

TWO IMPORTANT TACTICS IN BIG FLEET RACING:

WINDSHIFTS LAYLINES

by Jim Crane

Tactics are often maligned as being secondary to boat speed when it comes to success in boat racing, and this may be an arguable point in small local fleets, but in international competition faulty tactics can quickly negate any boat speed advantage. How many times have you seen a local hot shot step up to a national or international regatta and find himself completely out of the race by the first mark. The individual's usual reaction is one of disbelief at the number of times he misses the first shift, is tacked on the starboard layline, and is outside at the jibe mark. More often than not the individual is oblivious to the cause of his malady and blames it on "bad luck" when the actual cause is a lack of foresight and anticipation. I have picked what I believe to be two of the most common errors of the new initiate to big fleet racing and have tried to explain how to side step these pitfalls.

PICKING THE FIRST SHIFT

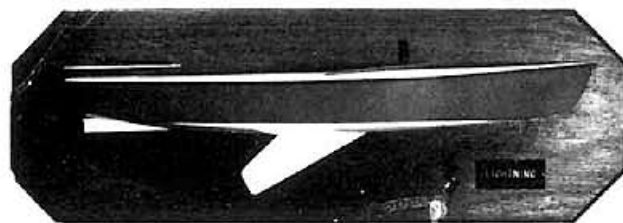
In any large competitive fleet each race is always broken down into two groups. The first 10 boats to the weather mark constitute the forerunners, and in most instances, are oblivious to the rest of the boats in the race for the remainder of the afternoon. Anyone rounding the mark worse than 10th can usually expect to remain in the doldrums while the leaders slowly disappear over the horizon. Once you fall into the "ruck" you are in a constant battle to find clear air, smooth water or for that matter peace of mind. The latitude you have for determining what you want to do on the race course becomes narrower and narrower until your very course almost becomes dictated by the boats around you. An obvious sure cure is don't fall back into the pack. The single most important point in the race to prevent this is the start and the 10 minutes or so immediately following the start. It is obvious to everyone that without an excellent start your chances for success in a 70 boat fleet are slim, but what is less obvious and of equal importance is the ability to capitalize on the first shift after the start. The most common error of the new initiate is to start a race without the slightest clue as to whether his initial compass course is a header or a lift. When you start in this predicament you always have to sail through one shift to determine what the wind is doing. This does a number of bad things. First, and most obvious, is that by not being aware of whether you started on a lift or header you might have lost the opportunity to tack onto the most favored tack. Secondly, and a more subtle point, is that you are not able to plan your start to take advantage of an anticipated shift. For instance, if you know that port tack will be favored at the gun, a start at the very leeward end of the line would be extremely chancy. With the entire fleet starting on starboard tack your chances of being able to tack immediately to port are extremely slim (unless you have the perfect start). In most cases you would be forced to remain on the wrong tack, or if you did tack you would have to duck

a good portion of the fleet. In large fleets you have to weigh the advantages of starting at the most favored spot and not being able to capitalize on the first shift, or starting in a more conservative position that allows you an option to tack. Another case, and a more easily reconciled decision, is when the line appears square just prior to the start. If you anticipate a shift you should start at the end that would have been favored had the expected shift occurred before the gun.

What all this boils down to is that you better have a darned good idea of the oscillations or gradual swing of the wind prior to the start of the race. The best way to do this is to get out on the race course early enough to sail at least half the weather leg taking port and starboard tack readings until you get an idea of the mean high and low readings on each tack. It is also a good idea to measure the true wind direction so that constant checks prior to the start can be made to determine if the wind is swinging permanently rather than just oscillating. Once you have this information, you should make sure that you check the wind again as close to the start as possible to enable you to choose your starting strategy. Then, once the gun has gone, you know what your compass is telling you and you can make immediate decisions.

LAY LINES

With 70 boats in a race, rounding the first mark is a harrowing experience for both old and young. You either



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make it in good shape or slip back into the masses. The 500 yards just prior to the weather mark probably offers more opportunity for gain or loss than any point in the rest of the race. Some people invariably seem to squirt out of the pack just prior to the mark, while others lose any slight edge they may have gained over two miles of sailing. The key to successful weather mark approaches is to stay away from both the port and starboard tack lay lines for once you have committed yourself to a lay line the only things that can happen to you are bad. If someone tacks in front of you, you are forced to eat his bad air until you round the mark. If you elect to tack to weather to clear your air, you are only adding additional sailing distance to the weather mark. If you are lifted on the lay line you overstand, or if you are headed the boats to leeward will pick you off. When the fleet converges at the weather mark, the ability to tack on shifts in clear air obviously becomes more difficult, but if you remain as close as possible to the rhumb line between the weather mark and the start you will be in the most favorable position to capitalize on a shift should it occur. How often have you seen a top sailor tack 100 yards to leeward of a string of starboard tackers who are making the mark, hook a small header and cross the whole pack before they turn the corner.

When you are about two-thirds up the weather leg you should start thinking about your approach to the mark. Look at the position of your competitors and anticipate what you will have to do to prevent them from driving you to the lay line. Very often it becomes a question of whether you

should sail in a little bad air or risk sailing to the lay line. If the mark is a long way away you have probably already waited too long to get back to the rhumb line and will be forced to sail in bad air no matter what you do. However, if you have not "hung yourself on a corner," it is almost invariably better to eat a little gas by tacking early because you know that if there are a lot of boats around there will be even worse air on the lay line, plus you put yourself in a position to capitalize on any wind shifts. The key is to plan your approach enough in advance so that you can capitalize on those who lack the foresight to get back into the middle of the course before it's too late.

One final point, many people are afraid of tacking short of the weather mark because of the dangers inherent in port tack approaches. I'm not one to say that you never get yourself in a predicament because of this maneuver, but if you use a little prudence and are willing to duck a boat now and again the gains almost always outweigh the risks.

The start and first weather leg are undoubtedly the most eagerly anticipated parts of any race, for in large fleets they either make or break your day. As you sail in larger and more competitive fleets, the differences in boat speed become less and less and tactics become increasingly important. A small fleet sailor's first initiation is not usually a kind experience, but with anticipation, foresight, and preparation he can soon learn the intricacies of steering his boat among 70 others without feeling someone else is making his decisions.



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