

Improving British Performance at Major Regattas: A Starting Checklist

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Summary. Written after a disappointing British showing at the 1985 Worlds in Douarnenez, this piece argues that British Dragon sailors lose most at the start in large, biased-line fleets. Nick Streeter gives a nine-point starting checklist: log the wind direction early in writing, choose the favoured side, find a transit for the line, check bias at about six minutes, and with a port bias come in on port from beyond the pin and tack into a gap at about 1½ minutes. He also covers starting a little down the line or late when the committee end is crowded, accelerating from 45–30 seconds with sheets not pinned in, and using the crew to call distance to the line.

The results achieved by British Dragons over many years at overseas events have shown generally that we are sailing to a high standard but lack the flair or ability to match the best from other countries. Most of us are sailing boats that are far from new and next year should prove whether this is a major factor. My own view is that we suffer from a lack of participation in large fleet races where the quality of opposition in the top half is better than would be met in the U.K.

There is no real substitute for competing abroad to raise our own standards. The particular area where it seems to me that we are weak is at the starting line where so often we are left after only five minutes racing with a recovery situation. This poor starting is aggravated by the larger fleets now allowed in the major Championships and with the propensity for race officers to set an unduly biased line so that only a small proportion of the fleet can hope to get a reasonable start.

Unless we can match the ability of the better sailors who will be at the favoured end of the line, the result of the race for us is almost certain in that we are not going to win.

How then can we do better? Possibly a checklist may help.

1. Be out early so that there is no doubt as to how the sails should be set for the prevailing conditions and take note of the wind direction at regular intervals (in writing) to establish the limits between which it is swinging.
2. The often almost impossible decision should be taken as to which side of the course is likely to be favoured having noted the land configuration, the tide over the course, cloud build up, what happened yesterday etc. If the starboard side of the course is favoured and the line is biased to port, a start two thirds along the line will more likely allow an early tack onto port. If there is a considerable bias it may well pay to start at the pin and take the whole advantage.

3. Do attempt to identify a transit between the ends of the line and the land. Often in the middle of the line there is a concave bow and it is possible to find oneself a couple of boat lengths ahead of those around one and still be confident of not being over the line.
4. Having assessed the wind direction at probably six minutes to go against the bearing of the starting line, the amount of bias and therefore which is the right end will be apparent. Try to do this in the middle of the line clear of other boats to get a clear wind and have your options still open.
5. When the line is biased to port, rather than join a queue at the five minute gun it is often better to come in on port tack from the far side of the pin and tack into a gap at around one and a half minutes to go. It is all important to make a slot to leeward into which you can accelerate and to avoid the boat to port getting into a safe leeward position. If possible avoid being next to a former World Champion or similar hot-shot!
6. When there is a decided starboard bias many boats will be at the committee vessel early and thus be hardly moving, especially if there is a fair tide. Either start a little way down the line or come in late, say ten seconds going flat out. If you cannot keep above the boat going slowly ahead you can always tack away.
7. Start accelerating at between 45–30 seconds to go with the sheets not too pinned in. Sail as free as possible consistent with keeping well above the boat to leeward. Make sure that your crew don't disturb your concentration but keep you informed as to the progress of the boats near you.
8. If the news is disastrous pray for a general recall! If that fails don't fret but look for an opportunity to sail in clear air.
9. In conclusion, good starts are a result of a team effort; let your crew know what you hope to do and put the onus on them to advise as to how close you are to the line. You can't do everything but you must sail fast!

— *N. J. Streeter*

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