

The Leading Edge

By Hal Smith

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

Why do it? "Just do it" is a popular phrase these days which encourages participation without reason or purpose. Much is done today because of "just do it." Some things are good, and some are bad. Often the do-er is engaged in an effort believing some reward will be forthcoming, but he misses it because he does not know what he is looking for.

In the first paragraph of the first article in this series, I stated that you could expect to improve your seamanship skills and have a great social experience even if you did not also win and boost your ego. If objectives are to be achieved, the objectives must be known and recognized. It is important to take a deep breath before and after you begin to race sailboats and become clearly conscious of what your objectives are. If you decide beforehand that winning the race is your only objective and you lose, then consoling yourself with backup objectives will accomplish nothing toward improving your defeated mood. On the other hand, if you have a conscious list of objectives, i.e., improved tacking, better start timing, meeting new sailors, not running out of beer, etc., then scoring three out of four objectives will count as a successful day, and your mood will be great.

This is about attitude and how and why you should manage it. If you are concerned that if you do not focus only on winning you never will win, don't worry. The competitive instinct is alive and well inside each of us. It does not need special nurturing. Have you ever sailed along beside another sailboat and not thought of showing him how fast you can sail? In a real race it is only more intense. The starting gun has always had the magical power to turn each of us into a beast. For the winner, the finishing gun turns him back into a joyous soul. Everybody else has to do that for themselves. It will be easy if you have accomplished something which you set out to do.

We all love admiration by our peers. Our egos need periodic feeding. The race winner often confuses others' envy, even resentment, for admiration, because the losers extend their polite congratulations. True peer admiration is reserved for higher accomplishments than winning sailboat races (thank goodness). Admiration is

bestowed on the sportsman who exercises his skills with honor, supports others' efforts, is selfless rather than selfish, and is always gracious, victory or not.

I have been quoted as saying "It is GOOD to WIN." This remains true, and it still works with the above thoughts. We have just invested seven chapters of study on how to win. The expressed objective of every race is to win. But more important than winning is how you win. Notice I said "how you win" not "how you race." If you win without racing well, the feeling of accomplishment is very brief and is absent the respect of your competitors. If you do not win, but race well, there is no trophy, but there is lasting satisfaction, and you will receive the respect of others. To win and to race well as a sportsman, alas, is the sweetest.

The discipline necessary to achieve a high level of skill is therefore required in two areas: 1. Boat handling and strategy skills, and 2. Attitude and definition of objectives. This is no different than for any other part of your life. Developing a good attitude involves more than suppressing the killer instinct. It involves defining achievable

goals and accurately measuring your current performance against your past performance. To beat your past performance is to win. To fail to beat your past performance but to gain new information which may help next time is also to win. This exercise requires as much, maybe more, discipline as is required in practicing boat handling skills and strategy development.

Once you have made the commitment to yourself that you want to become a better sailor, have thrilling experiences and have opportunities for personal glory (while playing), then you should "just do it." Now you have purpose. Being timid or lacking experience is no excuse, because you will overcome both by joining the fun. Yes, it is great FUN. It is fun for all those who improve themselves a little bit each time they race. It is fun for those who occasionally win as they become better and win more frequently. It is fun for those who simply wish to participate and share the excitement.

This is more than a pep talk. Attitude is as essential a skill to a successful sailboat racing career as are all the other skills previously reviewed put together. A lack of a proper attitude is the only thing preventing many participants from enjoying the full experience and winning their share of races. From a meaningful series of objectives accomplished, a strong positive self-image will emerge. It will be from this enhanced confidence that you will find the greatest satisfaction. Not only will you have the respect and admiration of your competitors, but you will also have the respect and admiration of yourself! I know of no other measure for true success.

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