

The Leading Edge

By Hal Smith

This is the sixth in a series of articles, "How to Begin Sailboat Racing for Fun and Personal Growth," by Hal Smith, a past Catalina 22 National Champion.

Downwind

Once again you have maintained your position in the top of the fleet as you round the weather mark for the last time. You even passed a couple of boats on that last leg, and the adrenalin is really flowing. Do you have a chance at silver?

Even in a breeze, sailing the long leeward leg in a tense or ho-hum attitude can cost you several positions at the finish. A planned strategy is as important while going downwind as going upwind, although the strategy is less apparent. Also, you need patience, boatspeed, and smooth execution of sail handling.

The downwind strategy has three objectives: 1. Clear air at the start of the leg; 2. Boatspeed; 3. A leeward mark rounding which will not put you in the windshadow of a boat just ahead of you. The data you have been collecting on windshifts during the other legs, the behavior of the surrounding boats, and your practiced speed trim adjustments will be very useful to you now.

It is absolutely imperative that you not allow another boat to round the weather mark just behind you and take your wind. Most people do not fully bear away at first, and sail high of the next mark to discourage a boat astern from sitting on their wind. Even if no boat is threatening them from behind, most people sail high of the next mark while preparing for the next leg and setting the whisker pole. Further, the last time they rounded this mark, they were going out to the gybe mark, so the formed habit of going high first is almost irresistible.

It is true that less speed is lost by making a more radical turn, but if you have boats on your stern, gybe around the mark instead. No one expects this, so you will likely have opened up some clear air room before the other boats adjust. You may wish to surprise the other boats, but **do not surprise your crew.** Your action should be anticipated before the weather mark so that the pole and the sheets can be readied appropriately. In any case, once you round the mark and start downwind, you are a windward boat (going downwind relative to boats beating to

ward the mark which you have just rounded), and as such, you are burdened not to obstruct their course. Think ahead, and do not foul.

Boatspeed on the leeward leg consists of: 1. Clear air (just discussed); 2. Boat trim; 3. Steering; 4. Sail trim; 5. Playing the windshifts. The Catalina 22 should be trimmed bow down to lift its stern so that the transom/bottom corner is not dragging more than one inch into the water.

It is harder to feel a steering "groove" downwind, so excessive steering is often the result. If the helm is not kept neutral with minimal steering, the slowing effect is tremendous. When a skipper is being approached by another boat, his tendency is to tense up and begin "steering" to go faster, while actually going slower all the while.

All the sail controls should be loosened to deepen the sails' shapes. The pole should not be extended as far on a broad reach, so that the genoa will be fuller and can be flown like a spinnaker. Since every degree sailed above dead downwind is extra speed, look for the shifts and gybe, just the way you tacked upwind, to keep the wind over one shoulder or the other. Sail in front of increasing breezes and puffs as often as possible. This can make more speed differences downwind than upwind.

Rounding inside of other boats at the last leeward mark is more important than at any other rounding. You do not want to be positioned just behind another boat beating to the finish line. If you are in a close behind position, the leeward mark

is an excellent place to pick up a few extra positions in a matter of seconds. Plan your approach so that you begin to take the air from the boat ahead, allowing you to catch and overlap him just before reaching the two-boatlength radius of the mark. If you play this game too soon, you will leapfrog over each other as he takes your air after you pass — then he will pass you, etc.

By gaining an inside overlap, you will complete the mark rounding with him behind and to leeward of you. Your task is to round sharply enough to allow no room between you and the mark, thus thwarting any attempt by a boat with a wide approach to shoot inside of you and everybody else at the mark.

If you are caught outside, you may be able to slow down enough to cross the other sterns just at the mark, while beginning to round; thus, you are moving faster on a tight, closehaunched course sooner and are to windward of the nearby boats. If you are aware of all the other boats, you will be alert to this possibility. **Thorough communication with your crew is critical, and swift and skillful sail handling is imperative.**

Your heart is beating a lot faster, but you made it! And, you picked up two more boats! Silver is possible. Tell everyone to wait right where they are until we discuss the final weather leg to the finish, next time.

Questions? Write Hal Smith, 101 Deerwood, Easley, SC 29640.

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