

## Be Patient Going Downhill

by Stanley Schreyer

We all know there are big gains to be made sailing downwind. We are also quick to forget that big losses can occur just as easily. Rarely does one benefit from taking a big risk on a downwind leg. However, good sailors will make big gains by capitalizing on the mistakes others make when going downwind. The following are some reminders that help one sail conservative downwind, and, at the same time, will help one gain places.

### On the Reaches

#### Sail the Shortest Distance

This sounds simple, but we often forget this during the course of the race. It is easy to become focused on passing boats. More often than not, when we are behind, we look for ways to get ahead quickly. This is just the time when we need to screw our heads on straight and think rationally. Think about what your strategy is. Racing strategy is defined as the course one sails in the absence of all other boats on the racecourse. This is what my wise coach from Boston University, Brad Churchill, calls, "the race against time." When we are behind, we often react to what the boats ahead are doing, and do the opposite, in hopes that we will pass them. Occasionally the gamble works, and we make a gain. But usually, we increase our losses, and increase the time it takes us to get around the racetrack. We all know that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. We also know that on a reach, sailing the rhumbline will usually get us from one mark to the other in the shortest possible time. Keep "the race against time" in mind as you read these other tips for downwind strategy.

#### Look for the Puffs

Racing sailors are always trying to sail in more breeze. On the downhill legs, keep looking behind for the puffs. Sail slightly higher than normal in a lull, to get to the next puff. Once in the puff, ride that extra breeze back down with increased speed. This is the actual way one would sail down a reach, in the absence of other boats, sailing slightly higher than the rhumbline in the lulls, until connecting with the next puff, which you take back down to the rhumbline, or maybe even below the rhumbline.

But throw in those other boats, and things get a bit more complicated.

#### Sail for Clear Air

This is another basic principle, but one that is often forgotten. Not much changes going downwind, since everyone is going in the same direction. So sailing for clear lanes is one of the only ways to make gains. Every time someone is one your breeze, others are gaining on you. Every time you are sailing in clear air, you are gaining on every boat that has someone on his or her wind shadow. But, do not get in unnecessary luffing matches in order to keep one's lane clear. This is the worst thing you can do, for you will end up sailing unnecessary extra distance. The boats ahead and the boats behind will gain on you, and you will lose valuable seconds in your race against time. Always think of the other boats as roadblocks in your race against time.

Some simple planning will prevent 99% of all luffing matches.

With a pack behind, get high, with a pack ahead, come down.

Before you round the windward mark, assess the situation. I have my crew ask me what our plans are a few boatlengths before each mark rounding. This helps me get my head out of the boat, and get in touch with our strategy for the next leg (remember that you don't have this luxury in a singlehanded boat). One of the things I look for when asked this question at a windward mark, or a gybe mark, is whether there is a pack of boats ahead of, or behind us.

When there is a pack of boats behind, do not turn immediately down to the reach mark, for the boats behind will surely get high on you, and try and roll you. Reach a bit higher than normal for a boatlength or two. This will send the message to the boats behind that you are serious about keeping your lane clear. Almost all the time, this will prevent the boats immediately behind you from trying to roll you. It is important to get high and stay high when there is a pack behind, for once you get rolled by one of the

boats, they will all roll you. I realize that sailing this extra distance will lose you seconds in your race against time, but it is necessary to maintain your current position in the fleet. When there is a pack of boats behind, come down. Rounding behind a pack is a great opportunity for those that stay patient. The boats that are ahead are forced to sail high in order to maintain clear lanes, and some of them are inevitably involved in luffing matches. So take advantage of this opportunity, and stick to the rhumbline. The next time you are watching a race go down a first reach, drive behind the windward mark, and line it up with the gybe mark. You will be surprised to see how high most of the fleet is sailing, and how much can be gained by sticking to the low road when given the opportunity. Remember to be patient on the low road though. Stay low until you get to the next mark. This is not as hard to keep in mind on the first reach, where the low road is also inside. It is still advantageous to remain low all the way to the end on the second reach, where the high road is also inside. Since high is also inside on the second reach, the fleet tends to sail higher on the second reach, especially at the end of the reach. Stick it out on the low road, and you will notice even more open space as you go down the leg. Remember that inside overlaps only need to be established at the two-boatlength circle. Most people start setting up for the rounding way before that. Try staying low, and then shooting high to get an overlap at the last second.

Better yet, consider staying low and rounding on the outside. This is contrary to every rule you have been told. Even the all important one your coach taught you about slowing down, and letting the boats who are inside of you round ahead, so you can make a clean rounding by yourself. It is often the case in big fleets that large packs of boats are too hard to sort through. A large pack of boats will round a mark very slowly, and there is often a slew of people trying to slow down and round behind those inside of them. There are also others crashing into each other, and still more taking overlaps where they do not deserve them. If the pack is big, avoid it, and round outside. The important thing here is to close reach for a bit, and get around the pack. A large pack of boats will cast a big windshadow, and heading up to closehaunched immediately will spell certain death for you boatspeed-wise. Just after rounding the mark, look for a place to tack, for there will most definitely be boats ahead, that rounded properly, who will be sailing on your breeze. **THIS IS NOT A MOVE TO BE DONE FREQUENTLY**, but it can cause you big gains if the situation is right.

Think of the reach as a place to set up for passing boats later.

There are many times when there is simply no opportunity for gain on a reach. At times like this, it is important not to get hasty. Don't try and make something happen. Be patient, try and gain distance on those ahead, and try and separate from those who are behind. Bide your time, and try and set up for a gain at a rounding, or on the upwind leg. Smart sailors pass boats when they can, and have the patience to realize when they cannot.

#### On the Run

Many of the same rules apply

- Sail in clear lanes.

This is much easier to do on a run, for you have more freedom to spread out laterally. Sailing in bad air on a reach is sometimes necessary. On a run, it is inexcusable.

- Look for the breeze.

Just as you have more freedom to choose your lane downwind, you have more freedom to sail for breeze. Look behind, and sail for the puffs.

- Remember to sail the race against time.

- Sail the proper angle.

If you sail a boat with at least two sails, and you do not have telltales on your shrouds, then you are doing yourself a huge disservice. Put telltales on your shrouds, and make sure that the telltale on the windward shroud is always pointing slightly inboard. This means that the breeze is blowing over your windward quarter, and you are not sailing by the lee. You never want to sail by the lee in a boat while sailing wing-on-wing, or with a spinnaker up. If you find yourself sailing by the lee, either head up, or gybe, depending on what your plan is. Make sure you do one or the other, for when sailing by the lee, the mainsail is blanketing the jib or the spinnaker (depending on what boat you are sailing), thus your boat's sail area is not being used to its full potential. This is a major key to sailing fast downwind.

If you are sailing a boat that only has a mainsail, then you do want to be sailing by the lee while running. However, this is not as important as it is to not sail by the lee in a multi-sail boat.

-Don't be afraid to gybe.

There are three reasons to gybe on a run

1) To get a clear lane.

2) To sail to a puff.

3) The other gybe will be a better angle.

Do not be afraid to gybe for any one of these reasons. Most boats become complacent with sailing on starboard tack after setting at the windward mark. If a puff comes in from the left side looking downwind, there are often big gains to be made by the boat who gybes for this puff, while every one else is on the starboard tack train. Get in the habit of gybing for better breeze, a better angle, or to keep your lanes clear. You will notice yourself picking off boats as you do so.

If you do not gybe because you are not good at gybing, then get good at gybing. Your boathandling should be polished enough that any move you lose very little by having to gybe.

Keep these tips in mind the next time you are on the racecourse, and as always, please email us if you have any questions.

Good Luck!