

Keys to quick sailing in light 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 light 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 point 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 – Weight Forwards!

It really is that simple. The key to sailing fast in light airs is to get your weight far enough forwards. I suppose therefore that the question is how far is 'far enough'?

The easiest way to answer this is to look through your transom flaps (if you don't have any, it really is worth cutting some in your transom and sticking a piece of perspex or sail window material over them). If it looks like there is turbulence coming off the back of the boat in the water, then you need to move forwards until this stops. As a guide, the thwart is far too far backwards for the crew to sit. Crouched in front of it is far better (although if this is uncomfortable, the inset crew seats do the job fine). As a helm, I would usually sit on the windward crew's seat or gunwhale in the crew's compartment'.

Your boat speed will probably double if you follow this advice. The Miracle actually performs very well in light airs as it is so light. It does have quite a 'big bum' though, so if you don't get it out of the water, then you will sail very slowly.

NB – This point still holds true as it gets breezier, but the faster you go, the more the back end of the boat can be 'supported' by the boat's speed. But keep checking through your flaps – even in 30 knots!

Additional point – Practice Roll Tacking

If you can already roll tack, then practising it and perfecting it for 10 minutes on you way out to the start line or between races is a very good way of going faster in light airs without a great investment in time or money. It is a lot easier to improve when one doesn't have the pressure of a race situation (although practising with the goal of improving your racing does tend to focus the session more). If you cannot already roll tack, then it is worth investing an afternoon or so outside a race situation so that you can learn.

There are many variations on a theme when it comes to roll tacking, and as long as you get through the tack fairly swiftly and more importantly don't lose much speed (if any), then it doesn't matter which technique you employ. The steps that I follow are:

Head up into the wind slightly (keeping the boat flat) until the front of the jib starts to back.

As soon as this happens (but not before), the crew comes over to the windward side of the boat as quickly (but gently) as possible – this is the movement that actually tacks the boat, not really the rudder. Therefore highlighting the importance of this to your crew is essential.

Once the jib is fully backed, the crew starts to pull the jib through on to the new side whilst the helm lets out an armful of mainsheet as he starts to move across to the other side of the boat.

As the helm is righting the boat, he pulls in the main and the crew pulls in the jib, both a couple of inches short

of bar tight.

Once the boat is fully back up to speed, the sails are pulled in all of the way (although in light airs I would never pull in the main bar tight, and would have the jib about 10 mm short of bar tight until there is enough wind for the crew to sit in the middle with the helm on the side deck).

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!

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