

# The Leading Edge

By Hal Smith

With this issue of *Mainsheet*, we begin a new column on racing, written by Hal Smith. Hal is a past Catalina 22 National Champion and represents North Sails in Atlanta, Georgia.

It has been estimated that fewer than one in ten sailors race their sailboats. This is unfortunate, because racing will increase the seamanship skills of almost every sailor. Besides being an educational event, sailboat racing is a social event which has its own rewards. The only valid reason for not participating is a lack of knowledge of how to begin. In this and succeeding articles, we will share with you exactly how to begin racing safely with enjoyment and how to grow your new skills into successful racing experiences.

Richard Creagh-Osborne in *This is Sailing* cites five golden rules which will get you onto the race course immediately having fun:

1. Fight for CLEAR AIR.
2. Go for TOP BOAT SPEED.
3. THINK AHEAD.
4. AVOID TROUBLE.
5. Retain FREEDOM OF MANEUVER.

Until you learn and master other subtleties, the above simple rules will

permit you to participate and be competitive with a minimum of anxiety. Once started, your learning curve will rise dramatically.

Even experienced sailors frequently ignore the value of clear air (1). They heed their accumulated wisdom, which suggests one or the other side of the starting line is favored, and they congregate there with the dirty air of the masses. Later they will go too soon to the layline and follow other boats, in bad air, to the mark. There is no substitute for clear air, short of raw luck, which will help you complete a fast course.

Obtaining top boat speed (2) will be the topic of the next article. In general, speed is the result of boat handling knowledge, quality of sails, and bottom condition. You can smooth your bottom now. You can get quality sails when you are ready to spend the money. And, you can begin sailing your boat as much as possible to get it know it better. You will intuitively discover some of the boat speed techniques which we will later define.

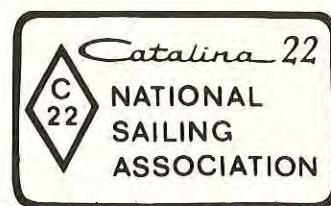
When on the course, anticipate what other boats are going to do and how it will affect you. If you think ahead (3), you can avoid trouble (4) and maintain clear air (1). All of this will decrease the time it takes to complete the course, reduce your close quarters and anxious moments, and enhance your fun.

If you retain your freedom to maneuver (5), you will be able to tack to clear air (1) as needed and avoid trouble (4). The more familiar you become with the notion of completing the course in the best air and least confusion, rather than worrying about interaction with other boats, the better your overall planning will be.

Do not under estimate the significance of this utterly simple concept of clear air. Sailing in dirty air will cost at least one-half knot of speed, and often more. Additionally, your attention will be focused on the boats around you instead of on the course in general. You may miss a significant wind shift or fail to make appropriate adjustments as the wind speed changes. As you race more frequently, your attention span will broaden so that you can sail in close quarters and not overlook the above, but the dirty air will always make you slower.

Since avoiding other boats is not entirely possible, here are few fundamental notions on rules to help you know when you are right or wrong. A starboard tack boat (wind from the right, boom to the left) is arbitrarily given rights over a port tack boat. Other rules tend to grant rights to the boat which does not have a wind advantage; i. e., a boat to leeward (down wind) generally has rights over a boat which can take its wind. Also, the rules grant rights to boats which cannot maneuver to avoid collision, such as a boat being overtaken or approaching an obstruction. These are only logical and support the fairness principle of our competition.

It is true that some sailors, who must have been mistreated as children, think sailboat racing is a contact sport. They learn a few rules and try to apply them aggressively on the course. If you pay close attention, you will notice that these people rarely win. For now, sail in clear air, go for as much speed as possible, and finish a lot of races.



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