

*The Great Escape*

Well, so that perfect start didn't work out quite as well as you'd planned. No problem. Statistics show that every sailor gets a minimum of one, and sometimes even two, bad starts in a series, so you're right in there with the best of them.

Now you just have to figure out the best way to pick yourself up and get back in the race. With most bad starts, you know that you're going to have a rough one as early as thirty seconds to a minute before the gun. So don't feel you have to wait until the gun goes to make your escape from a bad start. Bail out as soon as you realize you're not going to make it up to the line or into clear air. The classic example of someone stubbornly refusing to bail out is the guy who is coming up from leeward with no real chance of breaking through boats already on the line. But instead of tacking out of there and looking for another hole, or at least getting off into clear air farther up the line, the guy continues, yelling "Up, up, up!" and swearing at his crew for not trimming the jib in soon enough. Finally, the gun goes, sealing his fate. The air is so bad, oxygen masks automatically start dropping from his boom. The water is wildly churned up, and the whole fleet has hardened up to closehailed, preventing him from tacking and sealing all possible escape routes.

The key to avoiding this is to anticipate the trouble before it happens. One time I was sailing Lasers in about eighteen knots, and I was luffing on the line with about thirty second to go. All of a sudden there was this incredible noise and yelling, and I looked back to see this guy planing madly down the line, totally out of control. I was so intrigued by the sight that I watched him zip by my transom and head for a hole below me. He then hardened up a bit too fast and instantly deathrolled to weather. Unfortunately, he had gone just far enough so that his mast came crashing down like toll-booth gate right on top of my bow. Then, BANG! The gun went off. Great! The only thing that would have saved me at that moment was a Black & Decker power saw. Had I been thinking clearly and anticipating the possibility of trouble, I could have bailed out before it happened and been off with the rest of the fleet.

If you're starting near the windward end, you may encounter several variations of bad starts. The first is getting to the line too early and being pushed over by the boats behind. Too often, a sailor who knows he's going to be early just sits there and waits for it all to happen. Maybe he thinks he can jam up the rest of the fleet to windward, forcing a general recall. (He can't believe that the committee will get his number. But sure enough, nine times out of ten, the committee will spot him.) If you know you're going to be over, bail out! Either bear off and try reaching into a hole farther down the line or,

better yet, sail up around the committee boat and start again. If you do this at twenty seconds rather than waiting for the gun, you'll still be in the race. If you're caught coming into the weather end too low, simply tack and try again. Your chances of getting a good start are much better than if you stay down and try to break through from the rear. One thought on tacking back onto port—avoid jibing at all costs. You'll wind up much farther away from the line than you thought, as well as risking a capsize, particularly if it's breezy. It's better to bear off, tack and duck starboard tackers. Finally, if you know you're going to get boxed out at the windward end and get caught for barging, circle around and restart. If it's done early, you'll get a decent start. If you have to do it after the gun, you'll have a much worse start than necessary. Remember, no one can go anywhere before the gun has gone—so that is the time to do all of your circling and repositioning.

The same applies for starting at the leeward end. Too often, people know they're going to be early at the pin. But instead of jibing out of there and setting up again, they luff and pinch and squeeze and holler, ending up either hitting the pin anyway, not making the line at all or, the worst of all bummers, accidentally falling onto port tack. If you sense you're going to be early at the pin end, bail out of there, and do it soon! If you wait until the gun goes to make your escape, you'll end up getting a quick review of the name of each boat in the fleet as you pass behind their transoms.

In bailing out onto port tack, there's one rule that is frequently misunderstood, but that is vital to recovering from a bad start. Rule 18.2(a), Giving Room; Keeping Clear requires an outside overlapped boat to give an inside overlapped boat room to pass an obstruction. A right-of-way boat can be an "obstruction" (see definition of Obstruction), and between two non-right-of-way boats the outside boat of the pair must give the inside boat room to pass the obstruction. This frequently occurs as two port tackers are passing the transom of a starboard tacker. If the outside (leeward) of the pair chooses to pass behind, they *must* give the inside (windward) boat room to do likewise (diagram). Of course, under rule 19.1, if the outside boat chooses to tack, they can do that also, provided they fulfill all obligations clearly stated in the rule (also see Appeal 36).

Now the gun has gone, and you're back in the bushes. Don't freak out—the race just becomes a bit more challenging, that's all. Remember, the fleet can't get too far away from you in the first minute or so after the start, so quick reactions can often get you right back into the action. The problem with a bad start is that most people think they have to shoot a corner to get back into the race, and they wind up losing even more. It's the old "well, let's see, most of the fleet is going left, so we'll bang it to the right" syndrome. But the race is long, and the series longer, and I can't count the number of times after the series is over that I've wished I'd fought it out for fifteenth place in a race rather than gambled and wound up

twenty-fifth. Hang tough, and get what you can.

First of all, you should definitely have an idea as to which side of the course is favored. Also try to notice which way the top sailors are headed. Set your boat up for more power as you sail through the disturbed water and lighter air, i.e. fuller sail—eased outhaul, cunningham, and sheet tension. But be sure to shift back down when you get off into clear air again.

At this point, clear air is vital. After a start the first thing that will happen is that boats will begin peeling off onto port tack. The sooner you can do that, the better. Crews should be carefully watching traffic so that the skipper can concentrate on keeping up speed. If on starboard and another boat close to windward is preventing you from tacking, you can often tack and clear that boat's transom by bearing off sharply or by quickly luffing the mainsail, rather than waiting for them to tack. Once on port, someone onboard—preferably the crew—had better keep eyes wide open. As a general rule, it's better to duck a starboard tacker and continue on port into clear air than it is to tack on their lee-bow. Only lee-bow a boat if you want to go to the left very badly, you'll be in clear air on starboard, or you'd have to duck a lot of boats before hardening up again. Often, in a close situation, a starboard tacker would rather have you cross their bow than to tack on them. Always ask, "Tack or cross?" and watch for their response. The alternative to tacking is to drive off to leeward of the boats ahead, putting you in clear air. Remember, a boat or pack of boats throws bad air off in a cone-like pattern. Also the bad air is worst when you're closest to the boats ahead. When in a boat's wind shadow, most people feel themselves start slipping back pretty fast, and tack or bear off at that point. But after two or three lengths, you really don't get hurt that badly. So, if they're going the right way and you're not getting seriously hurt, hang in there.

One advantage to getting a bad start is that you can see what's happening to the boats ahead. The first few boats to get a header will not always tack immediately, for they want to be sure the header is real. You can watch them, and if the header is sticking, tack as soon as it hits you. You'll have a slight jump on the boats ahead and a bigger jump on those who are sailing out of phase with the windshifts.

Another good tactic for fighting your way out of the jungle is what Gary Jobson calls "the starboard-tack blocker." If you want to tack to starboard, first duck a starboard tacker and tack to weather and behind that boat. That sets the other boat up as your "blocker." Then, as port tackers come across, they'll first encounter your blocker, located to leeward and ahead of you. If they can't cross, and decide to tack on the blocker's lee-bow, it will hurt the blocker, yet you'll remain in clear air. If they decide to duck the blocker they'll probably have to duck you as well. You'll be pleasantly

surprised, the first time you use it, how effective this tactic is.

Fighting your way back into the race after a bad start is one of the toughest skills in sailing. It requires that you keep your eyes wide open, anticipate openings into clear air even before they happen and know exactly how your boat handles. Most important, it requires that you keep your cool throughout the entire race. Being back in the pack is no fun, but if you keep your head together and never stop fighting, you probably won't be there for long.