

Understanding Sportboats

The modern sportboat is light, fast, and fun to sail. The term *sportboat* is usually reserved for boats with bowsprits and asymmetrical spinnakers. The boat has been great for the sport of sailing because it has provided a new spark to the sport, given dinghy sailors a fast boat to play with, and it has given all sailors a new challenge of sailing this lightweight boat fast around the racecourse.

Most sportboats have a long, narrow keel fin with a large bulb at the bottom and a large mainsail. This design coupled with a light boat presents challenges when starting, tacking, light air sailing and whenever the boat is not sailing at maximum speed. The nature of the keel design causes it to stall at slow speeds and the large mainsail causes the boat to round up and heel before the flow has attached to the keel. The biggest piece of advice here is to keep the boat moving at all times to prevent leeway. This is especially true on the starting line. Make sure you have a good hole to leeward to accelerate into and really try to get the boat up to speed before trying to point and before sheeting the main in tight. The faster the boat is traveling through the water the more efficient the keel will be.

This same technique applies to sailing the boat upwind. Your steering technique should be foot to point higher. This may sound strange, but it works. Because sportboats are light and have the keel design mentioned above, they sail at their best VMG when they are traveling fast. The faster and flatter the boat is sailed, the tighter you can sheet the main and keep flow attached to the keel. The end result is higher pointing, but the angle of the boat is always "bow down". You may notice other boats with "bow up" attitudes, but if you stick to the "bow down", flat boat and tight mainsheet theory, you will point higher and have better VMG in the end.

In all sailboats the faster boat wins or has an advantage. This is even more true in sportboats. The faster a type of boat sails, the bigger the distance lost when a boat is not traveling at its maximum speed for the given conditions. The point here is that good tacks, jibes and boat handling are very important to master. For example, if it is blowing 20 knots and you are sailing downwind at 15 knots in a Melges 24 and you have a bad jibe versus a competitor who has a good jibe, the distance lost is huge because your competitor is up and planing at 15 knots while you are still struggling at 8 knots. Practice, practice, practice sets, douses, tacks, jibes and all boat handling maneuvers. If you can minimize the amount of speed lost in each maneuver, you will see a gain of an incredible number of boat lengths by the finish line. If you are not traveling at the maximum speed possible at all times, someone else is!

Racecourse techniques

Try to carry this theory into the weather mark spinnaker set. This means calling a "fat" layline so you do not have to pinch for very long to lay the mark. The goal at the weather mark should be to keep the boat moving as fast as possible and get around the mark. This means the minimum number of people off the rail to perform their jobs and the rest hiking hard. The skipper and sail trimmers should be focused on speed and keeping the

boat on its proper angle. Once the boat is turned down the crew jump into action and hoist the spinnaker and get it flying and the boat moving as fast as possible. If the set is performed well and the skipper concentrates on keeping the boat moving instead of what the crew is doing, boatlengths will be gained over your competitors who are arguing, heeling fighting for boat position and not concentrating on speed down the race track.

Once the boat is moving and all of the sail controls are set for downwind, the tactician needs to be thinking of where the most wind velocity is and the quickest way to it. Sportboats love wind velocity. The speed gains and the angle towards the leeward mark change dramatically with velocity. Keep the boat in the most velocity and you will look like the smartest tactician and the fastest spinnaker trimmer on the racecourse 90% of the time.

Once you are in the velocity try to figure out how to stay there. The goal should be to minimize jibes, which slow you down, and maximize VMG. If you are in a planing sportboat, sail down till the boat is on the edge of falling off the plane and then head up to keep the boat planing. If you are sailing a displacement sportboat, sail down in the puffs till the speed drops slightly and the boat feels sluggish, then head up to maintain speed. This "S" course should be steered all the way downwind. Be careful of getting caught too low because the turn up will have to be big to get going again. It is better to err on the side of sailing too high than too low.

As you begin to approach the leeward mark or gate, the layline becomes very important in a performance boat. If you overstand you come in too hot and it is hard to douse that enormous spinnaker. If you understand the layline and try to float the boat low you will stop and lose all boat speed and maneuverability. The point here is to practice calling your downwind laylines. Remember that laylines change dramatically in different wind velocities.

The best approach is to come into the leeward mark with speed to increase maneuverability and on a layline about three boat lengths to windward of the leeward mark. This will give you time to call for room and head the boat downwind to get the spinnaker down. Always be thinking about the exit and the quickest way around the mark so you can be racing upwind as soon as possible. After rounding the mark, look for a clear lane quickly so you can sail the boat at its fastest angle.

All sportboats are slightly different and the boathandling techniques are also. One article is not enough to cover each specific maneuver. The point of this article is to offer suggestions on how to sail a sportboat fast and smooth. If you perfect these techniques you will be rewarded with a good race results. Tactics are slightly different than traditional "lead sled" boats in that clear air, wind velocity, fewer maneuvers and laylines become more important. The best way to learn this new boat is to practice, share information with fellow sailors, and practice some more.

Article compliments of Ullman Sails

