

ALWAYS SAIL FOR THE MARK

by Jamie McCreary

In my racing experience, I have found that one of the most basic rules for success is to *always sail on the tack or gybe that brings you closest to the mark*. The principle here is clear enough, but I have seen far too many sailors dismiss it in favor of more complicated tactical considerations. One reason is that some sailors like to flatter themselves by refusing to believe there are some basic rules for successful racing. There are such rules, and if you and your crew adhere to them, you will invariably wind up with some good, consistent scores. Here are some of the rules as they apply to a typical, Olympic race course. Most of these will work just as well on any other type of course.

The start

When you start in a large fleet, don't always try for the perfect start. Because the start is such an important part of the race, your initial reaction may be to try to start in the best position on the line. But this can get you into trouble. In most fleets, all the competitors know which end of the line is favored and will try their hardest to start there. This often leads to congestion at the favored end, and the more boats there are in a given area of the line means the more moving obstacles over which you do not have control. Clearly, these boats can hurt your approach to the line.

The best solution I know is to start about one-sixth of the way down from the favored end (one-sixth of the way up if the leeward end is favored). If you study that position right after a start you usually see either a boat that is moving with clear air and speed or a hole on the line where someone could have started with little difficulty. The advantages of starting in this spot are evident after you have tried to take the perfect start only to find yourself buried with all the hotshots while someone who was not concerned with such perfect positioning sails off with a good start in the top five.

There are some times when it does pay to go for a first- place start, but these are very rare. One case is after there have been several general recalls and one end of the line has been repeatedly jammed with boats. For the next start, the boats that have been at the jammed end usually move to safer positions, and those who have been in the middle of the line usually hold their strategy. This situation leaves the favored end open for the alert racer.

A word of warning: Extremely long starting lines are common in large fleets, and starting at one end or the other can be dangerous in an unsettled breeze. Both ends of the line may be crowded with boats who believe *they* are at the favored end. But as the race progresses, it may become apparent that there are two different breezes, and one group will discover that it has the old breeze and is out of the race. Under these starting conditions, you must know exactly what the breeze is doing or the consequences can be devastatingly bad.

If you can't determine what the breeze is doing, hedge your bet and go for a middle-of-the-line start. From this middle point, you will be ahead of the half of the fleet that started at the wrong end, and you will have clear air, which should put you at least in the top fourth of the fleet. If you tack on the first wind shift before the other racers, you will be right up with the leaders and will not have taken any measurable risk in getting there. When racing a keel boat such as a Sonar, you should be moving with full speed as you approach the line. However, I find that many sailors arrive at the line early and let their sails out to slow down or stop. This is the *wrong* thing to do in most situations because a boat without speed cannot maneuver.

The best move to make when you see that you're going to be early is to trim in the sails

extremely hard and *pinch* the boat very close to the wind. This trim allows you to keep steering way while you move very slowly toward the line. Additionally, any leeward boat that tries to head you up will have difficulty getting close to you because your tightly-sheeted sails will badly disturb the wind directly below you. Any boat directly to windward of you will be forced up and perhaps over the line because of your unusually-high heading.

As the start approaches, all you have to do is ease your sheets and head off. Your competitor, on the other hand, will have to *trim in* his sails as he heads off, and this makes it hard for him to gain momentum.

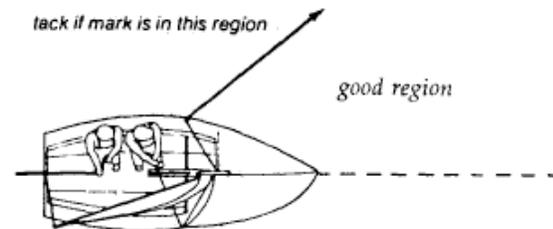
The first beat

Do not be afraid to take a momentary loss of place in order to get where you want to go. Too often, the feeling of being pinned down by other boats can force you to tack over into a hopeless position on the wrong side of the course.

It is also easy to make the same wrong move when someone tacks on you. Many sailors think you should tack — and the sooner, the better — but that can be dangerous advice. First, take a good look around and see what's going on in the race. Then decide whether to tack immediately, sail farther before tacking, stay on the present tack, or tack to clear your air and then tack back again. If you don't take the time to think these decisions through before you tack, it will be harder to make them on the new tack where you always have a new angle from which to view the race. The distance you may lose by the backwind of another boat is small compared to the danger of going the wrong way.

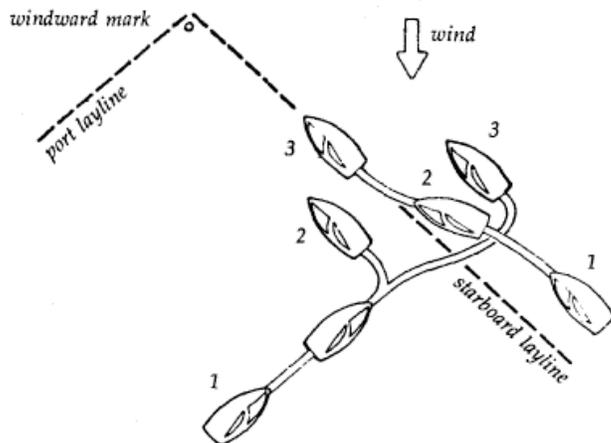
There is no reason to ever sail away from the mark unless the wind or some other factor makes it advantageous to do so. On most race courses, the marks are almost always visible, so there is no excuse for not knowing where the mark is. If you are unsure of which way to go, look for the mark and then sail for it. At the very least, you will be decreasing your distance to the mark.

One easy way to determine whether you are on the tack that brings you closest to the mark is to look forward from the windward side of your boat and see if the mark lies roughly between your bow and your windward shroud. If the mark is in this area you are sailing on the lifted, or closest, tack to the mark. Keep checking the mark's relation to your boat and tack if you see the mark to weather of your windward shroud. (Note: tacking angles do vary in different wind conditions.) If you simplify your shift-playing with this method, you can pay closer attention to the trim of your boat and the intricacies of your tactical position (Fig. 1).



If the windward mark does not lie roughly between bow of boat and the windward shroud, you probably are sailing away from the mark and should tack.

The last fourth of the first windward leg is a critical part of the race, for this is when the fleet starts to converge at the weather mark. Many sailors start to relax and anticipate going downwind, but this is the time when a few inches can mean everything, and good positioning is essential. The successful skipper really puts on the heat at this point. You must keep looking at the mark and keep tacking toward it. Don't say to yourself, "Well, just a little bit farther and I can fetch it." If you do sail all the way to the layline, any shift could cause you to lose distance on the mark.



Starboard-tack boat can sail low and let port-tack boat tack astern of her by steering course below mark (2). Port-tack boat either goes astern of starboard-tack boat or tacks on starboard-tack boat's bow. Starboard-tack boat then heads back up which puts port-tack boat either in backwind or in position where she has overstood mark (3).

Often, it is a good idea to make your final approach to the mark on port tack. This way, you can avoid the crowd of boats on the starboard layline and squeeze in right at the mark. But if you do this, always approach the mark on a course at least three boat-lengths to leeward of the port-tack layline because boats on the starboard-tack layline usually overstand a bit, and they bear off as they get closer to the mark. You must tack to leeward of the starboard-tack boats *before* they bear off or you will not have enough room to get around the mark.

If you approach on starboard tack and you are on the layline, sail the boat a bit full. This allows you to have some extra speed and gives you the ability to head up and go over a boat that tries to tack underneath you. (Fig 2).

The first reach

You have three choices for your strategy on this leg: sail below the marks, sail high of the mark, or sail right for the mark. In steady winds, it usually pays to sail either on the rhumb line or slightly below it. In variable breezes, it usually pays to stay high of the mark to allow yourself room to head off in the puffs. Whatever your decision, you must implement it as soon as you get around the weather mark.

If you go low on the reach you will notice that the boats that go high sail 20 degrees above the mark for the first three minutes of the leg. So if you sail 20 degrees *low* of the mark for the first three minutes, you will be roughly even with the boats that have gone high but they will be well to windward of you. With this distance you will get through any disturbed air quickly and be able to play the puffs and lulls as you please (Fig, 3).

If you sail high early in the reach it will be hard psychologically for the boat in front of you to head up and defend herself. The reason for this is that you will seem too far to windward to make the effort worthwhile. You then will be free to sail as you please, and you will only need that one big puff to ride down and over your now-helpless competitor. As you approach the gybe mark, make sure that you and your nearby competitors call for buoy room at the two-boat-length circle. Many sailors call for room at about five boat-lengths from the mark, and you should be on your guard for this.

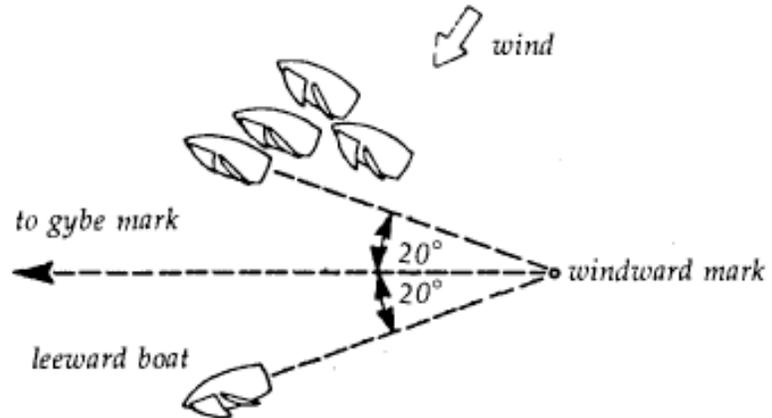
When you sail your Sonar with a spinnaker, the gybe mark can present some real problems. The pressure of tight competition can force you to gybe so suddenly that your crew cannot possibly avoid getting tangled up in the spinnaker gear. But you can save the day for them by stopping your turn for two or three seconds when the boat is by the lee. This gives your crew an opportunity to square the spinnaker to the wind and gybe the pole. The chances are good that you will be rewarded with a clean gybe.

The second reach

You have to make the same decisions at the gybe mark that you made at the weather mark. Should you sail high of the next mark, sail low of it or sail straight on the rhumb line? A slow gybe around the mark may be really helpful if you decide to sail low on the second reach. Soon, you will be a comfortable distance to leeward of the boats that made

tight roundings, and you will be free to sail the leg as you please. However, you must be careful, for the boats that do go high will come in with an overlap at the mark.

Your goal on this leg should be to gain (or reduce) distance on the fleet and then be positioned for a good mark rounding. Unless you are one of the breakaway leaders, avoid small battles with other boats because these can lead you high of the leeward mark. Usually it is better to stay in sixth place and be close to the leaders than it is to be in fifth place with no hope of moving up farther after the leeward mark.



After first three minutes of reaching leg, the boat sailing 20 degrees low of course is same distance from gybe mark as boats that have sailed high. But boat to leeward has clear air and now is free to play puffs.

The second beat

Before you round the leeward mark, decide on your basic strategy for the next beat. Leeward-mark roundings are often crowded with boats, so decisions will have to be made fast and at a time when you and your crew may both have your heads in the bilge of the boat.

If your plan is to tack onto starboard after a rounding to port, tack before the boats in front of you do. This way, your air will be clear and you will not have to take any extra tacks to free yourself. You should also try to plan your tack so that you pass *to windward* of any group of boats still on the reach. You can lose a lot of wind by sailing to leeward of a cluster of boats that are reaching.

If your plan is to stay on port tack after the rounding, you may find that there is just too much backwind from the port-tack boats in front of you. If that is the case, tack away but tack back immediately after you have cleared your air.

If you are doing well in the race and the breeze is steady, cover your competition. But if the breeze is shifty, sail your own race and sail your boat as fast as possible. You have to keep working or else it will be excuse-time when you get back ashore.

The run

As you approach the weather mark, you or your crew should decide what gybe to take after the rounding. Know where there is more breeze and what the shifts are doing. More important, know where the leeward mark is and what gybe will bring you closest to it. All things being equal, a gybe set at the windward mark sets you up for an inside overlap at the leeward mark, and it also gives you the opportunity to gybe onto starboard tack.

When you play the shifts on the run, always keep your eye on the mark and gybe any time the opposite gybe has a closer angle to the wind when you are sailing toward the mark. As you approach the mark, keep gybing toward it. It is just like your approach to the windward mark you must resist the temptation to sail to a layline (Fig 4).

The final beat

Before you round the last mark, decide on a tentative plan for the last leg of the course. Usually the fleet is quite spread out by this time, and there is no real alternative except to cover your nearby competition. (Again, if the breeze is shifty you must sail your own race to the finish line.) Try to stick to your plan, but be on the lookout for opportunities to gain distance on other boats. Most important, sail your boat fast for this is the sprint to the finish, and you must be ready for it.

The last fourth of this leg is important when you are near a group of boats. You must concentrate fully on boat speed, and your crew should calculate the consequences of tacking or not tacking on a given competitor. Your crew should also determine which end of the line is favored. At the finish line, have your crew tell you when you should shoot the boat into the wind to nip out a close competitor.

Tactical decisions can certainly seem complicated at times, but you can prevent many serious mistakes by keeping all these fundamental rules in mind.

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