

Begin to Race

A guide for cruisers who have been sucked into racing

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General

There's nothing magic or difficult about racing at the 'corporate' level.

If you cross the start line within 1 min of the gun and sail efficiently around the course (and don't make any blunders with the tide) you will beat 50% of the fleet.

Concentrate on doing well what you know how to do and what you have to do. Don't get all excited about lightning fast tacks and hairs-breadth mark roundings.

Organise, delegate and prioritise.

In particular, in addition to settling crew positions (port sheet, starboard sheet, main sheet, halyards, foredeck, mast) get someone other than yourself to take care of the administration and catering, AND, if at all possible, appoint someone with a bit of nous as a navigator/timekeeper. 90% of the heartache in picnic races is caused by going to the wrong place at the wrong time.

My experience is that there is a near-overwhelming range of mental and physical activity all crowding in on the skipper in the 5 or 10 minute pre-start period, and this is exacerbated by having to give specific directions to inexperienced crew.

I think that this problem can be relieved somewhat by 'stretching' the time in which preparatory decisions are made, and by 'routinizing' what goes on on race day.

Pre-Race Planning - Homework

It's important to every crew function to know when the boat is starting, where the boat is going, what's going to happen next.

It's desirable to obtain and understand as much of this information before you actually get out on the water and involved in handling the boat.

Rules for a sailing race are contained in:

- the Racing Rules of Sailing (RRS)
- the Notice of Race (NOR) issued by the club organising the race; and

- the Sailing Instructions (SI) issued by the Race Committee

The RRS contain the international rules for racing, NOR contains sufficient information to enable potential competitors to decide whether or not they want to enter, and to lodge entries. The SI specify what goes on before, during, and after a race.

These days NOR and SI are usually available on the club's website

Get hold of a copy of the SI as soon as you possibly can.

Key Contents of SI for our purposes are:

- Date(s) of race(s)
- Starting times and starting sequences and signals
- General location of Course,
- Starting Line and Finishing Line
- Starting Procedures
- Course Details
- Finishing and Shortening Course.

We have different courses so as to provide races of appropriate length and duration for the different sizes of boats in the different divisions, all with a good balance of windward, downwind and reaching sailing, with a start into the wind, for the various different wind directions and strengths that may occur on any particular racing day.

Marks are objects that delineate a sailing racing course. They can be geographical objects, navigational aids, or specially laid buoys. The marks for a race are listed and described in the SI.

Each mark has a 'required side', which is the side of a racing boat upon which the mark must be left when passing or rounding it. a starboard mark must be left on the boat's starboard side, and the boat may have to alter course to starboard to round it; a port mark must be left on the boat's port side, and the boat may have to alter course to port to round it.

The convention is that unless shown otherwise, for example by the suffix (P), the required side for all marks is starboard.

As part of your race preparation, some night before the race, at home, get the SI and a photocopy of the chart section or chartlet covering the racing area, and mark up the course on it. If there are optional different courses, mark up each of them, on a separate chartlet if possible.

Paste/Draw the Course Code Flag on each chartlet, and laminate, or stickytape each one into a plastic sleeve. This way, once you see the Course Signal, you have ONE chart in the cockpit, and reduce the chance of mistakes.

If at all possible, get your designated navigator to come over to your place and do this with you, so that you're both familiar with the course(s) and the starting procedures.

The Starting Line and Finishing Lines are also specified in the SI

There is a standard starting sequence and signals shown in RRS 26 (the 5, 4, 1, Bang sequence), although some Race Committees may use other sequences, which they must notify and describe in their SI.

On your preparation evening, get a copy of the International Code of Signals flags, and study and apply the SI starting sequence, so that you have a clear picture of what the starting sequence will be.

What you actually do is:

- Before going out, set your digital watch accurately on the pips (GPS time/Mobile Phone time) (most Race Committees these days keep good time), with the alarm set 5 min, or 1 min before the first warning signal
- On the water, watch carefully to pick up the first warning signal for the first division or race (whatever it is) and set your countdown timer running,
- watch carefully for each successive 5 minute signal until 5 minutes before your start, and then,
- start at the signal 5 minutes after that, using the 4 and 1 minute signals to help you judge your start.

Either on your preparation night (if it is near enough to the race to have forecasts), or the night or morning before the race you should prepare a Pre-Race Plan You should obtain the following (from the Tide and Weather links on almost any sailing website) Forecast: Tide: From the Sailing Instructions Start Time: Now Start Assessing Tide Flow State at Start (and other key points)(critical for the Solent: you need a full quid passage plan for each leg of the course, for the estimated time that you will be travelling over it Likely Course: Likely Points of Sailing on each leg Course Comments: Add to or Apply Local Knowledge

Race-Day Organisation

(Bear in mind that you have delegated the food and drink (and shuttle car organising and that stuff) to someone else: if not, you will have to expand your pre-race plan to take care of that as well: best you delegate)

Pre-Sail Timing

Reverse Planning Sequence:

Warning Signal time, less half an hour for warm up, less X mins to get from dock to Starting Area = latest time to leave dock (must be communicated to crew), less time to rig boat at dock, less time to bring boat from mooring to dock, less time to get dinghy out to boat = time that skipper and skeleton crew have to be at the dock.

Note that somewhere in this, skipper needs to shoehorn 5 minutes, with someone else sailing the boat, to review and confirm his starting plan, and general race strategy.

Activity Sequence

1. Skipper makes Pre-Race assessment and plan If you haven't already done so. If you have done it, update it for weather on race morning
2. Skipper mentally updates the Pre-Race assessment and plan for actual conditions on arrival at the dock, key outputs at this stage are Headsail Choice, Mainsail Reef Choice, Kite/No Kite decision.

3. When all crew arrive, Skipper briefs Crew: Personal intros of new crew Allocate crew to positions General Safety as required General Race brief
4. Get boat out on the water and heading towards the starting area. If your route to the starting area is close to any of the marks of the course you will be rounding later, identify them and any surrounding landmarks clues to help find them later on in the race.
5. Warm-up/practice the crew with some tacks and gybes on the way to the start line. End up warm-up at the Starting Area at least 5 minutes before the first Warning Signal.
6. Identify the Committee Vessel and Starting Line, and the first mark or at least the direction to it.
7. Skipper mentally updates assessment and starting plan for conditions actually on the line, and orientation of line. Verbalise the starting plan and communicate it to the crew.
8. Check In at the CV no later than -10 min before start: Sail past CV within hail, on starboard tack Hail CV "Sunsail Avaricious with x persons on board intending to race" Observe Course Flags. Manoeuvre close to CV until you get good starting time from a starting signal Position to where you want to be in the starting area, and commence your pre-start manoeuvre.
9. Start on the gun, high, fast and ahead.

The Start

In a 37 footer at this level of racing, if you cross the start line at any distance from the CV, heading towards the first mark, at maximum boatspeed any time up to 30 sec after the starting signal, you have a good start and are well on the way to a successful race.

Don't treat a 37 footer like a dinghy and stop it near the starting line to wait, then try to accelerate: your crew's trimming skills won't be up to it: keep the speed up. Traditionally you do this by, starting with an even number of minutes to go, beam reaching away from the CV for 1 min then beam reach back: if that gets you to the CV about bang on the minute, just keep doing it, if you arrive back at the CV in less than 2 min, reach out for say 1 min and 10 sec, if you're over the 2 min, only go out for 50 sec the next time: keep reaching out and back, watching your starting signals and following your watch until you arrive near the CV, reaching nicely right on the starting signal, cross the line with speed, and off you go. If necessary duck behind any other boats that are bunching up on the start line. Keep good speed and a bit of clear air, and you'll leave the jostlers for dead.

Near a start line, Gybing is your friend, it takes up less sea-room, is quicker, and moves you away from packs of boats forming near the line, rather than towards them, as a tack will. Get a couple of gybes in in your practice/warm up, so that everyone is confident with them near the line.

Crew Work

Do it the same as you do when you're cruising.

Give specific roles, letter-off, tailer, grinder/trimmer to your cockpit hands. Make sure they understand how winches work: all winches clockwise, spin the drum before you load up if in doubt, 3 turns on, tailer has to pull hard, fast speed/slow speed, how self-tailers work, how rope clutches work for the halyards.

Give clear verbal cues/commands for tacks and gybes

Stand by to go about/gybe

Ready about Hold the tack until you see everyone in their correct station, lee sheet out of the cleat/jammer, weather sheet loaded up on the winch

Lee HO/Gybe HO Give the executive after you have steered into it, and when you want the sheets to be let fly.

Explain to your crew that this is the drill beforehand.

Verbalise your moves beforehand: say "I'm going to do a right hand turn around that big green buoy, and head off towards that fort on the skyline", or "I'm going to tack to the left 20 yards before I get to that other boat" Note the use of left and right: if it makes it easier for your beginner crew to understand then do it: same with sheets and halyards: they'll probably be colour coded: a) point this out to people, and b) talk about the green rope, the black flecky rope etc (my bowman does this to me all the time: it saves mistakes).

Lookout to Leeward

I've given this a special section, because getting it wrong can cause so much anxiety and accidents.

Leeward Headsail sheet hand keeps lookout under HS: skipper needs to explain to novices beforehand about the 'blind spot'.

Desirably lookouts at least understand that lookout is most important when on Port tack, and skipper should explain this to them beforehand.

Mainsheet hand can usually watch the weather hip for room to tack (but if relying on this, it should be explained/discussed beforehand) and watch generally for overtaking boats.

Tell your lookouts how you want reports, something like this:

"All Clear to leeward"

"Sail Number 1234 coming on starboard, 2 o'clock, 10 lengths away"

"Sail Number 4567, same tack 2 lengths ahead, 1 length to leeward"

"Clear to tack to windward"

"Not clear to tack Sail Number 3210 2 lengths on your quarter".

"Do you see Sail Number 9876?" (must be acknowledged by helm).

I know this sounds terribly formal, and the "Do you see Sail Number 9876?" will probably be the best to use in almost any situation with rank beginners, but you really don't want the "OOOOH there's a boat coming" sort of report.

Navigation

Your navigator should have his binos with him. You need to put effort into correctly identifying your marks as early as possible. Unless someone genuinely knows how to use it, don't rely on GPS, although it may give one of your nerdy colleagues something to do for the afternoon. The

navigators job is to tell you where the next mark is, and where the mark after that is, and where your passage-planned route to avoid/make the most of the tide should take you.

Tactics

Stay out of trouble:

* Don't "insist" when you're on starboard: Hail, early, long and loud, but really, be prepared to duck behind or tack away, and, given that your crew is iffy, do it with plenty of room to spare. Try to detect if the Port tacker is going to tack away to keep out of your way: get eye contact with the skipper, do you see the sheet hands getting ready for the tack? If not: you must avoid.

* at marks or obstructions, give the boat inside you room to pass the mark.

Understand "Slow up and Win". It means that many situations, particularly port/starboard, and mark roundings can best be handled by slowing down your boat and letting the other boat get on its way, then sailing on yourself, unflustered and fast. Many people never think of 'putting on the brakes'. Ways to slow up include pinching and luffing, or starting or easing sheets.

Conclusion

Key points:

- Start on time, well organised, not in a panic.
- have a good passage plan for every leg taking into account the tides for the time you will be doing that leg.
- Stay out of interboat trouble
- Have a good time.

The Tacking Fan

