

## ***Starting Line Strategy***

Preparation for a start in a small fleet is no easy feat. Preparation for a start in a 64-boat fleet can seem just plain daunting. Which end of the line is favored? Which side do I want to be on? Is my boat set up properly for this breeze? What happens if we aren't fast enough? Question after question races through your mind as you make your way to that all too familiar starting line.

Let's assume that you and your crew have been sailing together for long enough that you each know what every jerk, every slide, every ease means. And let's also assume, that unlike me, you are fully practiced and have been sailing in big fleets for the past two months. Now, finally, BBR is here. You and your crew are poised and ready for any condition that that monstrous beast we call Buzzard Bay will throw at you. The question, as you start your journey out, is how are we going to win this first start with 63 other boats thinking and planning to do the same?

Often, when sailing out to the course, you end up dropping into conversation: How are things going? How is your job? Where are we going to stay tonight? Can you believe they hooked up last night? We are all too familiar with this pre-race chatter. But, as you've all heard, the time spent sailing out to the course can be more than just a time to chat.

Although we didn't win the first start at BBR this summer, Ted Ferrarone, my skipper, and I had enough good ones over the course of the weekend to make us want to work harder to smooth out the wrinkles and get the bullet starts. On the way out, Ted and I would distractedly talk about life in the office and the yearnings for everyday sailing. But we would also be futzing with our hiking straps, our boom vang, our jib tension, our jib trim. We would make it a point to talk about the clouds, what kind of wind they would bring, and what the Weather Channel forecast was. Depending on the conditions, we would check how the boat would respond to different degrees of heel in the varying chop. Although this was catch-up time, it was also the first step to our race preparation.

From college racing to V-15 racing to Olympic racing, starts can make or break a race. Of course, there are the brilliant come-from-behind victories that may post more adrenaline, and certainly make better bar-talk than the start-to-finish wins, but why force yourself to do the painful grind when you can get a great jump at the gun?

A start, and a race for that matter, is not won or lost in those last five critical horns before go; it is the series of events leading up to those horns that makes 85 percent of the difference. Before a start, regardless of how many boats will be sharing the line, you must make sure to run down your personalized mental check-list so that you can be in position to take the start.

One of the most important things in winning a start is position on the line. Where do you want to be on the line? The most common and most reliable technique to figure out the favored end of the line is to go head-to-wind for a few seconds and see which end your bow is pointing closer to—indicating the favored end. But, because wind can be and

usually is an unstable foe, it is good to check it several times over the course of a six-minute sequence. By doing this you are also checking how the wind is shifting.

Your start preparation is not, however, complete once you have found the favored end. During the time before the sequence and during the sequence, you need to be gleaning information about how the wind is behaving over the course, and more specifically over the impending weather leg. Stand-up, look around, look up the course to see if you can see any color or texture differential on the water. Check the flags on those sprawling, green lawns. Scrutinize the lay of the land: Are there hills around that could cause a geographical shift or does it contour in one particular direction (remember, wind always flows perpendicular to the land)? Time the shifts: Is it an oscillating breeze like we will see in an early-afternoon seabreeze, or is it a persistent shift to the right? In morning racing unstable air masses as the land heats up may dominate, while late-afternoon seabreezes will methodically shift to the right with the path of the sun. It's also important to watch the boats around you as they take their last upwind spurts. These are the clues that will give you the necessary information needed to win that start.

Now that you have determined whether to start at the boat or pin, the next step is execution. It is important to determine if you are going to make a port- or starboard-tack approach. A starboard approach requires good boat-handling and good boat control. You will be perched on the line for longer and will be forced to defend against more boats. If you decide to approach from port, be sure to choose the boat to tack under carefully and make sure that when you tack over, you will have a sizable hole to leeward.

Once you have completed your own approach, you will need to defend from pesky mates trying to steal your hard-earned hole. If someone approaches from port, aggressively bear down, pointing your bow right at them. It is important not to lose room to leeward, so let your main luff while your crew quickly trims the jib. This will reduce forward motion but will give you the ability to bear off. As soon as the threat is gone, luff the jib and immediately trim the main, which will catapult you to windward, then maintain the full luff. This is an effective strategy in protecting your hole whether you opt for a starboard or port approach. You are in a vulnerable position stationed on the line waiting for the start, so it is crucial to be completely aware of imminent dangers to your hole.

Now that all the pieces are together, all you need is speed to punch you out in front. With 30 seconds to go, you need to be looking for the late comers looking to poach, but you should also be looking ahead to the line. It is crucial to have your timing down so that when you hit the line, you are going at full speed. At about 10 seconds, depending on the wind and waves, grab your mainsheet. You need to have a good sense of how far off the line you are—one boatlength, two boatlengths. Slowly start to bear away with a slow pull on the tiller while your crew trims the jib (this will help turn the boat down). At about 3 seconds, heal your boat to leeward, giving it a rock. Be sure that you and your crew are moving in complete tandem to create a slow and smooth rock. Frequently, the skipper or crew will preemptively heal to leeward causing a violent motion and disturbing the flow across the sails, nulling the positive effect of a thrustful rock. Just before the gun, flatten

the boat, head-up and hike, hike, hike. If you have done all of this, you will be punched and the race will be yours to lose.

These are the skills, the techniques, and the information you will need to win any start, big or small fleet. Good luck and sail fast.—Katie McDowell