

Sailboat Racing Skills—Starting Tactics

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The start of a sailboat race is really two separate events: 1. Pre-start, and 2. Start. Their purposes are different.

The start sets your initial racing position. The pre-start is your preparation, information gathering and strategy development time for the rest of the race. In the absence of other boats, the pre-start activities would blend continuously into the start and into the race itself. The pre-start is for planning your fastest trip around the course. However, reality interjects the starting dance in-between the pre-start and the race.

Once you have started, you will want to have the right sails up, the rig tuned optimally for the conditions, crew assignments understood and maneuvers well executed. If there is an advantaged side of the course, you will want to be there. The pre-start period is when you determine what you must do to accomplish this.

As soon as you are on the water, proceed to the race area. Begin your wind observations. Note the speed, direction and time of your observations. The cycle of the wind oscillations will reveal itself. This will be very important at the start and with the initial strategy on the first leg. It is hard to make these notes while sailing short-handed, but the dividends are worth it. If you can start lifted and time your first several tacks with favorable shifts, you will put a huge distance between you and at least half of the fleet. Look for areas of the course which may have different wind in either strength or direction. Currents, if any, are equally significant. Know when to expect changes.

The sail selection and fixed tuning should be set for the average windspeed conditions even if that means being overpowered at times. One of the most deceptive situations is an area of whitecaps with gusts of 12-15 knots but 8-10 knots of wind 75% of the time. You must set up to go as fast as you can the majority of the time and develop boat handling skills to manage the overpowered moments.

With sail selections made, and fast tuning and trimming set, begin to practice tacks and gybes. Coordinate changing gears (trimming loose for power and acceleration and trimming tight for pointing and smooth water high speed). Constant talking on the boat is good, but you do not want to rely on giving instructions during the race in order to accomplish a maneuver.

Continue your windspeed and direction note-taking. As you get within 10-15 minutes of the start, begin to anticipate the wind conditions at the start and during the early

minutes of the race. This prediction is based on the cycles which you have observed and the time remaining until the start.

The first gun (white flag) signals that 10 minutes remain until the start. Your stop watch should be precisely coordinated with this signal. It is now time to make the transition from the pre-start to the starting activities. During the first five-minute period before the start, do not wander more than two minutes' sail from the start line. Check the angle of the start line to verify how square it is to the wind and to the first mark. Compare these angles to your previously collected average wind direction angle. Based on all this information and your estimate of the wind conditions at the start, select a preferred starting position and desired side of the course.

The only combination of starting line side and course side which is really difficult to do is going to the right side of the course after starting on the left end of the line, because you must do that on port tack against right-of-way starboard tack boats. The time remaining during your first five-minute period will allow you to contemplate the possibility of achieving your desired starting combination.

As the second gun (blue flag) is sounded, check your watch for accuracy. You are now in your start mode. All your attention should be focused on managing a good start. Your objective now is to position yourself at the start in as favorable a location as possible relative to the fleet.

In the final five-minute period, never get farther than one minute's sail from the line and not more than 30 seconds away within the last minute. All of your remaining actions should be devoted to these two crucial rules:

1. Start in clear air.
2. Have freedom to maneuver.

But, you say that we have just put all that effort into picking a favored end and ultimate course. What of that?

If your preferred choices are open to you AND you will not violate the above two rules, then go for it. However, being in the perfect spot but being covered up in dirty air and restricted from tacking is not the place to be. Also, you could be wrong in your predictions. If you start in clear air with room to tack, you can take advantage of any expected or unexpected wind changes and do it with good boatspeed. This will put you in the top percentage of the fleet as fast as anything will.

There are three places to start on every line: 1. Right (usually by the committee

boat), 2. Left, and 3. Middle. Racers tend to congregate on the right side to start because they can approach it on starboard tack and sail on down the line if they are early. The trouble is, they usually have a lot of company. There is much dirty air here, unless you go up to a reaching approach parallel to the line and risk being forced on the wrong side of the committee boat, or forced over the line early by the right-of-way close-hauled (leeward) boats. Another group of boats will congregate at the left end of the line, but they can quickly run out of room.

You can sometimes observe that the right end starters are very aggressive and are arriving at the line early. In this case, they will generally drift on down the line a bit, leaving an opening for a well-timed right end start, but they will have left lots of dirty air. Going for this start is usually only worth trying if the need is urgent to get over to port tack as soon as possible after the start. It is also rare that there is not continuing traffic at the right end.

The middle of the line is often the best place to start by default. Clear air is normally available here as well as the freedom to maneuver. This is far more desirable than being a short distance closer to the favored end in traffic and dirty air. There are two good ways to get here. You can be on starboard tack, arriving early at the right end of the line, and then pace your reach down the line to the middle, timing it with the start. You will have good boatspeed, but you can collect some other boats, and you have few maneuvering options if you need them. The other approach is to reach in on port tack from the left side and pick a developing hole in which to start. Our approach must be early enough so that you can complete your tack to starboard with 30 seconds remaining before the start.

To sum up: Know where you want to go after the start and find clear air to get you started. Avoid congregations by being early and slowing down or coming in from the other direction. Rather than fight other boats to start at some fixed point on the start line, be aggressive in finding a developing hole near your desired spot, which will allow you to go the way you wish after the start. Being alert to the last minute sailing habits of the other boats will give you clues as to where the holes will occur.

Bang! There goes the final gun and the red flag. I hope you have been focused on the starting dance for the last five minutes and have used the pre-start time to plan where you are headed now. Go show them your stern. ▲