

WOW for Dec. 18, 2011

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With Andy, Scott and I virtually tied going into the last race (Back to the Dock), and ice forming on our decks, it was a fitting end to the Fall series. The ice cold Northerly we were racing in did two things: It froze our fingers (somebody has to make some gloves that actually keep your hands warm without being too bulky) and caused an extremely shifty breeze. I would like to discuss this breeze and mention a few other thoughts.

The northerly breeze is always shifty in any part of Narragansett Bay because it has to travel over land before it hits us. The narrow Warren River exaggerates this effect. Sunday's breeze was even shiftier because it was so cold! When the air is colder than the water, as is typical in winter, it becomes very unstable and leads to big shifts and differences in pressure. You can tell when you are dealing with this unstable condition by looking at objects far away over water. If they appear to be floating above the water, it is going to be extra shifty! I knew sailing out that, playing this breeze properly was going to be the key factor to success and would be more important than the current. Here are some ways to handle these unstable conditions:

1. Constantly look upwind for clues. The shifts and puffs were fairly easy to see Sunday because the sun was behind us while going upwind. I find it almost more important in winter conditions to wear good sunglasses, because the sun is low in the sky and adds to the glare that makes reading puffs more

difficult. This is particularly important when the breeze is out of the South. With the wind out of the North, however, the shifts and puffs really stood out as they approached!

2. In general, Standard oscillating shift strategy, such as staying on the lifted tack, not letting boats cross, crossing when you can, and tacking back after a gain on boats to windward is the right move, but there is more to it than that.
3. Because the shifts and velocity changes are so drastic , you must use good fleet positioning to maintain consistency. Fortunately for us, racing in 10-15 boat fleets, on short courses, is a perfect way to practice fleet positioning! Here are some examples of percentage positioning moves: If you are to windward of most of the fleet and sailing in a lift- put the bow down to close the lateral distance on the boats to leeward. That way, when the next header arrives, they will not gain as much. If you are ahead and to leeward of most the fleet, and you see a lift coming, try to point as high as you can; again that will keep some of the lateral distance down, and the windward boats won't gain as much. If 1 or 2 boats are crossing you in better pressure, don't tack until you are in their breeze, or they will roll you. In this case, it may be better to duck and sail into the better breeze. When you are sailing one of those giant lifts, with lots of pressure, get a shore bearing before you start going up. In many cases Sunday, you would get a 30-40 degree shift. However, once the pressure dropped off, you would go back down 20 degrees. In this case, you would still be 20 degrees above the shore bearing and should keep going. Almost everyone got this wrong at one time or another Sunday! If you are to windward of

most of the fleet and are heading back towards the middle of the course- Don't tack until the boats to leeward tack! This tactic works 90% of the time and is a classic example of proper fleet positioning! If it gets light and fluky at the weather mark and you see a big puff coming in on one side, don't be afraid to sail above the layline , to get to it faster. Bob Perry did this in one race and passed most of the fleet right at the mark!

4. Another place where we are lucky to get lots of practice is at leeward mark roundings. In Sunday's shifty breeze, it was essential to be able to hold your lane, after the bottom mark, if the wind was in a left phase. In the 4th race, I rounded too close to Dave, and began to fall into his bad air. I should have hung in there and waited for the next righty, before tacking. Instead, I tacked out of phase and into much less pressure, only to lose most of the fleet. After the race, Coach Callahan asked me what I was thinking when I did that! I wasn't thinking- I was just being impatient and not using good fleet positioning!
5. A couple of thoughts on dealing with the current- When sailing up the river against the tide, don't play the Warren side. Andy and I did this , and we got hammered! Anytime you let the boat get slow or stalled, the tide punishes you. If ever there is a time for good tacks- this is it. Actually, try to minimize tacks, if possible. Keep the boat on an even heel (the butt in , shoulder out technique is perfect in these conditions). In Sundays conditions- staying on the lifted tack and in better pressure was almost always more important than playing the tide!
6. I certainly want to thank Frank, Sally, Joel, Leo and rest of the wonderful staff at Barrington Y.C. for a great fall series!

Barrington Y.C. feels like my second home , and frostbiting has become one of my favorite things!

7. Happy Holidays to everyone! See you in March!

Bill