

CHAPTER 20

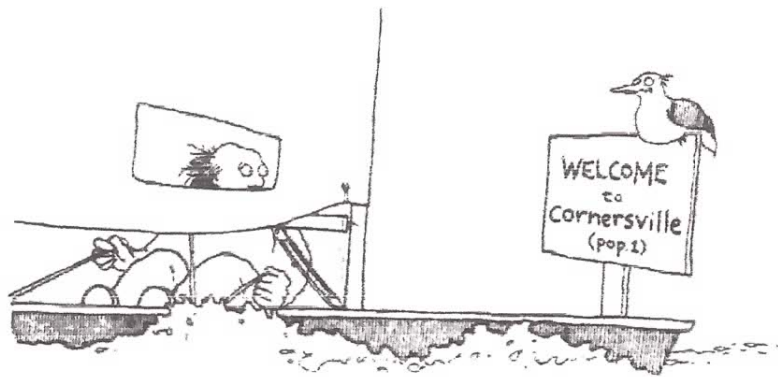
Tactics in Windshifts

"All my life, people tried to make tactics in shifty breezes seem so complicated. Then I went to Tufts University where coach Joe Duplin put it like it is: "Don't worry about all those fancy shifts; just get your boat on the tack pointing you closer to the mark and make that scoundrel run for its life!"

— Jamie McCreary

TACTICS IN WINDSHIFTS is a subject nearly every author has taken a shot at and, as a result, most sailors know what they should be doing on the race course. However, having put in some serious corner time myself, what interests me is the difficulty most of us have actually doing what we know we should be doing.

It boils down to a simple mind game: you're racing upwind on port tack. Suddenly, the four boats ahead of you tack, and almost simultaneously you get headed. The unemotional and intellectual side of your mind says, "Tack immediately! We'll be to leeward and ahead of the pack in clear air and going fast toward the next header!" But the personality and ego side quickly counters with, "Hang on! We'll never pass those guys by following them. Keep going, wait for a bigger knock and get'em all!" But by now it's too late to tack without tacking right into a lot of bad air and wake, which even less inviting, so you keep on. Of course, the next thing to happen is a lift, putting those four boats even farther ahead and leaving you waiting for an even big-



ger knock so that you can at least get back to where you started from. You keep on, and on, and on, until finally you pass a little sign in the water that says, "Welcome to Cornersville, Pop. 1."

It all boils down to several key barriers:

- Sailing is supposed to be fun, but most spell fun W-I-N. Our urgency and desire to win causes great pressure in and of itself, particularly when we've gone a while without winning. Our loss of confidence causes us to start taking more and more chances with boatspeed and tactics.
- Our ego and our need to be right controls many of us. It's very hard to fall in behind a pack, even if we know the pack is sailing in the correct direction. The tendency is to head off in the other direction, envisioning ourselves out in front and the heroes of the day.
- The frightening thing about the aforementioned scenario is the confident commitment that people make to it. This is due to the immense unpredictability of the weather, otherwise known as luck. It's often impossible to resist the temptation to wander off by ourselves with the hope that this is the day for the big break.
- Worrying about who the other competitors in the series are can be another serious barrier. Personally, I've always done my best when I've gone into a series not thinking I was going to win it. Overconfidence and lack of respect for my competition have always nailed me.

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And, there are plenty of other factors that become barriers to clear, rational thinking:

- psych jobs in the parking lot, etc.
- rivalries and grudge matches from previous regattas
- bad vibes at a certain location where something went wrong before
- feeling that you'll make lots of mistakes, but that no one else will
- predetermining your finish in the regatta ("I'll probably finish in the mid-20s," etc.)
- psyched out by the weather – heavy air, chop, light air, etc.
- and the inevitable pressure in the last few races caused by a close series.

All of these and other factors mount up to prevent us from doing the one thing we want to do most – race sailboats as well as possible.

THERE IS A RATIONAL approach that will help overcome some of these barriers, particularly with regard to tactics in windshifts. A good gambler always seems to know when to shoot for it and, especially, when to fold. Undoubtedly, he knows the game well enough to assign odds and probabilities to each possible outcome. But most of all, he realizes the incredible importance of remaining conservative when the odds aren't good.

Back to the original example: you're sailing along on port; the four boats ahead tack, and almost simultaneously you get headed. If the breeze is oscillating, then the next shift will most likely be a port tack lift. Tacking immediately will put you in the safest position when the shift comes. You may gain slightly or just hold even, but you won't lose – high percentages move with good odds. However, the longer you hold on past the pack, the worse the odds in your favor get. Gamble as much as you dare, but as soon as you realize the gamble may not pay off, fold and tack back. Unfortunately, what usually happens is this rationalization: "Well, I'm behind already, and if I tack back now, I'll just be conceding my loss; so let's hang on a little longer and see if we get a big knock to go back on" – low percentages, bad odds.

So the rational approach to tactics in windshifts is to continually assign odds to certain possible outcomes throughout the race and execute where the odds are most in your favor. It might be that ten other boats are thinking the

same as you, in which case you may follow a pack around the entire course. Or it may be that you decide to take a flyer, even though the odds of its working are extremely poor. The important thing is that you've thought about it, there's a reason behind each move you make, and you fully understand the odds of their success.

NOW, LET'S QUICKLY REVIEW some of the important tactical considerations when sailing upwind in an oscillating breeze.

Before the race, get a feel for the frequency and size of the oscillations and the strength and directions of the puffs and lulls (see Chapter 19). Force yourself to remember that the object of the first beat is not to be first at the mark. The object is to sail the shortest possible distance in the strongest wind and end up somewhere in the hunt. Unfortunately, you never know what that course is until after the beat's over. So, up the first beat, stick with the good odds, keep in touch with the bulk of the fleet and resist the temptation to go for it all.

Your primary race is against the wind. Don't let boats in front distract you. Use them to see what shifts are coming next. Start where you can get on the lifted tack immediately. Don't worry about sailing in bad air. The gains from hitting three consecutive ten-degree shifts are miles more than the four or five boatlengths lost in bad air. If you are in bad air and wake and going toward a header, drive off two or three lengths to clear your air. If going toward a lift, make two quick tacks.

The tactician's total energy must go toward positioning, and the key word is separation. The larger the separation between you and other boats, the larger the gains and losses will be. The closer you are, the less you'll lose and gain. Stay close to hang in there, get away to pass — simple! (see Chapter 19).

The more in the middle of the beat you are, the more open your options are: the closer to the layline, the fewer your options. Shifty breezes can be fickle, so continually drag yourself back to the middle. Don't necessarily wait for just five more degrees. Open your eyes, sail toward a puff and use the puff to take you back toward the middle. If you're right of middle on port, and getting headed, tack onto the starboard lift and get across to the middle as quickly as possible for the next header. Foot in the lifts, point in the headers

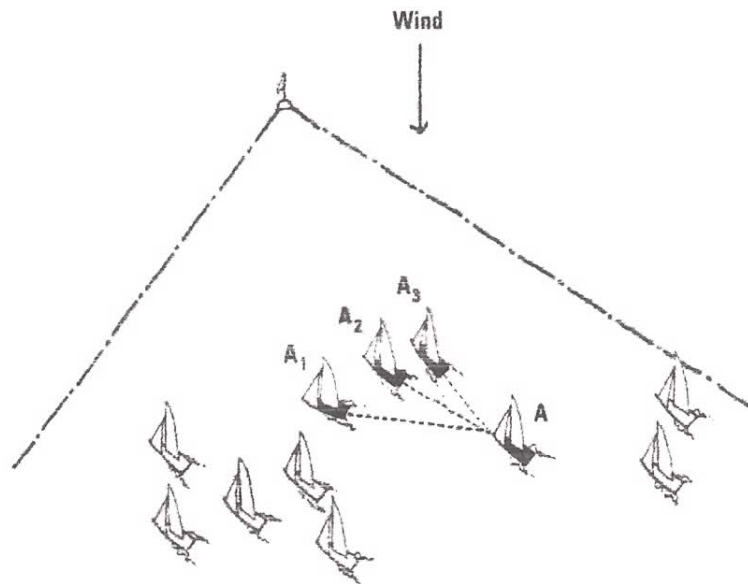


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(diagram). Tack back
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If you are A, sailing on a lift, do you:

A₁ – foot slightly, going faster through the water?

A₂ – sail a normal close-hauled course?

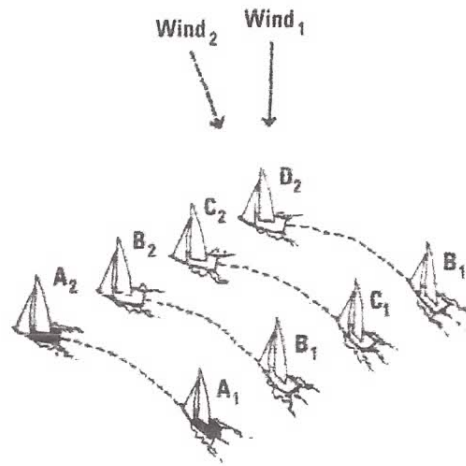
A₃ – or put the boat in point-mode, sailing higher but slower?

You should foot (A₁), putting yourself in the best position to use the next header.

(diagram). Tack back to leeward and ahead of boats coming in to the middle. This gives you more fighting room, more options, and you're less likely to be tacked on.

Watch the other boats to determine wind shifts (diagram). You don't actually gain on another boat until you're on converging tacks. As between two boats on port, the one to leeward and ahead gains in a header. But he doesn't actually realize the gain until he tacks over. If you can cross or get closer to a boat that was previously farther ahead, do it! Grind boats down little by little.

When the wind starts to shift, when should you tack? If the shifts are fast and frequent, tack immediately in a header. If the header is slow and gradual, tack halfway through it or at the mean (halfway between the most lifted and most headed course on that tack). Above all, be on the tack aiming you closer to the windward mark. If you're to leeward and ahead of some boats and



- 1) *A is clearly behind B, C and D.*
- 2) *Now B, C and D appear to be slipping back. If boat speeds have remained constant, the wind is shifting to the left, heading the boats.*

start to get lifted, decide what the odds are of the wind shifting back before you reach the layline. If good, hang on. If bad, tack back to windward (inside) of the boats.

Finally, here are some thoughts on boat-to-boat tactics in a shifty breeze. If you're on starboard going the way you want and a port tackler is approaching, wave him across your bow. That's much better than having him lee-bow you, forcing you to tack. If you're on port, ask starboard tackers if you should tack or cross. Chances are good they'll let you go. (Don't forget – rule 10 still requires you to keep clear). If you're on starboard or port and a boat is clearly going to cross you, pinch up to close the distance. This will delay or prevent them from tacking on you. And if they do tack on you, have it already figured whether you're going to drive off or tack to free your air, so you can react immediately. The elements that make the good tactical sailors great are:

- a. their ability to anticipate what's going to happen next
- b. their precision in assigning accurate odds to the various responses to what's going to happen next, and
- c. their reflex ability to react instantly and execute before the opportunity's gone. When sailing in shifty and puffy wind, you have to be think-

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ing continually. Racing is a game of minimizing mistakes; good sailors don't make fewer mistakes than others, just smaller ones.

Probably the best way to improve your own consistency and finishes in shifty air is to watch a good series. When you can get out and look at the entire picture, even the smallest mistakes become obvious. You'll also get a good mental image of how the top guys attack the race. Most important, you'll get a much broader feel for the dynamics of the race course – the laylines, the effect of bad air, current effect, sail shapes, etc. – much more than you could ever get inside your boat.

Tactics in windshifts are frustratingly fundamental on paper, yet deceptively difficult to apply consistently. Just for fun, pick a series and plan to sail it the way you know you should be sailing it. Who knows – it might be the best chance you ever took.