

Keys to quick sailing in medium airs

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Introduction

What's the difference between a back of the fleet club sailor and a front of the fleet National Championship sailor? When asked this question, you might answer with a whole list of skills including tactics, tuning, boat preparation, fitness, knowledge of winds, tides and currents etc. etc. These are all valid points, but they probably only make up the final 10% of overall performance.

Businessmen often talk about taking an 80/20 approach. The theory goes that 80% of performance comes from 20% of the effort and vice versa. In this article I suggest a key point and an additional point for sailing in medium airs. As a rough estimate, I think that 55% of the difference comes from the key and another 20% comes from the additional point.

When I coach people, I often get them to write the key point for the day on the boom to remind them of its importance. Can I suggest writing each of the key points on the boom (on both tacks!), and if you can find somewhere else in the boat, to write down the additional points to remind you to practice them in between races and on the way out to the start line etc.?

The Key Point – Keep the Boat Flat

A flat boat is far faster than one that is heeled. It doesn't matter how much mainsheet you have to let out, I can guarantee you that you will go faster if you don't let the boat heel. The main reasons are as follows:

When the boat heels, it tries to point up towards the wind (if heeled to leeward). To keep the boat on a straight course, you then have to use rudder. The only thing that slows a boat down more than a transom in the water is the rudder.

It stops the boat from slipping sideways – the next time that you go sailing, heel the boat and look behind you at your wake – you will be amazed at how much you have lost out.

I don't normally like to get people to go and spend money improving their boat, but buying a clinometer (gadget that measures how much you are heeling – from most of the chandlers) actually improves your sailing. Fix it to the inside face of the aft transom and every now and then, look to see how flat the boat is – many people think that it is flat when it isn't.

When you have mastered keeping the boat flat, try to anticipate the effect of gusts so that the boat never heels. As you see the ripples coming towards you, get ready to let out an armful or so of mainsheet, then as you move your weight further out, you can pull in the mainsheet back in again. At the 2006 nationals, I tried to persuade Warren Hodgkinson and Peter Burfield of the benefits of this (they are both very good light wind sailors, but had previously struggled in a breeze, thinking that you had to be heavy or fit to keep the boat flat). They both gave it a go and resultantly went a lot faster in a breeze (Peter Burfield finished 4th at the Nationals, weighing only 17.5 stone (with his crew!)).

Additional point – Kicker

This is your main sail control upwind apart from your sheets. The rule of thumb is that the top tell tale should be flying about 50% of the time. More than this and it means that the kicker isn't on enough and you will struggle to point high enough, particularly as you let your main out to keep the boat flat! Less than this and the main is stalling.

As a basic rule of thumb, you want your kicker quite slack when the crew is on the leeward side of the boat, bar tight when you are both hiking (with an 8:1 kicker, I wrap the control line around my hand and pull it on as hard as I can when we are both hiking!). In between these conditions, you do have to look at your top tell tale.

A couple of things to remember:

Let the kicker off at the windward mark – if you are going on to a run, let it off a decent way, but don't let the

boom sky too much. If you are going on to a reach, carry on following the top tell tale rule.

If the wind is changeable, you may have to adjust the kicker quite frequently.

Some final thoughts

Once you have mastered these points, I am sure that you will find an improvement in your sailing. If you are combining these practices by attending association run events like open meetings then you will probably find that another 5 or 10% comes fairly easily. Once you have got to that stage, the path to the remainder of the improvement takes a little longer, but it will certainly seem like a far smaller step!