

Inner Sailing

"Think of your competitors only as a guide to your own performance."

– Paul Elvström, International and Olympic champion

(After a poor first beat.) "Well we're here . . . just for fun, let's see how well we can do in the rest of the race."

– The late Manton Scott; Sears, Intercollegiate, and 470 champion

"It's difficult to have fun or achieve concentration when your ego is engaged in some heavy ulterior game involving its self-image."

– Timothy W. Gallwey; author of *"The Inner Game of Tennis."*

To most who are bent on improving their racing skills, on the surface these quotes offer very little substantive information. In reality, however, these words are rich with insight into how to successfully approach the game of racing sailboats. I'd like to try to expose what, to me, is much of the meaning of these statements. This will be most meaningful to those seriously interested in improving their enjoyment and success in racing and who will expend the energy to consider carefully what is being said, look inside themselves for a possibly renewed understanding of themselves and, if necessary, rearrange some of their priorities and attitudes.

I'm often asked which books on sailing have been most useful to me. The one book that has had the most profound effect on my finishing positions and my attitude toward the sport is Tim Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis* (Random House, N.Y.). Gallwey writes: "Every game is composed of two parts, an outer game and an inner game. The outer game is played against an external opponent to overcome external obstacles, and to reach an external goal. Mastering this game is the subject of many books offering instructions on how to achieve the best results. But for some reason most of us find these instructions easier to remember than to execute.

"It is the thesis of this book that neither mastery nor satisfaction can be found in the playing of any game without

giving some attention to the relatively neglected skills of the inner game. This is the game that takes place in the mind of the player, and it is played against such obstacles as lapses in concentration, nervousness, self-doubt and self-condemnation. In short, it is played to overcome all habits of mind which inhibit excellence in performance."

As I travel around the country teaching racing seminars to all ages and levels of sailors, I'm continually impressed by how much knowledge and experience people have, and how seriously people take their racing. It's fantastic. Why then don't more of these people win races more of the time? Why do some people's learning curves level out and never seem to rise again? Why do people complacently fall into established "pecking orders" within their club series? And why the frustration, the anger and the inability of some people to get along in a boat?

Even at the highest levels of our sport, where all the top competitors are sharp both physically and mentally, it fascinates me to see how some consistently emerge as even better than the best, particularly under the pressures of a nationals, worlds, or Olympic Selection Trial. Certainly they possess skills, whether consciously or subconsciously, that would be helpful to all of us to learn. So, with the guidance of Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis*, let's explore the inner skills, and try to learn how to use them.

Sailing Out of Your Mind

Think back to your last successful race or series, and try to remember how you felt during the competition. Most people's descriptions include the following: "I felt good"; "I felt relaxed"; "Things seemed to go my way"; "It seemed too easy." All these descriptions imply effortlessness and almost surprise at the outcome. Athletes in most sports use similar phrases, and the best of them know that their peak performances never come when they are thinking about them. In fact they seem to come when they are "out of their minds."

In this state the good sailors are not unconscious of what is happening around them, but in fact are *more* aware and concentrated on the speed of the boat, the subtle changes in the strength and direction of the wind, and the tactics. They aren't aware of giving themselves lots of instructions – tack on the headers, stay with the fleet, pick the path of least resistance through the waves – they just do it. They are conscious, but not thinking, not *overtrying*. They seem to be immersed in a flow of action which requires their energy, yet results in greater speed and accuracy. The "hot streak" usually continues until they start thinking about it and try to maintain it. As soon as they attempt to exercise control, they lose it. Consider the classic scene of a sailor or team jumping out to an early lead in a series and then sailing poorly only to lose in

the end. The question then is: how do we become "out of our minds" without thinking about it?

The Discovery of Two Selves

Gallwey outlines a convention to help us better understand what happens within us. He divides us into two selves: Self 1 and Self 2. Self 2 is the computer, the unconscious, automatic doer. Self 1 is the teller, the director, the worrier. The kind of relationship that exists between Self 1 and Self 2 is the prime factor in determining one's ability to translate knowledge of technique into effective action.

Decide for yourself the value of this typical scene: You're coming onto the jibe mark, it's blowing twenty-five, and you're in first place. You've successfully jibed hundreds of times before so that Self 2 knows exactly how to do it. All of a sudden Self 1 gets into the act, as if he doesn't trust Self 2 to do it right. "Now this is important; we can't afford to blow it here. Be sure to turn quickly, but bring the boat back under the boom. O.K., here we go. Careful, careful . . . CRASH!" By thinking too much and trying too hard, Self 1 has produced tension in the body. Furthermore he heaps the blame on Self 2—"You stupid!.. "&!. Of all the times to blow it. Can't you get your act together?"

In hindsight, if someone had told Self 1 (your mind) to do nothing during the jibe but concentrate on the water directly in front of the bow, you probably would have jibed perfectly, and you probably would have caught the first wave after the jibe, gaining several lengths in the process. So sailing "out of your mind" is really just a matter of shutting Self 1 up so that Self 2 is allowed to perform in its excellent way.

Getting It Together

Getting it together means Self 1 is totally supportive of Self 2 and does everything possible to help Self 2 perform up to its potential, which in most people is nearly limitless. When the two are in harmony, one's peak performances can be reached. When Self 1, the ego mind, is constantly chattering away, constantly thinking, and constantly deriding Self 2, Self 1 does nothing but interfere with the natural doing process of Self 2, causing frustration and poor performances. The most important skill Self 1 can learn is to become an objective rather than a judgmental observer of events. See events simply as they are; don't judge them as good or bad. It's when emotions are added to events that people begin to get overconfident or start to freak out, both of which seriously inhibit clear decision-making and performance.

A classic example of this occurred when I was crewing for Bill Shore in a Lightning class championship. It was the

morning of the first race and we were unpacking his boat, which had just been shipped home from Switzerland. As I peeled the cover back, I saw that the entire deck surrounding the mast partner had been crushed. Reluctantly I told him, expecting him to be extremely upset and disappointed that we couldn't sail. Instead he looked at it, grabbed a paddle, wedged it in for support, taped it all together and started unpacking the rest of the boat! Instantly, I realized the value of remaining calm, detached, and objective in the midst of rapid and unsettling changes.

The spinnaker halyard jams, you're expecting a header but start to get lifted, a boat totally in the wrong smashes into you, the mark is in the wrong place, you have a bad race – all these things are events which you may have not expected and which may even cost you places in the race or series. But they've happened; there's nothing you can do about it. Given the chance to think about the situation as good or bad, the emotional Self 1 will start to bum out, give up, and the situation will get worse. But the player of the Inner Game will remain calm because his judgmental mind is quiet, allowing Self 2 to spontaneously and accurately figure out the best way to make the most of the situation and do its best from that point on.

Concentration – the Here and Now

The key to an undistracted mind, hence the key to the Inner Game, is relaxed concentration. Concentration is the act of focusing one's attention. As the mind is allowed to focus on a single object, it stills. As the mind is kept in the present, it becomes calm. Concentration means keeping the mind *here* and *now*.

You come off the line immediately to windward of a fast guy. You get nervous that he'll blow you off. He does. While cursing the fact you started there, you tack. Your mind's in the past. The boat to windward of you tacks simultaneously right on your air. In anger and frustration you shove the tiller over again, cursing out your crew for not being ready. Going slow and in bad air you resign yourself to a bad finish, taking the opportunity to call yourself a loser and consider selling the boat. Your mind's worrying about a future outcome. Your head is blown, your race is blown, and you're everywhere but in the present.

The art of keeping in the present is a difficult skill which must be respected and practiced hard. Remember, the outcome is only the sum total of all the mini-events leading up to it. Focus your energy on successfully completing each mini-event – the pre-race preparation, the start, the first five minutes of the race. Don't ever let your mind consider the importance of the outcome. As Ben Franklin put it, "Watch the pennies, and the dollars will take care of themselves."

If you feel your mind drifting away from the present, gently bring it back, giving it something of interest to focus

on. In the Laser, when I'm tiring and my concentration begins to drift, I get near another boat or watch the waves off my bow, trying to actually see if the water moves up or down the face and the backside. There's no question that when the mind is in the present, focused exclusively on what's happening right there and then, things seem to happen slower, decisions are more spontaneous and accurate, and the body has more energy.

The Meaning of Competition

Why do we race sailboats? Out of sheer love for sailing, for the enjoyment of competing, or as an extension of our ego needs to excel at something, to feel like a winner? In our achievement oriented culture one thing comes through loud and clear: excellence is valued in all things, and a man is measured by his competence in various endeavors. That is, you are a good person and worthy of respect only if you do things successfully.

In this light it's frightening to realize that people use sailboat racing, with all its inherent fickleness, uncertainties and inequities, as a standard for judging self-worth. Notice your own attitude as you go to school or work Monday morning after winning or not winning on the weekend. On the one hand you may feel happy, confident, on top of the world; on the other, depressed, lacking confidence, and feeling that you'll never succeed in anything. But you are exactly the same person you were on Friday; you've just let the outcome of the race dominate your outlook on yourself.

The fundamental skill that underlies all others of the Inner Game is the ability to see winning for what it is: overcoming obstacles to reach a goal, which might be making it around the course, finishing five places higher in a series, or winning an Olympic Medal. Often, reaching the goal itself may not be as valuable as the experience that can come by making a supreme effort to overcome the obstacles involved. Thus the competition can be more rewarding than the victory itself, though it takes a certain level of maturity to see this.

The player of the Inner Game is in a moment-to-moment effort to let distractions go and stay centered in the here and now, where his total energy goes toward doing his best. As he proceeds around the race course, his competitors become merely guides to his own performance. And his satisfaction and happiness come in the end when he knows that he performed well against challenging obstacles. As an added bonus, the successful players of the Inner Game will find they are enjoying the sport much more, and walking off with more than their share of the silver.