

Sailboat Race Starting Techniques

by Allan Hoffman

There are several ways of starting races. Runners stand still behind a starting line, then wait for the count down of “on your mark”, “get set”, and go at the sound of the starting gun. Swimmers, ice skaters, and skiers start similarly. Automobile oval track racers start in a pre-arranged, rolling grid following a pace car. As the grid approaches the starting line, the pace car pulls off the track and the race is on.

Thoroughbred racing puts each horse into a separate chute, where they stay until the doors open and the horses bolt out. Those methods control the racer’s position and how he is allowed to move.

The “LeMans Start” in automobile racing is a little more interesting. The cars are all lined up along one side of the track and the drivers stand opposite their cars on the other side. At the starting gun, the drivers run across the track, get into their cars, start them up, and then drive onto the track. Their position in the pack is largely determined by how well they run, how quickly they situate themselves into their cars, how well the car starts up, and how well they avoid anyone else already on the track.

In sailboat racing, during the starting countdown, the racers jockey for position; each trying to force a disadvantage on the other racers and to gain any advantage they can for themselves, all at the same time. Provided that he follows the rules of sailing, exactly where each racer goes and how he gets there is uncontrolled.

What is the objective of a good start? Most people will tell you that it is to hit the starting line as the bell sounds, while going full speed. Yeah, I’ll agree to that. But, it’s not that simple.

During the starting countdown, we have to contend with five to ten other racers, each trying to do exactly the same thing at exactly the same time. I’ve been in fleets with as many as 18 boats starting at once. Now, that’ll keep you on your toes. The real question, though, is how do you achieve a good start?

Starting is a difficult skill to master. It often takes years to achieve proficiency. There is an awful lot of stuff going on at once. Each skipper wants to get an advantage, such as a favored position, while preventing the other skippers from taking that advantage away from him, all while trying to hit that line at full speed as the bell sounds, but not crossing the line before the bell sounds. It is very chaotic out there.

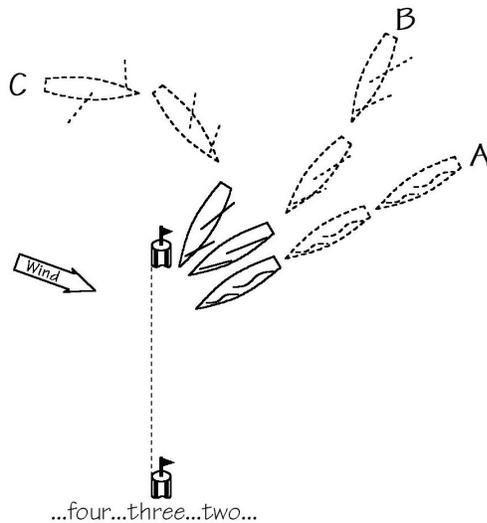
Usually, everyone wants to start at the starboard end of the line so they can be on starboard tack, requiring all port tack boats to keep clear of them. They also want to be the most windward boat so they can get the clear air.

The problem is that everyone can’t get that most desired position. What are the alternatives? Well, because of the jam-up at the starboard end, the other end of the line and the middle of the line are less congested. You can try starting there. But, be mindful of starting on port tack.

There is nothing wrong with a port tack start, but you must do it cleanly. If you can cross all the starboard tackers, then you’ve aced them all and got the better start. In reality, though, you won’t. It’s a rare occurrence. Be prepared to give way by tacking onto starboard or ducking the stern of any starboard tack boats. Why? Because those are the rules, that’s why. A port-tack boat **MUST** keep clear of (or give way to) a starboard-tack boat. Period.

You can also follow the first tier of starters across the line. You’ll be just behind them, but with good positioning for the first leg of the course. If you sail smart during the rest of the race, you may be able to overtake the boats that you followed over the starting line.

The most hideous and awful of things is barging. Don’t do it. How can you not do it if you don’t know what it is? Barging is when a windward boat tries to wedge herself between the starting mark and the leeward boat closest to the mark when there is not enough room for her to fit.



In the drawing, boat A is close hauled and heading straight to the line on starboard, perhaps a little too fast. She has eased her sails to allow them to luff, thereby slowing down a little. Boat B has come alongside of boat A and has her sails in tight, accelerating to the line. Boat C is attempting to force herself between the starting mark and boat B where there is not enough room for her to fit. Boat C is barging. She has no right to do that. Boat B should be hailing her to keep clear.

Also, in the first and second positions, boat A could have luffed Boat B up so that B would have to pass on the wrong side of the mark. It is perfectly legal and boat B, being the windward boat, would have had to keep clear of A. In that case, boat C would have been blocked out altogether.

Forcing yourself in, or not getting out of the way of a leeward boat, is completely against the rules. Barging is a risky maneuver. If you try it, be prepared to miss the start. If you follow the rules, most of the times you attempt to barge you will, or should, miss the start. No one likes it when they miss the start, but that is the risk you take when you attempt to barge.

Unlike at the rest of the marks on the course, the inside boat is NOT entitled to room at a starting mark while she is on her final approach to the line in order to start. But, again, it's not that simple. Before beginning her final approach, while still jockeying for position, the regular room-at-the-marks rules DO apply to the inside

boat. As soon as the inside boat begins her final move towards the starting line, where her objective is to actually start the race, her rights to room at the starting mark disappear. Poof! Gone! She MUST keep clear of both the starting mark and any leeward boats, even if she misses the mark and does not start. If you find yourself in that position, acknowledge to yourself that you have blown the start and accept the penalty of a poor start.

To repeat myself, do not force your way in and do not stand your ground by not giving way. That is against the rules and it is unfair to the skipper who has developed his starting skills to the point where he is able to be in the right place at the right time.

As the leeward boat in a starting situation you have the power over the windward boats. You can force them out of your way. Don't let them push you around.

My suggestion is to avoid situations where you will become the barger and, if you are in a convenient position, close the door on bargers by hailing them to keep clear and by not giving them room to start.

You've probably seen other skippers circle around at the starboard end of the starting line, then zoop in at the mark at the last second, getting themselves an excellent start. It has everything to do with the skipper's boat handling skills and sense of timing. If your skills are sufficient, by all means try it. Just be prepared to back off or to turn away if the opening you are aiming for gets closed down on you. If your skills are not sufficient, you should do a more conservative start.

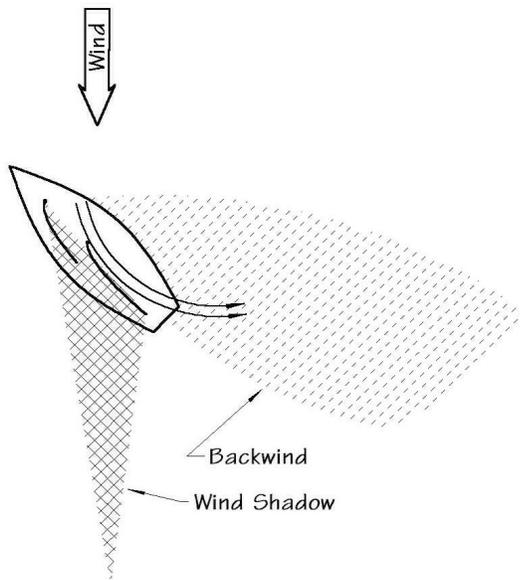
The second most hideous and awful of things is running down the line when you are early to the start. In the drawing, that would be if boat C ran along the line, pushing both B and A out of her way. It is not against the rules to run down the line. But, if you do it and there are any boats to leeward of you, YOU must keep clear of them. Your choices are to cross the line early and round either starting mark to re-start, or lose some speed, or duck behind the leeward boats, or don't get into that position in the first place.

The danger of crossing early is that you lose all of your rights to all boats that start properly. You may have to travel with the pack until you can work your way free to turn around. Remember, you have to keep clear of everybody. You can't force a boat out of your way in order for you to go back to re-start.

There are no brakes on a sailboat, so how do you lose speed? Ease, or loosen, your sails. Depending on the conditions, by either a lot or a little. If the sails are flapping (which is called luffing), the boat has no driving force. Hull friction will slow you down. But, be aware of your booms going out too far to leeward. If they interfere with a leeward boat, then you have not kept clear of her and you are subject to protest.

Another way to lose speed is to make a series of rapid rudder movements, alternating to port and to starboard. The further the rudder moves, the more drag it creates and the more speed you'll lose. You don't want to hold the rudder over to one side too long though, because you'll turn the boat. That's why you make a series of rapid movements to both sides. It keeps the boat on the same line. You can think of it as linked "S" turns so quick that the boat still goes straight.

If you are following a boat that might be early to the line, watch out for her slowing down. As a boat clear astern, it is your responsibility to keep clear of her. Either use the same technique to slow your boat down or take a course where you can safely overlap her.



Clear air is what you want to sail in. It is wind that is un-disturbed and can deliver the full force of the current conditions. Blanketing or wind shadow is when the windward boat's sails physically block the air from getting to your boat. In the drawing, it is the dark triangle on the leeward side of the boat. It is not a large area but the effect is relatively intense. The backwind zone is the area of turbulence that's left in the air after the wind has flowed across the sails. It is the larger, lighter area in the drawing. It lies to windward and astern of the boat doing the backwinding.

Neither the blanketed nor the backwinded areas carry the full force of the wind. The turbulence effects in both areas are considerably less with our model boats as compared to full sized boats, but you should avoid sailing in either zone, if possible.

You want the wind to hit your sails before it hits anything else. It may be wise to temporarily tack away from a boat throwing dirty air at you, so that you get into clear air.

In summary, a good start is one that finds you in the front row, free and clear of other boats, not just at the bell, but a minute later, after the sprint off the line. While it is not necessary to win the start in order to win the race, a good start is always helpful.

Getting a good start will give you the freedom to sail the first leg as you see fit. A poor start means other boats may be able to set you off in the wrong direction or to make you sail in dirty air.

Lastly, either while starting or on the rest of the racecourse, don't try to make moves your sailing skills can't support. With practice, your skills will improve. Until they do, try to stay out of the other racers' way. It's just common courtesy. When you do decide to try a new move (or even if it's an old move), always leave yourself an escape route – just in case the move does not work out.