

R/C Sailboat Racing in a One Design Fleet Strategy First, Then Tactics

by Richard Hedderick

R/C sailboat racing is becoming an increasingly popular sport. With the development and commercialization of reasonably priced, fast, one design boats like the DragonForce 65 and DragonFlite 95, racing seems to have reached a new level. Many skippers are participating in the sport. Furthermore, great class leadership has insured that the boats are indeed raced as one designs with identical speed characteristics. Now we have one design boats with identical speed potential, sailed by good, experienced skippers. So, now you have a fast RC boat that is well tuned, and you can sail it well. The fleet includes many great racing skippers. How do you do well in races and Regattas? You need to have a good strategy and to employ good tactics.

DEVELOP A STRATEGY FIRST

What is STRATEGY? Think of strategy as the way you would sail the racecourse as quickly as possible *in the absence* of all other boats. In other words, how do you get the boat across the start line, around the course, and to the finish line in the least amount of time. A strategy should be developed before each race.

Here are some examples of STRATEGY:

- Where on the line do I want to start?
- Which tack do I want to be on at the start?
- Where are the parts of the course to avoid (for example, due to wind shadows)?
- How do I want to approach the 1st windward mark?
- How do I take advantage of wind shifts?
- What is the fastest course downwind?

Think though and develop your strategy. Then, before any races begin, try out your strategy on the water many times. Start where you want and sail up to the first mark. How did that go? Did you run across a bad wind shadow that you need



Figure 1. At the start.

to avoid? Adjust your strategy and try it again. Try starting at a couple of different places on the line. After several runs around the course you will get confident with your strategy. Many top skippers go to the lake early, well before racing is to start, in order to have time to develop and test their strategy.

THEN TACTICS

TACTICS are actions you need to take because there are other boats on the course. You often cannot sail your preferred strategy because other boats are trying to sail the same course you are. Or other boats are just in the way. Tactics come in to play a lot at the start, because that is when most boats are close together.

Here are some good examples of TACTICS at the start:

- Always have your boat moving fast at the start. Fast and a bit late at the start is always better than early and slow. You want to try to “blast away” from most of the boats at the start. Being fast at the start and not over early requires lots of practice.

- Start just away from the crowd. Many boats will be trying to start at the same place. Try to find a “hole” where you can get clear air. Many boats sailing close together are always slower than one boat sailing by itself.
- At all costs avoid contact with another boat. Contact is SLOW. And then, there goes the fleet ahead of you.

After the start, put your mind back to your preplanned strategy. Work the boat for speed. Where is the next wind shift? How can I now approach the 1st mark the way I want? How can I avoid those “wind shadows”? Try to sail the race the way YOU want to. Don’t get distracted too much by other boats. As you go about sailing the course the way YOU want to, tactics will still come into play, because there are other boats on the course.

Here are some good TACTICS after the start:

- Don’t race other boats. If another boat gets a puff and seems to be faster, let him go. It is just one boat. If you start luffing another boat, the whole fleet may pass you by. Remember, you are racing the whole fleet, not just that one boat. This is not a “match race”.

- b. Avoid a “bunch” of boats at a mark. Sail way around them. Sailing into the bunch often leads to the train wreck of multiple collisions. And you may be protested and must do one or more penalty turns. Then the fleet will pass you by and you are going to have a poor score.
- c. Don't miss a mark. Sounds obvious, but it happens too often. Go a little wide, just to make sure.
- d. At all costs avoid contact with another boat. Contact is slow. You will end up being part of a protest and get totally distracted. The best strategy can go to waste if you hit another boat. Even if you are on starboard and the other boat is on port tack, avoid contact and protest.



Figure 2. Different tactics.

So STRATEGY and TACTICS are both important. But make sure you first develop a strategy before the race. Sometimes skippers don't take the time to develop a good race strategy. Not sure what a good strategy is? Watch some better skippers practicing their starts and how they

approach the first mark. And just ask others some questions: I am thinking of starting at this end of the line what do you think? Are there wind shadows here or there? You'll be amazed that the best skippers are very willing to share their ideas. At lunch break, engage some other skippers about their strategy. Tell them yours.

Sailboat Racing is much more than just sailing your boat fast. It is also figuring out the best way to sail the course

(STRATEGY) and maneuvering your boat (TACTICS) so you can sail YOUR race.

Once you get the hang of sailing fast, developing a strategy, and using tactics, you will find sailboat racing much more enjoyable. Racing is really like playing a chess match with many other people at the same time.

Good luck in your next race or regatta. Speed is important, but STRATEGY and TACTICS are the game. Enjoy!

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