

Racing Without Winning

by Larry Meade

In striving to win, whether at the national or club level, it is easy to forget the true value of competitive sailing. Larry Meade reminds all racers of some of the qualities that can make the sport worthwhile even if you don't come out on top:

Most books and articles on how to race (invariably written by champions) assume that winning is the only reason for racing. Their premise is that if you don't win, your only recourse is to improve so that you do win.

For the broad base of competitive sailors, this philosophy is unrealistic. Most sailors, even when they have the ability, don't have the time to become champions. And even the champions cannot win all the time. No matter how good a sailor is, the sport is full of uncontrollable variables that can turn certain victory into defeat. If we, the also-rans and the champions alike, are to consistently enjoy racing, it is necessary to find a means of doing so without winning.

Basically, this is achieved in two ways: by changing your attitude toward winning and losing, and by changing your approach to racing.

Forget About Winning: The experts usually tell us that we can win more by caring more about winning. But such intensity can take the fun out of racing, especially when this intensity does not result in winning. I find racing is actually more rewarding when I care less about winning.

Ignore your ego: Everyone needs to feel good about themselves by achieving something in life. But people who set out to do this by winning sailboat races are courting disappointment. Only a few are likely to win enough to build a reputation that will consistently satisfy their egos. And even for those few, usually the price is having to take racing too seriously to really enjoy it. When you no longer pressure yourself by putting your ego on the line each race, you free yourself to better appreciate the sport.

Befriend your competitors: People who hate to lose because it bruises their egos often get angry at people who win more than they do. They imagine that they are looked down on by the winners. In fact, these people look down on themselves and project this feeling onto others. Remember that sailboat racing is a social competition. Feeling that you have to beat someone you dislike simply adds to the pressure and detracts from the enjoyment.

Escape the past: Sail every race as if it were the only race. Sail every leg of the course as though it were an entity in itself. Forget the mistakes of the previous leg or the finishing position of the previous race. Of course, you want to learn from past experiences and mistakes, but beyond that, you should eliminate any thoughts about having to make up for a poor finish or living up to expectations.

Don't worry about losing: The idea that those who do not finish in the top few places are "losers" completely overlooks the basic character of fleet racing, which, unlike match racing, consists of numerous victories and defeats within each race. No sailor who competes to his or her best ability can be put into the category of "loser."

Race to Sail: Racing, after all, is sailing, and racers are people who enjoy sailing their hardest and their best, using other boats as yardsticks. Even when not winning, a racer can benefit from the challenge to his sailing skills and the appeal to his sense of adventure.

Race to sail better: Racing teaches sail trim and boat handling skills better than any other form of sailing. A good tack, jibe or mark rounding is a reward in itself whether you are first or last. Racing to extend your personal limits of speed and boat handling will keep the competition challenging and fun.

Race to play the game: One of the most interesting aspects of competitive sailing is the tremendous variety of tactical situations that develop. There is nothing quite so satisfying as winning the favored pin end position at the start or coming in from down low to gain an inside overlap at the jibe mark. Trying to make the correct split-second decisions, learning to see situations developing ahead of time and striving toward the "perfect" tactical race offers numerous challenges within the challenge of the race itself.

Race for adventure: Racing is as much a competition against the elements as against other boats and sailors. Similarly, successfully testing your skill against the wind and waves can be every bit as rewarding as beating a close competitor. In a real blow, or even a drifter, anyone who makes it around the course is a winner.

Race to develop concentration: At its best, racing is total absorption in sailing your boat. You become an extension of the hull and sails and even the wind and water. When a sailor achieves this level of concentration, nothing else matters. The reward is in the depth of the relationship.

Sailing and Winning: These approaches to racing without winning not only make racing more fun, but generally result in improved performance and higher finishes. By reducing pressure, by concentrating more on the factors that influence winning than on winning itself and by emphasizing the value of competition and learning, a sailor often discovers that he is racing better.

Winning is really just something that is tacked onto the true rewards of the sport. You don't need to win to get personal satisfaction out of competitive sailing. But you do need to enjoy the racing to be a real winner.

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