

DeBrief: Open Orange Bowl 2017

December 26-30, 2017 in Biscayne Bay - Coach & Words by Fred Moffat

General Notes from the Regatta: PLAN ONE LEG AHEAD

When pressure's fairly uniform, we must maintain a constant awareness of the current shift. Off the start and at mark roundings, we should use the current phase to plan the next leg. This was the single largest lesson I spent the most time discussing with each and every one of you over the course of Orange Bowl. On a points basis, its where we lost the most, and if we improved our process, its where we could stand to gain the most. I've boiled this down to some rules of thumb, with a discussion of each in the paragraphs below.

1) Use the Start to Plan the Beat's First Portion

We must use our read of the starting line (signs/signals of the prevailing shift) to plan the beat's first portion.

- In a Righty:

Plan A: Start mid-boat with space to leeward in the "gatekeeper" position - creating congestion for every boat to windward of us. After GO, hold on starboard, use low mode to foot to the header (incoming lefty) and thereby consolidate over the fleet. When the header sets on, tack, cross, smile, rinse, repeat.

Plan B(1): Pinched Off/Lane Lost. Should a competitor steal your space to leeward at the start, or should you get pinched off by your leeward neighbor (this should not happen in a righty), we must identify the closest clear lane. Either foot free into a gap to leeward (strategically preferable, since it sails you toward the next header), or DOUBLE tack into a gap to windward (not preferable, but may be our only option in light/moderate air). We must act decisively. Tacking once is not an option, since it puts us on the header and completely out of phase.

Plan B(2): Getting Rolled by Windward Neighbors. Should competitors to windward of you get great starts at the committee boat, or should a lift or pressure set in, they may threaten to roll you. Foot free to leeward to keep them from going over the top, wait for the next header to try to tack and cross.

- In a Lefty:

Plan A: When the 29er is not planing (light/moderate air), we should employ the same strategy that's successful in conventional dinghies (420, Snipe, Laser, etc.). Start on starboard tack at the mid-pin. Sheet in earlier than your windward neighbor to convert leeward space into speed and windward space. As soon as you can, tack, cross, assume the lift, consolidate over the fleet, and lead to the next header (a righty).

Once the 29er can plane to weather, we might need to adjust our Plan A for lefties. Over the course of Orange Bowl, we saw multiple instances where boats starting on starboard near the pin in a lefty could not tack and cross their windward neighbors. They were forced to continue sailing headed on starboard tack, out of phase, since the steep cost of 29er tacks in planing conditions denied them the cross. Meanwhile, competitors starting at the unfavored committee boat were free to immediately tack onto port, assume the lift, lead to the next header (a righty), and as a result, rounded the weather mark in first! Sophie and Adra, I'm looking at you. I'm not saying we should start at the unfavored end, rather its clear to me that our first priority should be quickly assuming the lift (that's certainly what succeeded at OB).

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So, in planing conditions, perhaps we should start on port tack near the pin and attempt to either cross the fleet, or poke through a hole in the starboard tack procession. Even though we face some legal risk, and may have to duck some sterns, this instantly puts us in phase, leading to the next header. It ensures that we'll never be forced out of phase by a stubborn windward neighbor, and absolutely guarantees that an inability to tack and cross won't scuttle our grand strategy.

Just keep in mind, if you're in a lefty and elect a port-tack start, your only option in crossing situations is TO DUCK. This keeps you in phase, on the lift, and sailing towards the next header. If you're presented with a tough crossing situation, leebow tacks are NOT a strategically acceptable option.

We can revisit Plan Bs later - in the meantime I beg you to deeply consider how you approach lefty starts in the 29er class. This is a very interesting strategic question.

2) Use the Beat's Final Shift to Plan Your Weather Mark Rounding

Relating to the run, is there a more important question than whether to straight set or gybe set at the weather mark? I think not! We must use the beat's final phase to plan our run strategy long before rounding. This allows us to quickly exit weather mark congestion in phase, on the long jibe with clear air.

Reading shifts at the top of the beat is relatively easy. There's no shortage of glaring, obvious indicators. Which side approaches their layline sooner? As the fleet converges, which side is crossing? That side has been favored by the final shift. Which side is getting wound out, sailing towards a layline that is further and further away? Which side is ducking and trailing? That side has missed the final shift.

- In a Righty:

If we're approaching the top of the beat and assess that the last shift is a righty, we must consider our positioning.

We want to tack slightly under the starboard tack layline, and get lifted to the mark. If we tack on lay, we'll be overstood by the time we finish the beat. In any close crossing situation, we should leebow tack into the safe leeward position. This positions us to make the mark on the incoming lift, and CRUCIALLY, it puts us inside with mark room, able to immediately execute a jibe set onto port (the headed, long jibe) with a high lane and clear air. This is really, really important in big fleets with significant traffic. So positioned, our approach to the weather mark will set us up to execute our downwind strategy.

We *might* be able to hoist on the offset leg if the righty is sufficiently severe. Regardless of whether we hoist on the offset leg, our game plan is to IMMEDIATELY jibe around the offset mark, exiting headed on port jibe, sailing directly down the race course in the high lane with clear air.

- In a Lefty:

In a lefty, we want to tack underneath the port tack layline, and get lifted to the weather mark. We will eventually arrive on the starboard tack layline, and should be very close - within a stone's throw - of the mark itself. In any close crossing situation we want to either CROSS or DUCK and tack to windward of the starboard tacker (either ahead or on their hip). This sets us up for a straight set onto the long jibe (the header) in the high lane with clear air. Again, this is supremely important in big fleets with significant traffic. If you put yourself inside at the mark,

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you'll be forced into the low lane during the run, and may get "roll-trained." One boat rolling you turns into three, five, ten, etc.

If there's an offset leg, we should know in advance that we are not going to set the kite. In a lefty, there's no way we'll be able to hold it. Instead, we should focus on going fast and try to roll the boats ahead of us.

3) Use the Run's Last Phase to Plan Your Leeward Gate Rounding

We must use the run's final phase to plan our second beat long before we have to douse. This allows us to pick the CORRECT gate mark and quickly exit congestion in phase, on the lifted tack, sailing toward the next header. The correct gate mark is not always the favored gate mark...we'll explore this below.

Again, reading shifts at the bottom of the run is relatively easy. Which side must jibe onto or near their layline sooner? Once on lay, which group's heading is more directly down the course? As the fleet converges, which side is crossing? Which gate mark is closer?

If the course left pack has to jibe onto lay sooner, if they're sailing more directly down the course, if they're crossing, and/or if the course right gate mark appears favored, you're in a righty. And vice versa.

Successful strategy for the leeward gate is dictated by exposure to traffic.

- Rounding Without Traffic (Leading or Trailing)

When you're either far ahead of or far behind the fleet, sometimes traffic is not a concern - air and water immediately above the gate marks will not be disturbed, and you'll be able to cross that zone without significant penalty.

When that's the case, round the favored gate and tack immediately. This puts you on the lift, sailing towards the next shift, having sailed minimum distance to the gate.

For instance, when you're free from traffic and finishing the run in a righty, round the course right gate and immediately tack onto starboard. This puts you on the lift, sailing towards the next shift (a lefty), having sailed minimum distance to the gate. Although you'll have to sail across the course's middle, this shouldn't be a concern when you're free of traffic.

- Rounding In Traffic (Typically Midfleet)

When you're rounding in traffic, the air and water immediately between and above the gate is heavily disturbed. Bad air and multiple crossing situations mean that we must avoid that area. This typically occurs whenever you're rounding in the middle of a pack of boats, especially when you're midfleet.

When that's the case, it's frequently advantageous to round the unfavored gate and hold on that tack. This puts you on the lift, maximally leveraged towards the next shift, and it totally avoids the worst zone of bad air/water. This also tends to free you from the pack, who are all trained to round the favored gate, since they'll be fighting for it.

Consider the following example. Say you're in thick midfleet traffic and are ending the run in a righty. If you round the favored, course right gate alongside most of your nearby neighbors, you will certainly sail less distance. However, you'll still be in traffic, spat out on the header, sailing

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out of phase, away from the next shift (which will be a lefty). To get in phase, you're going to have to sail back through multiple crossing situations and the area with the most disturbed air and water on the race course. This is a bad position.

If instead, you round the unfavored, course left gate, you will sail more distance. But traffic will thin, you'll be sailing in relatively undisturbed air and water, you'll be on the lift, in phase, leading the fleet to the next shift (a lefty). This is well worth the distance penalty.

I've watched many great sailors turn terrible races into keepable scores using this gambit.

These are pre-packaged plans addressing scenarios you are *guaranteed* to encounter almost every race you sail (except those where geographic shifts or major pressure differences are controlling). Since 29er racing is so dynamic, and since the decision-making pace is so fast, it really pays to streamline your thinking. These pre-packaged plans reduce your decision-making to mere diagnostics. Once you've identified the situation, the conclusion is already known, there's far less need for original thought on the race course. For example:

"We're finishing this leg in phase X, so we're going to deploy plan Y"

"We're finishing this beat in a righty. We must achieve inside position at the windward mark because we're going to jibe set."

"We're finishing this run in a lefty in heavy traffic. Let the fleet fight for the course left gate - we're going to round the course right gate and get spat out in phase on the lift. We're going to lead the fleet to the next shift, and then we're going to pass everybody."

"We're starting in a righty. Lets get to the mid-boat and be the "gatekeeper," causing problems for the boats to weather. After GO, we're going to hold and foot over the boats to leeward to lead the fleet to the next shift."

"We're finishing this run in a righty, and its just Bella and us at the front. We're going to round the course right gate and tack onto starboard immediately."

"We're finishing this beat in a lefty. We're in a close cross with Tommy and Chris on the starboard tack layline. We're going to duck them, tack on their hip, sail fast on the offset and power through a straight set."

And so on...

Planning for your first beat occurs during the pre-start. Planning for your run occurs on the layline to the weather mark. Planning for your second beat occurs on your layline to the leeward mark. Make sure you're timely having conversations so you don't get ambushed by the overwhelming real-time burden of execution. Plan one leg ahead.

Specific Notes for Pairs:

The Brothers Janov -

During our practice on the 26th you guys revealed yourselves as the pace-setters of our group. Withstanding your limited downwind speed issue (which we fixed by easing your jib and freeing your vang - don't forget this), you were consistently our fastest boat. When racing from the front, and certainly when you guys were rafting up with me during the I420 starts, your read on the shifts was consistent and accurate. There is absolutely no question in my mind that you guys know how to read the course in real time and are capable of sailing with deliberation and intent -

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forcing your will on the competition, rather than letting the competition dictate terms. You did this for most of the regatta, and its the biggest reason you finished on the podium.

Your worst races, and your toughest spots were always preceded or caused by frantic decision-making after some initial difficulty. For example - starting bow back, you begin to have trouble surviving in the front row, so you tack off the lift, onto the header and duck several boats while sailing away from the next shift. On one beat you did this twice consecutively and ended up rounding almost dead last. You guys know what I'm talking about. You go from looking like Peter Burling to a chicken with its head cut-off (not trying to pick on you, but this characterization paints the picture doesn't it).

Of all of our boats, you would benefit the most from developing a more disciplined, systematic approach to decision-making, and then working on rigid adherence no matter the instant emotions or circumstances. Pre-meditate your best bail-out procedures for when you lose your lane, somebody tacks on your face, etc. etc. If our system calls for Grant to make the calls uphill, lets make sure we don't vary from that.

Knowledge is great, but self-knowledge is enlightenment. We must make sure we're capable of clear-headed decision-making no matter the circumstances. Well-developed procedure and disciplined adherence is our pathway to future success.

Emma and Ciara -

This class has a notoriously steep initial learning curve and it beggars belief that you guys were able to climb it so well having never touched the boat prior to the 26th. Against seasoned competition, you led around the course for 3/4s of the regatta's final race. I've not a shadow of a doubt that with more practice you could have competed to win the event.

The 29er produces sensory overload - the boat is so unstable, nimble, and responsive that our proprioceptive and tactile senses easily get overwhelmed just in the effort to keep the mast pointed North and the boat moving forward quickly. The different division of labor between skipper and crew also causes some dislocation. You certainly experienced all of this early in the regatta - making certain strategic mistakes that I'm 100% sure you wouldn't in any other conventional sailboat. Withstanding that, you managed to overcome the unfamiliarity and distraction and consistently improve over the course of the event. The greatest value you can carry from this is the refined hypersensitivity to heel and speed that the class develops - and the ability to get your head out of the boat while operating in this hyper-responsive environment. Emma, I'd encourage you particularly to sail other fast, high performance boats off the wind (another 29 regatta, sailboards, other skiffs, cats, etc.) to continue to refine sensitivity to speed and the ability to cultivate your apparent wind. The acute response of fast boats makes it easier to develop a feel for the angles. Subsequently, you'll be able to carry this into your 470 sailing. And believe me it really does help.

Finally, I'd like to congratulate you both on tackling these challenges with a pragmatic, clinical disposition and general philosophical optimism. You didn't let the ambiguity of unfamiliar

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technique and new equipment become an obstacle to pursuit of success. I'd love to see how you would do in a second 29er event.

Sophie and Adra -

You guys are tremendous, fundamentally sound sailors and already have a fantastic grasp of apparent wind sailing and skiff technique. So long as we square away a couple issues that we discovered at OB, I think you're going to be shocked at how much easier it is to compete and win in this class going forward.

First and foremost, at every practice this Spring, you guys should make a point of being the first boat on the water and the last boat in. Drill accelerations and tacks to death. Work on coordination of your hiking and sheeting such that the boat stays completely flat during both accelerations and tacks (in general, hike BEFORE you sheet in the main). The more time you can spend on the water, refining your boathandling such that the boat stays within 2 degrees of flat ALL the time, the faster/more comfortable you're going to be. Reducing the heel will make the boathandling MUCH easier for Adra, since we won't be asking her to climb a mountain on her way out of the boat.

Whenever you're sailing line-ups and have the eye of a coach to confirm proper tune, pay special attention to your leech profile and your vang markings. Start to develop a ballpark sense for where the vang must be trimmed depending on the conditions. We should know how much vang we've got to have on when Adra starts to trap, when Sophie moves onto the rail, when Sophie starts to hike, when Adra starts to ease more than 6" off centerline, etc. This should make it easier for you guys to be tuned correctly around the race course. Develop and practice algorithms for your windward and leeward mark roundings such that you always remember to ease and reapply the correct amount of vang. As it relates to speed, inconsistent/imprecise vang tension was probably your number one issue at OB.

I'd encourage you to hike harder/sail hotter angles on the downwind. Light as you are, you should be able to initiate planing long before most, and can use that ability to run people down. Know that you're built for high and fast, not low and slow.

During my life, several episodes of hard contact with reality combined with my personal stupidity has taught me "if you're going to be dumb, you better be tough." Well, here's an allegory appropriate for you two - "if you're going to be small, you better be strong." You'd both be very well served to develop a consistent strength and conditioning regimen. Deadlifts, weighted chin-ups, steak and potatoes, not treadmills, yoga, diet cokes and saltines. Upper body pulling power, lower body strength, general athleticism and agility. Like Anna Tunnicliffe. Start now and you'll be punishing the fleet sooner than you might think.

Morgan and Dave

Its remarkable how well you did with so little time in the partnership, and with Dave having so little time in the boat. Your downwind sailing was truly spectacular - caught so many boats downhill. Between picking the correct jibe far more often than the fleet, Morgan's latent feel for

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the angles, and Dave, your ability to trim an asymmetric kite with very little prior practice, there were a number of factors responsible for your success.

Sailing upwind, you had enough speed to stay even, but until it really started blowing you didn't have a consistent advantage. You guys should work on your modal sailing - making a simultaneous series of adjustments to configure the boat for high/pointing mode, VMG mode, or low mode. Depending on the situation, you can configure the boat to best get what you need - either height, or speed. By being a bit more precise with this I bet you achieve the speed we're looking for in moderate wind, before it really starts blowing and your leverage/feel start to take over. For high mode - sail the boat flat/allow very slight, intermittent leeward heel, move weight forward, close leeches, ease downhaul, board down. For low mode, sail the boat flat/allow very slight, intermittent windward heel, move weight aft, open leeches, add downhaul (though really not much), board up.

There are a couple of times in the lighter stuff where you lost a lane because the mainsail wasn't sufficiently trimmed, and a couple of times in the moderate breeze where we might have sacrificed some point thanks to a too-eased jib. Additional practice should sort these things out. And you guys really should make the time to campaign this boat hard - you've got unbounded potential.

Some other points - Dave you've done the best job of any crew I've ever coached with respect to communication, especially in the pre-start. Don't ever change. The prior match-racing background is clearly evident. Morgan, you've got an excellent feel on the helm. Make sure you sit forward in the light stuff. You're a talented young gun in the company of an older crew and very helpful parents. As you move forward in youth sailing, make sure you bear primary responsibility for all of your equipment, logistics and organization so you build the kind of resourcefulness and independence we're going to need to succeed on the water.

It was a pleasure coaching you all - I wish you good luck in all your future sailing and look forward to opportunities to work together in the future with 2Niner Skiff Squad