

Week 6: Lesson from Saturday = be big and hike till it hurts, then hike harder

First of all, thank you to Andrew Scrivan for breaking your top section and thank you to Steve Fisk for giving him a leaky boat to use after that. Also thank you to Mike Matan for capsizing at the gybe mark in race 5. These are just a few of the many pieces had to fall in to place for my result to end up as well as it did. There were a lot of fast boats out there and most people had a very consistent day, making for plenty of excitement and close racing.

I don't think anyone was upset by the postponement before racing, so good job to the race committee for keeping us out of the rain, which would have made it uncomfortable, and keeping us out of the lightning, which would have been unsafe. The breeze followed the forecast of blowing hard all morning and then picking up even more in the afternoon.

Courses were another plus for the race committee. Perfect length and many fun (and stable) reaches, along with the weather mark being sheltered by the island to allow us to take a deep breath before being drowned in spray on the reaches. Thanks again.

Now on to the sailing. In addition to being a tall person and incredibly fit, sail controls were exceptionally important. Before the first race, I pulled my outhaul until the hook that attaches it to the sail was touching the eye on the boom. It remained this way until I hit the ramp, never being eased for any reason. Leeward marks were hectic enough without another control line to mess with.

Next, the cunningham went on until the eye was below the gooseneck at about 2 minutes to each start and about 20 yards before each leeward mark. Close hauled sailing was never attempted without the bottom of the eye below the top of the boom, with the lone exception being the last beat of the first race when the breeze let up for just a minute and I needed more power. Cunningham was uncleated about 15 yards before the windward mark and allowed to ease on the downwinds.

Now onto my favorite control - the vang. Immediately at the start and after each leeward mark, I would trim in all the way and then pull the vang as hard as I possibly could. This made tacking dangerous as every tack required that I get on hands and knees in the bottom of the cockpit in order for the boom to scrape over my back. Get stuck just a little bit and all of the sudden you're in irons or swimming.

With the sail so flat, the upwind groove becomes very narrow so not pinching and playing the main becomes very important. In the last two races, as I became more exhausted, I got a bit lazy and did not sheet out in some of the puffs. I was punished each time as I spun out and then had to act fast to avoid getting caught in irons or capsizing to windward.

Pointing was not a bad thing, which I learned in race two from Glen Dickson. On the final beat, I got a little bit stuck under the boom on a tack to starboard and lost my lead. Glen leebowed me and my initial attempt to get the bow down and roll him failed as he

had very good upwind speed that day. I then began to point a bit, scared that he would pinch me off, while still being careful not to pinch and stall out. It paid off. I lifted off of Glen and laid the finish. From the time we tacked in the corner until the finish, I gained around 20 yards of height. Glen was still even with me on the course, but he had to do an additional tack to make the finish, which costs a lot of distance in big breeze, and he ended up a few boat lengths back in the end.

Mike Matan was setting the pace around the course. He has good form steering through the waves and there was no conceivable way to keep up with him on the beats. No worries though, we'll just try to hang in there upwind and then pick him off on the downwind when lighter sailors have the advantage. Not really. The reaches required full hiking and the run required stability so the vang was only eased about 2 to 3 feet from max for the downwind legs. Mike's size and considerable skill and technique in big breeze gave him the advantage there as well.

All this talk about setup and technique makes it sound like a day when tactics and strategy are out the window. After all, tacking in breeze is so slow that only 2 or 3 tacks can be made per beat if you want to keep up. Sadly, this is most often the case in big breeze laser sailing. However, because everyone is busy keeping their head in the boat and focusing on speed, the payoffs are that much larger when you do see something.

The best place for tactics in big breeze is the start. Big breeze starts almost always have a huge sag. In fact, the only time I remember anyone being called over was the general recall because the pin end dragged its anchor. Also, boats are much more spread out in breezy starts, so setting up early is unnecessary. You can come in on a screaming reach above the sag and spin up at the gun. Now you're going faster and ahead of all the other boats and you haven't even had to hike yet -- how great!

The other two places for tactics were the finish (the pin was usually favored, why hike a few extra yards when you can finish at the closer end to you), and in the final race when there was a course change. At the end of the run in the last race, which was a pretty scary ride but lots of fun, I was terrified about gybing. We often have a gate at the bottom of windward-leewards but there was only one mark visible for most of the leg. I was set to round in 6th or so, right behind a pack of boats which means dirty air and extra tacks at the rounding. At the last moment, I thanked the race committee for answering my prayers as I saw the other end of the gate, and ever better, it was favored. I headed toward it and the hot angle got me there in no time. I rounded and sailed out until I thought I was on layline (it turned out to be the mark boat taking photos and I was quite disheartened to see how much more hiking would be needed to get to the finish). As I came back to the pack, I was practically in the lead. After a huge duck of Andrew, I tacked on the layline, hoping to hang even and get him on starboard after the tack. He ended up winning the race, but I was able to make substantial gains and ended up with a 2 after it looked like I would be outside the top 5.

Saturday was a lot of fun but I'm glad it wasn't longer than the usual Sunday racing. Recovering from that day was a slow and painful process. Everyone at work now thinks I'm a big whiner. Thank you to everybody for coming down and to the race committee and organizers for the great event and abundant food afterwards. Feel free to contact me with any questions, comments, or just to let me know that you managed to stay awake through the entire reading. See you next week. I've got RC duty so be prepared for courses set by a drunk.

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