

SAILING WORLD

HOW TO

5 STEPS TO A BETTER START

Terry Hutchinson boils down his good starts to five easy-to-remember tips.

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As a tactician for the past eight years I've been fortunate to sail alongside some of the best helmsmen, and from each of them I've learned many different starting styles. When the time came this summer for me to fire up the starting instincts for the TP52 Breitling MedCup Circuit there was plenty of nervous anticipation. But there was also the reminder from my college coach K.C. Fullmer to always keep it simple. This means different things at different times on the starting line because there's no one predictable situation, but I've categorized the top-five priorities that help keep me focused. Each priority may carry more or less importance in any given situation, but being able to balance and understand the cause and effect of each will help lead you to consistent starts.

1. Time and distance: Each race day before the first start we will spend 10 minutes doing a 2-minute rolling sequence to calibrate the helmsman, trimmers, and bowman to the boat's time and distance for the day's conditions. With each 2-minute sequence you will pick up a bit of information that will allow for better understanding of how quickly you approach the line. In the age of computer pings and extremely accurate GPS, a good measure of time and distance is crossing the line 1 to 2 seconds after the start. On the TP52 at full pace, that's roughly a quarter of a boatlength off the line. That's not a lot of margin of error, but having the key components to the time and distance dialed in amongst the bowman, helmsman, and trimmers allows you to hit the line at pace and on time.

2. Momentum: In each of my bad starts this summer I've been victim to momentum. Each time I may have owned the space we were starting in, but either the windward or leeward boat had more momentum, and ultimately a better start. As you approach the line

it's important to balance your time and distance with the momentum of the boats around you. For example, if you get to the line too early, chances are you'll have to park and boats around you will come in with more momentum, making your final wrap up to the line much more difficult. To prevent this from happening I watch the leeward boat more intently than the weather boat and keep our bow forward of the leeward boat. It's critical to stay the same speed, if not faster, than the boat to leeward. This will allow for at least an even build and wrap up to the line, giving you an even start. Better momentum will give you a better coast onto a closehailed course right after the gun, allowing for better windward gauge and a lasting lane.

3. Speed control: On board Quantum Racing we've worked hard at two ways to kill speed. One requires big turns on the rudder, the other requires big eases on sheets, followed by a quick trim. Both methods are effective but have different results. A big turn of the rudder is like applying an emergency break. When you want to stop the boat, a couple of big turns will do the trick, and it's pretty effective to control your momentum if you are sliding too far forward relative to the boats around you. The other way, which is subtler and allows for a good glide, is easing the mainsail until it luffs but keeping the jib trimmed to a closehailed course. This does two things: it keeps the boat's momentum going forward and it kills time as the rudder is pushed to leeward to counteract the lee helm created by the trimmed jib. It takes practice to get it right because the bow is being pulled to leeward into your well carved hole, which you want to avoid. The feel will be awkward, but as soon as the main is trimmed, the boat jumps to weather and builds speed. Timing on the trim of the sails is important.

4. Routine: I strive to have the same routine for every start: there's a routine for the pin end, middle, and the boat end. These routines allow for a comfort zone that, once you understand the implications, will allow you to control your spot. Such routines also help everybody on the boat; they won't panic when the boat is in a tight spot. A middle of the line start is a good place to start with developing a routine. Once you master the middle of the line, you can then take what you learn and apply it to the ends. The purpose of the mid-line routine is to develop a comfort level and get everyone on the boat comfortable with a conservative start.

I will spend that last 2 minutes approaching the starting line on port looking to poach a hole. The one thing to be careful of is to not get driven too far away from the line by the first row of starboard tackers you encounter. As a starboard tackler digs deep, be aggressive by coming around its stern and hard on the wind on port tack. From here, tack to leeward of the group and time-and-distance your way to the starting line. Controlling momentum will be easy as you can judge your pace with the boats to windward, and by putting yourself in a big hole you can have a good wrap up to the start. Do this enough times (routine) and you'll do it consistently.

5. The wrap up: Every item above is done so that you can have the perfect speed build and wrap up to a closehaunched course a full knot over target. With the final wrap up there's a lot of timing of the trim and understanding how much to trim and not to trim. Don't hesitate to mark sheets, leads, and backstay to nail your settings off the line. Poorly trimmed sails make for a bad wrap up, and identifying these settings will allow you to be fast straight out of the blocks.