

# FROM THE EXPERTS: CREWING AROUND

## "RESPONSIBILITIES AT THE START AND WINDWARD LEG"

*by David Heinke*

The start to me is the most exciting part of a race. It is the only time when all the boats racing are at the same place at the same time. As the start of the race draws nearer, the adrenalin starts pumping and it's easy to lose your cool and make mistakes.

Starts are one of the only things in racing that you can't practice, unless you have a couple of boats to brush with. The crew can practice, in a way, by knowing exactly what is expected of them as team members. You may have an idea of what works best on your boat, but after talking to a number of skippers and crews, I have come up with a generic system of responsibilities for crews.

The most important aspect of good teamwork is communicating on the boat. From the skipper to the crew and from the crew to the skipper. To start off, the skipper should tell the crew exactly what he/she expects of them. Not only their physical responsibilities but also mental responsibilities. The skipper should make it clear what type of information he/ she needs and when he/she wants it.

Once responsibilities have been established, it is time to go sailing. On the way out to the race course, hoist the spinnaker, practice a couple of gybes, and then douse the chute (spinnaker) on the correct side (usually to port on an olympic course) of the boat. The forward crew should then run the edges of the spinnaker before packing it away (to prevent any hour-glasses). The spinnaker should then be stored, so it is secure and out of the way, but easily retrieved at the windward mark.

Meanwhile the middle crew if sailing with three (if sailing with two, then the skipper must share in some of the work), should start "cleaning" up the boat. Checking knots, controls, etc., basically getting the rest of the boat ready for the race. My mother always has her crew swab the boat (deck included) with a sponge; "a clean boat is a fast boat," at least mentally if nothing else.

Once the boat is ready to roll, then the course can be checked out and the starting area surveyed. The crew should be looking for the marks (if set) and any other important observations, while the skipper is going over his/her game plan. Next it would be smart to have the entire crew discuss any plan, so everyone will know what will happen at the start and windward leg.

At the ten minute gun, the most important thing to do is to start your watch. If you miss the gun exactly, start the watch anyway and then reset it at the five minute gun, when you will be ready. The middle crew is the most logical choice to be the timer, due to his strategic position next to the skipper. This will cut down on any messages lost in the confusion and in the noise of luffing sails on the starting line.

The forward crew should be watching for other boats on the line while the middle crew watches the time and gives the skipper readings at regular intervals. After the five minute gun the crew should be at one hundred percent attentiveness and quick to respond at a moments notice to any sail trimming, balancing or fine tuning of any controls that may need to be adjusted like when shifting gears from heavy air to light air.

The first hundred yards after a start are maybe the most crucial part of the race. You can either pull ahead and jump into a lead or you are buried because of a poor start or any other snafu. This is when you hike the hardest and perform your best (not that you don't throughout the entire race, but give even more at this time).

When sailing upwind the forward crew should be watching other boats for close quarters situations (starboard tackers etc.) and reading the compass, taking notes with a grease pencil, so at a moments notice the skipper can ask and receive concise information on what the wind is doing. An easy way to remember how to read the compass is; you are being lifted if the readings on starboard tack get higher or on port tack the readings get lower (starboard high - port low).

The middle crew is responsible for balance, fine tuning of controls and watching the competition and the wind. Balance is important and you should not wait for your skipper to tell you to move. You should be constantly but very subtly moving and adjusting your weight to keep the boat in good balance. Watching the competition and shifts is also very important. The middle crew is the eyes to his skipper, because the skipper should be watching his/her sails and the water to maximize boat-speed. Quick, reliable information

is imperative from the middle crew as Dave Perry in his book, *Winning in One-Designs*, suggests, is an excellent way to observe and report on your competition.

Another boat's position can be reported in two dimensions. The first is the position of the competitor in relation fore or aft of your own boat. The second dimension is the position to windward or leeward of your boat. The speed of the other yacht can also be reported using this approach. Is the other boat moving faster or slower and is it pointing higher or lower? A good report would be: "Hey Ralph #980 is 3 boat lengths ahead and 1 boat length to leeward, not moving as fast but pointing higher than we are." Another report on the competition might be: "The boats thirty yards ahead just got about a ten degree header with a puff of about fifteen knots."

If the skipper can receive quality information from the crew, then all he she has to do is take a quick look, make a decision and continue to sail either the same one, or on a new tack, but will be able to watch what he/she is doing better, and hopefully go faster.

Most Interlakers sail with the forward crew always as the forward crew and the middle always being the middle. But some skippers use a method called the criss-cross method. Simply each crew is forward on a respective tack. On starboard Susie is forward and has the jib. As the skipper starts to tack the boat, Jim, the middle crew on starboard tack, crosses first and becomes the forward crew on port tack while Susie becomes middle crew. This system works rather well, but two well-rounded crews are needed to make this tactic effective, or if balance is an issue (not wanting to put the big guy in the middle or up front etc.) If your existing way of sailing and crew work isn't working that well, then try the criss-cross tack and see what happens.

If all goes well, you should get to the weather mark in first place, or at least in one piece.