

After Gib and I won first place in Fleet A and B respectively during 2009 Nationals in Alabama, Jerry Thompson asked us to share our experiences on our road to the first place.

Acknowledgment:

I live in the Northeast (Stamford, CT) where sailing is normally limited to summer and maybe late spring and early fall. This makes it difficult to practice during most of the year or even prepare your boat unless you have enough room for it indoors. My boat was in very poor conditions and the trip was long so I posted my intention to race with someone else in our website. From this point forward many people worked hard to make it happen. Bea Picou, James Carr and Tate Beckham worked their magic and Bea put me in contact with someone that I had not yet met but that during the event became a good friend, Marvin Jansen. Marvin was kind enough to offer his boat and to crew for me. Susan Wilson from fleet 34 picked me up at Huntsville airport. The entire behind the scene logistics and generosity were the main ingredients that made our participation possible and furthermore be able to obtain first place in B Fleet with Marvin. (Thank you)

Some background:

I started to sail in Argentina when I was about thirteen, living in a boarding school from the Argentinean Navy. For five years I used to sail almost every day in Grumetes, Balleneras and Penguins. My first big regatta was representing the school in the South American Cup for the Penguin's class. With a less than brilliant performance I ended fourteenth among seventy five boats participating in the event but this was enough to hook me for life. I was about fifteen years old at this time and sailing continued to be my favorite sport from then on. Later, having the chance to participate in the 2006 and 2008 Nationals, I finished in fifth place in both cases in the only fleet we had at this time.

Now, In the same way that others did it to me I intend to share with you in a few paragraphs the most important concepts I learned not only from the National but from my experience over the years. I hope you find this useful or at least entertaining.

Ricardo Martin Casanova

MNC 2009

Preparation:

The first concept I want to share with you is the importance of preparing your boat to be as failure proof as possible. Even before you start the sanding and fairing and many other good things you should be as sure as possible that your boat will not break. Often races are lost before the start due to things that will break and could be avoided with a simple but thorough inspection. This is even more important if the race will be in a high wind area.

I experienced the importance of this during the 2006 National in Kenosha, when racing with high winds and seas my mast almost passed through the deck because the wood underneath was pulverized because of age. There were two more regattas this day that I couldn't race. Fortunately, with Bob

Deroeck's help, we fixed it during the evening and I was ready to go the next morning. Many other boats had to DNF after breaking something during this National.

A costly last minute pi:

It was about 8:30 AM. This race was critical in securing first place. The start would be in about thirty minutes and we had just finished the last few details before launching.

Marvin and I were ready to go towards the ramp when "nature called" and we decided to make a last minute "technical stop" before the big day. With the boat ready for the win and the spirits high we rushed in the car to get to the nearby restroom with the boat behind. Suddenly, A LOUD BOOM BEHIND US! When we looked back, Marvin's nice Mutt didn't have a mast anymore. We had driven under a group of trees and the mast had fallen off when hitting the branches. The tune up, the plans and the excitement fell in an instant.

But not so fast! Showing the classical "Mutineer" spirit many people rushed to the scene to help. Knowing we were up for the first place, we even received an offer to use someone else boat despite the fact that this meant she would no longer be able to race. We didn't accept the offer but this shows the spirit.

After a quick damage assessment we found that amazingly the only part that was really damaged was the head of the boom that broke in the impact. The reason for the minimal damage (besides luck) was that under the pressure the jib's halyard gave up before anything else, saving us a lot of damage and trouble. Bottom line, we replaced the broken halyard, put back the boom on place applying some constant pressure with the boom bang (Laser style) and headed to the water just in time to start.

Since I don't remember all the races in detail, I will describe the few things I try to pay attention to and that seem to work for me.

The start:

Having a good start is not the most important part of the race but gives you a good advantage. Of course it is nice to be the first to cross the line every time but since this is seldom possible, I focus on consistently starting reasonably well, with clear air and as close as possible to the favored side (in this order).

The emphasis I put on starting at the favored side depends on how off square the starting line is with respect to the wind. The more off square it is, the more I struggle for a favored side start.

There are many ways to find the favored side. I am not looking for an accurate measurement so I sail to the outside of the pin and stop heading to the wind. At this point the boat will be either perpendicular to the starting line or pointing more towards the committee boat or towards the pin side. The favored side is the side your boat is pointing to and you should try to start as close to this side as possible while keeping clean air. The less your boat points to one side or the other showing you the favored side, the less important this factor is and you can focus more in other things.

If despite my efforts I find myself in the middle of a crowd struggling for clean air, I get out of there as soon as possible, even if it means spending an extra short tack to get away.

The first leg:

During the first part of the first leg my immediate priorities are to keep clear air and point as high as possible. Since our boat didn't have internal rails for the jib, Marvin prepared a simple barberhouser with a line and two hooks that worked well enough for us.

Once I know where I am respect to everyone else, the next step is to get or keep on synch with the wind shifts. Taking good advantage of the shifts is critical to being in the front line. If you don't know why, play with a pen and piece of paper drawing two boats sailing at the same time to reach a buoy up wind. Draw one of them following the right shifts (the shift that takes you closer up wind) and the other just reaching the lay line and tacking to the buoy and you will see the difference. It is not only the five or more degrees closer up wind you are sailing if you are in phase but also the extra five or more degrees lower the boats who are out of phase are sailing.

The up wind buoy

Once I get close enough to the first buoy I try to see which boats may be competing with me for the inside turn and do my best to position myself to turn as close to the buoy as possible. If another boat gets inside first, I try to position my boat to disturb its air and pass it if I can. Just be careful not to lose sight of the overall picture and end up losing positions just to pass this particular boat (Pick your battles).

The downwind leg:

We didn't have a spinnaker but we had a jib and a nice long whisker pole handmade in "Marvinland". This was part of the list of important things we put together with Marvin while coordinating via email, who will bring what to the race and what the boat should have. Other important items in the list were telltales for jib and main, barber hauler, bubble level, boom vang and compass if possible.

The jib with a good whisker pole could be as or more effective than the spinnaker depending on the weather conditions and skills. For instance during some of the races we had during the National the wind was not strong enough to consistently fly the spinnaker. Furthermore, in some cases the rain made the spinnaker heavier needing even more wind to fly. In these kind of conditions a well deployed jib will take advantage of all the available blows all the time while the spinnaker will be hanging from the mast and flying time to time. Something similar happen if the wind is stronger than your skills can handle. In the other hand with enough wind AND if you fly it properly the advantage of the spinnaker is noticeable even in the Mutt. I say "if you fly it properly" because occasionally we found ourselves passing boats flying spinnakers due to poor handling. So if you plan to use a spinnaker practice until you feel comfortable before racing with it.

Once I am on my way to the final line the only strategy I use is to get there as fast as possible getting as much speed as I can. A very important factor is to have the boat leveled in the bow-stern direction, as this will greatly reduce dragging. In light wind you can slowly pass many boats doing this, presenting as

much surface to the wind as you can and keeping your movements to the minimum. To know if you are leveled during the race it is best to install a bubble level calibrated on land.

In addition, (some people may disagree), I prefer to retract the centerboard all the way up unless there is too much wind, in which case I only do it partially. With light winds I sail a bit higher of the shortest course to keep the boat moving, in which case I lower the centerboard a bit.

When there are waves, (usually in the same or similar direction as the wind), I try to take advantage of them. Since they travel faster than the boat, riding them as long as you can gives you extra speed. This may make a big difference. I experienced this during the 2006 National in Lake Michigan at Kenosha, Wisconsin.

The finish:

Once heading to the finish line I just try to keep good speed avoiding taking unnecessary risks that may compromise my current position. Consistency arriving among the first boats every time will put you in a better position at the end than winning for a mile in one regatta and getting last in the next.

Many of you are already experienced sailors so I hope these few lines will at least help those who are starting to race to be better positioned during our next National championship.

Thank you and favorable winds.

Ricardo Martin Casanova