 minutes ahead of all the faster boats and generally are in the lead for most of the race.

Let me cite some specifics from the 1999 season. We have 19 boats sailing, 16 almost every week.

1. At the start of the last race of the season, only 5 of 16 boats started 5 minutes ahead. That means that 11 of the 16 boats have finished first or second at least once during the season. Two thirds of the fleet felt the exhilaration of a first or second during the season.
2. Of the 5 boats that started 5 minutes ahead on the last race of the season, one finished 2nd and one finished 3rd and one finished 4th. That says that these guys have got the intensity right through to the last race. P.S. The boat finishing 2nd in this race is skippered by an Ancient Mariner 83 years young.
3. At the start of the last race of the season, 5 boats were starting scratch. These boats had finished first or second at least twice during the season. Only one of these boats finished in the top 5 places during the last race.
4. The boat that won the summer series, finished 10th twice during the season, and 7th in the final race.  
That means that most of the sailors finished ahead of the series winner more than twice during the season.
5. The sailor that finished first in the summer series only won one race.
6. **Nine different sailors won a race in the 13-race season.**  
That means nine, (not just 2 or 3) went home to his wife and kids with bragging rights for a week. And believe me that feels good and will bring them back next week.
7. 12 boat of the 16 that sail most weeks, finished 1st. or 2nd in at least one race. That's fun for everyone.
8. The winning boat had 30 net points (after 3 drops). So it is just like a long regatta, you can have some bad races but still finish well if you are consistent and beat the boats that start at the same time you start all year. A tenth is ok, if it is ahead of those that started the same time you did.

What do the "fast boats" think about this system? Well first of all, the top 8 finishers of the 16 boats who sail on a regular basis, have a good shot at finishing in the top three spots. These boats love it. Remember the intensity we were talking about, (and this may be news to the boats back in the pack) sometimes the fast guys lose the intensity too if they are comfortably in the top spots and hold on until the end of the race or the end of the season. With the "Fleet 55 Starting System" they have to work their butts off every race.

Consider this:

During the early races the fast guys have to get out in front and win some races. Then they have to do the same coming with a 3-minute handicap. When they score again, they start five minutes back. Five minutes behind 10-12 boats that you need to beat is one tough task. That's why the winning boats don't always finish in the top half of the fleet, some days there are simply

not enough passing lanes out there. And every week the "slower" boats spend more and more time in the intensity groove holding their leads making it more and more difficult for the fast boats to catch them. And while all this is going on, all sailors are working harder and getting faster, making fewer mistakes, learning more and feeling the adrenaline pump throughout the race.

When you are starting behind 10-12 boats, some who have already have a 1st or 2nd for the season, and having to chase them down one at a time to take the lead it is like racing in a big regatta right on your own lake. Believe me, it is tough and therefore very rewarding when you do pass them.

What about the "pack" boats, what are their feelings?

They all remember the standard starting system and know it is not much fun.

They say it is much more fun finishing ahead of some of the "fast guys" several times during the season. Every week they get a good start, learn the value of clean air and have the opportunity to hold the lead if they don't make too many mistakes. As the season progresses the slowest boats find the 5 minute group smaller and smaller so they can possibly finish ahead of ones that started along side just last week. During the last 4 races of the year, 4 different boats finished 2nd for the first time all season. In the last race of the season, the slower boats finished 2nd, 3rd, and 4th. That means progress. That means improvement. That means they will be back next year doing even better. The Masters sailor who won the 6th race this season, (his first win ever) said that was the hardest he had ever worked in his boat. His wife, who watched the race from her dock, was seen jumping up and down as he crossed the finish line.

Please note that we have been using this system for many years and it is rare to hear someone make light of a boat that won the race which had started 2 minutes or 5 minutes ahead. The Fleet 55 Starting System is our local rule. You race to the rules and the finishing positions are taken at face value. After all, Golf and Bowling and other sports have handicap systems to make it fun and competitive.

Give it a try!

Respectfully,  
Peter Van Kampen  
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