

USA Grabs The Gold In Cuba

By Matt Fisher

In September *Flashes* I wrote an article about the Pan Am Games. I was asked to add information that I left out of the *Flashes* article for the Yearbook. I write down the play by play for each race of all the major regattas I go to, so usually I could write a nine page relatively boring article. After the '87 Games where we were extremely disappointed in our finish, I looked at how I sailed and tried to figure out what went wrong. Whether you write it down or talk it out, it is very important to critique you and your team's performance at the end of each day and at the end of a regatta. After the 1987 Games in Michigan City we came to the obvious conclusion that several major changes had to be made. First, we were not moving well in light air upwind. Specifically, we were not pointing well. I mentioned this in the *Flashes* article and several people asked what we changed on the boat to go faster upwind. I think it was a combination of several things. We flattened out the main down low with the help of our sailmaker and more pre-bend. We also always made sure that the boom was always in the middle. I'm definitely not an expert at sail design but, this combination makes the only variable in light air on your mainsail shape be the amount of twist at the top. Having isolated the mainsheet trim to its impact being on the top batten simplified when you want to point and when you need power. The other change we made in our light air sailing upwind was to sail the boat flatter. It always "feels" better to have a little heel; the tiller has weather helm, the sails feel like they have more power and the boat makes more noise. The boat has little "feel" when it's flat in light air but that's good. I grew up on chop on a power boat infested small lake and it was good to heel the boat. But, long term upwind you need to sail flat, until near drifting conditions. When you hear that it blew 15-22 in Cuba nearly every race you probably wonder why I make a big deal about light air boatspeed. It's important to be ready and confident for any condition. It got old going to a regatta saying, "if it blows we'll do well". Besides, during the three days after the regatta in Havana it was less than 8 knots during our normal racing hours. You never know for sure what the conditions will be.

Another problem area I've always had is being a little too conservative on the starting line both in position laterally and vertically to the line. We were starting at the leeward end on well set lines and letting the fleet dictate our tactics during the first half of the weather leg. I also was often laying back on the line hoping to make up the distance later. We solved these problems by first, moving up the line a little, and second, pushing the start so much that we had to live with a few PMS's in major regattas in the past three years.

Finally, I needed to make sure that my teammates would want to put out the effort necessary to win. Our team consisted of Steve Callison, Sean Fidler and me. Although the three of us had never sailed together, Steve and I have sailed together many times. Steve is an excellent skipper, having won the Snipe Nationals a couple years ago. When we sail against each other at our home club, we spend lots of time in

very close proximity of each other, so with our similar sailing styles, there are rarely communication problems and mark roundings are much more fun when we are sailing in the same boat.

The Sunday before the Pan Am Trials in Tampa we practiced by ourselves at our little reservoir for about six hours. I haven't done that for a very long time but we made lots of progress. We worked on both the major mechanics of mark rounding maneuvers but we also worked on the fine tuning mechanics of boat balance, and communication of various information discussed during the race. I've always felt that one of the most overlooked parts of teamwork in the boat is the timing of puffs and lulls. It is not the most exciting part of a race, but counting down any change in velocity is a big contribution to improving upwind boat speed. Whether you want to hike more, or ease the main or whatever, it's important not to let a puff (or a lull) change your heel.

We went to Tampa feeling like we had sailed together for several regattas. For some reason we won the Pan Am Trials by a good amount which helped our confidence for going to Cuba. It was also great having the Trials so far away from the Games (4 months) so that we could adequately prepare.

The organization process we went through for Cuba was a little more complicated than for a normal regatta. We had to take two of everything — masts, rudders, tillers, poles, etc. We also took extra sails, and sailed every weekend between the Trials and the Games. In the middle of the whole process I noticed that my mast was falling apart, so we tuned a new



Matt Fisher at Awards Ceremony in Havana.

mast to try to match the excellent speed we experienced during the first half of the season.

Race Site Information

We had four days of practice in Cuba before the regatta started. One helpful part of being on the US team was the amount and quality of weather information we received. While we were in Tampa, we had a three hour weather briefing on the sailing area in Havana. An ex-Finn sailor named Mark Powell from Miami, is doing a research paper on the weather in Havana and he was extremely accurate on what type of conditions we would have. In the seven days of racing our compass readings were exactly the same. The weather and leeward marks were permanent marks set 1½ miles apart, at 40°. The first two races it blew 18-22 mph and then backed down to 12-18 mph for the rest of the series.

One of the biggest unknowns facing us was the direction of the current. The Gulf Stream goes SW to NE (directly against the prevailing wind) at three knots (fast). Our course had to be tucked next to shore in a three mile semi-circle cove because about ¾ of a mile off shore there was a shelf after which the depth of the water dropped to 700 feet. There isn't 700 feet of anything in Cuba, so the course was close to shore, and the jibe mark was set very broad, to the point where it was really not that far off the rhumb between the weather and leeward mark. There were two very broad reaches. The "cove" formed by being so close to shore created a one knot current that went from NE to SW — with the wind, but opposite of the Gulf Stream. No one knew where the line between the Gulf Stream and this "concurrent" would be. It really did turn out to be the most critical part of the sailing.

US Team and Cuba

Being on the US team in Cuba was an incredible experience. When the US sailing team arrived in Cuba we were told that we were staying in the "party school". We were staying in a communist party training camp, with emphasis on camp. Our accommodations were sparten but the Cuban people who managed or worked at our facility were great. They had their work cut out for them, but their attitude was always friendly.

The Cubans wanted us to be impressed with their Country so that the ban on tourism could someday be lifted. One of the ways Castro hopes to get Cuba out of their tough economic position is to become another Caribbean tourist spot. However Club Med probably won't make room in their 1992 catalog. The Cubans first need to acquire toilet seats in their public facilities and follow that very quickly by toilet paper.

It's also very hot in Cuba. It's 95 degrees in the middle of the day but only slips down to about 85 degrees while you are trying to sleep.

Something that really was special at this year's Games was the interaction within the US Pan Am team. There are nine classes with several alternates and a coach and a couple of team leaders. We had about two meetings a day to talk about the course, weather conditions, competitors, or what-even else was helpful.

Races 1-3

The question at the beginning of the regatta was, do you go left and try to go out far enough to get in a favorable Gulf Stream or do you tack along shore, which was definitely

close enough, to get out of the current that was going against us. There was something that made us want to sail up the middle of the weather leg because we thought that there really wasn't that big of an advantage by going all the way right because the water didn't start getting shallow until you got within 100 feet of the docks.

The first race was probably the heaviest at 18-25 mph. The starting line was set so that maybe five Lightnings could get through. We had a bad start, tacked right to clear, saw the Cuban team heading way out on the right and continued out that way. It was very wrong. Peter Hall and his crew from Canada won with Chile second and Brazil third. We finished an honest 7th in "our" conditions.

It was tough because you never feel fast when you have boats on your lee bow or on top of you. We shook it off and still said we can win this thing, but there were a lot of minutes between the end of that race and the beginning of the next. Several times I thought about opening up a laundromat in North Dakota when this regatta was over.

Our coach was Skip Whyte from Boston, who is the 470 coach for the Olympic team. He was great after our 7th in the first race. Skip was always trying to help us figure out what side was best. I don't sail that way. Steve and I have sailed together many times now and have prided ourselves on going up the middle of weather legs. Skip suggested we go left and we said OK, maybe. He was watching these races from Bill Buckles (remember him?) hotel room, on the 18th floor of a hotel that was at the weather mark.

The next race we said we just wanted to get a little bit back in the series and that we needed a third or better for confidence reasons. We had similar conditions (18-22 mph) and

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had a good start, rounded the first mark second and went on to win the race. It was great for the confidence and we could now act like the 7th didn't exist.

At the team meeting, Skip said nice going, but you need to go further left. I said yea sure we won the race. He said to left hard — he could see it on the water.

The next race Brazil won, Chile was second and we were third.

Races 4-5

Now we had a 3-1 to count, Brazil had 3-2-1, Chile had 2-3-2. We were back in the hunt and started to feel much better. At the team meeting, Skip said that we were sailing up the middle and that we needed to go left if we wanted to win this thing. It was almost getting irritating, because banging a corner that we couldn't see was against our sailing style. Skip saw it in the other classes (there were four classes on our course) and he said that the Lightnings were not going deep enough to the corner. It felt like the movie "Field of Dreams" because when we asked how far should we go, Skip said go to the corner—you'll know when you get there.

Well at least we had a game plan. We were going to go to the left corner just so we could stop taking so long on the firing line in the team meetings. The wind was 15 mph and we had a middle of the fleet start. Our boat and Chile were going very fast with the Chilians about five boat lengths to weather and one boatlength back. Some of the fleet was on our hip and probably had us with several of the lifts on starboard. After about ten minutes on at starboard, we started sailing in some huge rolling waves and started to come up under some of the fleet. Tito, from Chile, still had us, but we knew we were in the Gulf Stream. We were like three kids who found the candy supply and didn't want anyone else to know. We tacked to port and were now only about two boat lengths behind Chile and had a significant lead on the rest of the fleet. We wanted Chile to tack on us so we could go back out to the left alone. Chile tacked on our face so we went back left, got back into the rollers and were long gone. The team meeting went much better, and it was great seeing Skip approve of our sailing. He was right.

We actually did the same thing in the fifth race where Brazil and Chile were 2 and 3.

Race 6

In *Flashes* I didn't really describe Race 6. It was one of the most exciting races I've sailed in.

We had won the 4th and 5th races by pretty big margins by milking the left side of the beats. But the 6th race was different. Brazil actually had a bad start and sailed to the right and rounded the first weather mark with a 100 yard (big) lead. This was one of two weather legs where the right payed off (there were 21 weather legs). The wind was building to about 18-20 knots and we caught up within four or five boat lengths of Brazil at the leeward mark. At the second weather mark, Brazil had spinnaker problems and we sailed right up to even with them with Chile now about two boat lengths behind us.

To give you a little perspective on scoring here, if we would win this race we would only have to finish sixth in the last race to win the gold. We obviously knew this during the race. At the last leeward mark it was Brazil, U.S. and Chile all bow to stern. We talked first with Brazil about two boat lengths to weather and one back going to what we thought would be the favored side. We had great speed and within

about five minutes we tacked and crossed Brazil to be in first place. Chile had gone ten boat lengths to the right of us after the mark and now was on port three boat lengths directly below. After several tacks up the middle, Brazil had ended up to the right of both Chile and U.S., Brazil tacked clipping both Chile and us by two to three boat lengths. 50 yards from the finish the wind went 10 degrees left, which brought Brazil to be even with us. They tacked below us at the leeward favored finish line and beat us by one foot. We beat Chile by maybe ten feet. It was a very exciting race — we'd actually written Brazil off but they played the shifts and won. It was realistically a six point swing in points. We didn't really talk about the impact this race had on the points until the regatta was over.

Going into the last day, if Brazil won we had to be second to win. If Chile won we had to be fourth. I had some problems sleeping that night but was able to get my mind off the races with some lively hand-to-hand combat with some Cuban cockroaches at 4:00 a.m.

Race 7

The race started in 15-20 mph. We pushed the line hard and had a slight feeling that maybe we were over the line. Our boat lead the bulk of the fleet (including Brazil) to the left side of the course. Chile worked to the middle of the course and lead the fleet as we approached the weather mark. We were on top and bow ahead of Brazil, and the fleet, on port as Tito crossed and tacked on top of us. We reached down to stay on top of Brazil which initiated about fifteen tacks between the three of us. We finally bailed out to the port layline with Brazil, which is like going to your

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corner at the end of a round in a boxing match after getting beat up. We were still in second, Brazil third, but the fleet was very close now, which they hadn't been for about five races.

For some reason, the three of us (Chile, Brazil and US) stretched out big on the second reach. Times were pretty intense in our boat because we now knew what was on Tito's mind and we were going to round the leeward mark two to three boat lengths behind him. If he started pounding us again, not only might he bring the fleet back into the picture, but Brazil (which was two boat lengths behind us) could easily get into first. We discussed at least 3 scenarios, 1 — Not tacking and waiting for Brazil to tack; 2 — Tacking and dragging it out to the left corner; and 3 — Two quick tacks to stay bow ahead of Brazil, anticipating Chile to tack on top of us but always staying on top of Brazil in the anticipated tacking duel. We chose number 3 so we could stay in control of Brazil. We had a good spinnaker drop and sailed four boat lengths on port and tacked. There was a 4th scenario that we hadn't discussed. Tito didn't tack. Chile would get the silver medal if Chile won and Brazil finished 3rd. They didn't think they could push us back to 5th and Brazil 3rd. We hadn't thought of that. I wish Chile would have thought of this during the last quarter of the first beat because we aged about 10 years. It caught us so much by surprise that we did all the wrong things. We went about four boat lengths too far on the starboard because it was like waiting for a punch that was never thrown. We tacked back to port and it looked bad for Brazil, but we weren't that worried because they were going to have a very long and suffocating race with us tacking on them on one side and Chile tacking on them on the other. We went on to get second and didn't really know whether or not we would be PMS'd until we saw Bob Smither on the RC boat with a camera aimed at us.

End of Regatta Time

It was quite a lot of fun that night — the awards are everything that you would think they are. The racing was over at 5:00 and we didn't have the awards until 10:00. These hours are always the best part of sailing because you

remember what good friends you are with, the people you've been trying so hard to beat for seven days. The Pan Am Games are intense, but three or four hours before the awards allowed everyone to get reacquainted. We found the beer truck and seemed to be speaking better Spanish. There were nine classes in the Games but the Award Ceremony goes very fast. The Lightning was the last boat to receive their medals and our US team realized it was going to be the last time they heard the national anthem. No matter how many times you think about what it would be like, nothing compares to getting the gold medal on the podium. Our US team went nuts for our awards so it was pretty special.

Usually it seems that I've never had time to visit the country that we sail in after these regattas. We had three days after the races to see Havana and we used most of each day's 24 hours to see events, sights, etc.

Going to Havana was one of the best experiences I've had for many different reasons. One thing to remember is that most of the sacrificing comes from your family when you put together a program like this, not yourself; I had fun. I miss the event, but it is kind of nice to know that the only critter that's going to crawl in your bed in the middle of the night is your three-year-old daughter.



Lightning Teams at Pan Ams — Chile (L), USA, Brazil.

1991 PAN AMERICANS Havana, Cuba

Pos.	Sail #	Skipper/Crew	Ctry.	Race 1		Race 2		Race 3		Race 4		Race 5		Race 6		Race 7		Desc.	Final	
				Pos.	Pts.	Pos.	Pts.	Pos.	Pts.	Pos.	Pts.	Pos.	Pts.	Pos.	Pts.	Pos.	Pts.			
1	14045	Matt Fisher Steve Callison, Sean Fidler	USA	7	13.00	1	0.00	3	5.70	1	0.00	1	0.00	2	3.00					
2	11011	Alberto Gonzalea Valentin Menendez, German Schacht	Chile	2	3.00	3	5.70	2	3.00	2	3.00	2	3.00	3	5.70	1	0.00	23.40	5.70	17.70
3	14203	Claudio Biekarck Gunnar Ficker, M. Batista	Brazil	3	5.70	2	3.00	1	0.00	3	5.70	3	5.70	1	0.00	3	5.70	25.80	5.70	20.10
4	14387	Peter Hall Alain Boucher, Philip Kerrigan	Canada	1	0.00	dsq	15.00	6	11.70	6	11.70	4	8.00	6	11.70	4	8.00	66.10	15.00	51.10
5	11928	Juan Santos Oscar Viteri, Carlos LeCaro	Ecuador	4	8.00	4	8.00	5	10.00	7	13.00	dnf	15.00	5	10.00	5	10.00	74.00	15.00	59.00
6	11037	Horacio Tettamantie Hector Longarela, H. Longarela	Argentina	5	10.00	dsq	15.00	4	8.00	4	8.00	7	13.00	4	8.00	7	13.00	75.00	15.00	60.00
7	14506	R. Perez C. De La Guardia, O. Padron	Cuba	6	11.70	6	11.70	8	14.00	5	10.00	5	10.00	7	13.00	7	11.70	82.10	14.00	68.10
8	14182	Ed Cabassa Enrique Torruella, Carlos Hernandez	Puerto Rico	8	14.00	5	10.00	7	13.00	8	14.00	6	11.70	8	14.00	8	14.00	90.70	14.00	76.70