

# Setting Priorities

David Dellenbaugh · BDA Magazine 2004 Annual, pp. 14-15

**Summary.** A "Toolbox" chart from Speed & Smarts on making better decisions by setting priorities. Dellenbaugh sets out a three-step approach: identify the question you need to answer, collect the information you need to know, then decide on your priorities. The chart applies this to six situations (practice time, pre-start preparation, the start, steering upwind, converging with another boat and a light-air run) and gives two sample priority lists for each, showing how different answers lead to different plans.

Inconsistent finishes are one sign that you may not be following the right priorities while racing. It's hard to find the fastest course to the finish line without a map. That's why I've created the chart on these pages showing one way to approach the subject of setting priorities.

**Identify the question you need to answer.** Every time you sail a race, whether you're the skipper or crew, you have to make hundreds (or thousands!) of decisions. Should you go left or right? Tack now or later? Trim the jib sheet a little more or not? In the first column at right, I've described a number of common situations where you must make choices. The quality of the decisions you make will determine your chances of success in any race.

**Collect information you need to know.** In order to make a good decision, you must be prepared. That is, you can't (or shouldn't) make choices in a vacuum. Every decision you make should be consistent with a larger strategy. So before you decide what to do, think about the big picture. Ask yourself questions like the ones shown in the middle column.

For example, are you willing to assume a lot of risk or just a little? Are you faster than most of the other boats, or slower? You can answer many of these questions well before you are faced with a crisis. The more time you have, the more information you can collect. And this will help you set more effective priorities.

**Decide on your priorities.** As I said before, priorities are mental tools that help you get organized to sail around the course as quickly as possible. They help you focus on the most important elements in any particular situation. In two columns at the far right, I've made up some sample priority lists based on different answers to the info questions.

| Situation/Question                                                                | Information you need to know                                                           | Sample priorities 1                                                 | Sample priorities 2                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Practice time</b><br>It's a few days before your big regatta, and you have one | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In recent races, what have been your</li> </ul> | <b>You have all your crew but not another boat to sail against.</b> | <b>You have another boat but not all your crew.</b> |

| Situation/Question                                                                                                                                                                                      | Information you need to know                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Sample priorities 1                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Sample priorities 2                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
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| afternoon set aside for some on-the-water practice. <i>What should you work on?</i>                                                                                                                     | <p>relative weak points?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What skills will you need to do well at your upcoming regatta?</li> <li>• Do you have all your regular crewmember(s) aboard for practice?</li> <li>• Is there another boat like yours that you can practice with?</li> <li>• What wind conditions do you expect for your practice?</li> </ul> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Spend almost all your time on boathandling practice.</li> <li>2. Review regatta schedule and SIs.</li> </ol>                                                                               | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Work on straight-line speed and changing gears.</li> <li>2. Test speed variables.</li> <li>3. Work on your “fix it” list.</li> </ol>                                                                 |
| <p><b>Pre-start preparation</b></p> <p>You are sailing a singlehanded boat and you get out to the starting area almost an hour before your warning gun. <i>How should you prepare for the race?</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the wind conditions?</li> <li>• How familiar are you with the wind and current in this area?</li> <li>• How good do you think your speed will be compared to?</li> <li>• How valuable would it be for you to have some boathandling practice before the race?</li> </ul>                                          | <p><b>The wind is quite shifty.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Spend a lot of time sailing upwind collecting wind readings.</li> <li>2. Find a “buddy” and split apart on the beat, checking the wind.</li> </ol> | <p><b>You have not spent much time in this type of boat.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Find a “buddy” and work on straight-line speed upwind.</li> <li>2. Practice tacking, jibing, turning, accelerating, etc.</li> </ol> |

| Situation/Question                                                                                                                                                                                          | Information you need to know                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Sample priorities 1                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Sample priorities 2                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
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| <b>At the start</b><br>You are the tactician on a J/24 and you're about to start a race in a fleet of 50 boats. <i>Where on the line should you start?</i>                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Which end is favored (i.e. more upwind)?</li> <li>Which side of the course do you like on the first beat?</li> <li>What is your series position and what do you need in this race?</li> <li>Where are most of the other boats going to start?</li> <li>How is your speed relative to the rest of the fleet?</li> </ul> | <b>It's the first race of a series and you expect to have good speed.</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Start between the favored end and the middle of the line.</li> <li>Start away from other boats.</li> <li>Minimize risk.</li> </ol> | <b>The pin end is "favored," but you like the right side.</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Start to windward of the pack at the pin end.</li> <li>Try to tack as soon as you can.</li> </ol>                            |
| <b>Steering upwind</b><br>You are the helmsperson of a one-design keelboat and you are racing up the first beat. <i>While you are steering, where should you be looking most of the time?</i>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How easy is it for you to keep the boat in the groove?</li> <li>How much help are your crewmembers giving you with information about the race course?</li> <li>What are the wind and sea conditions?</li> <li>Do you have many other boats close around you?</li> </ul>                                                | <b>You are less experienced than your crew.</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on the jib telltales to help you keep the boat in the groove.</li> <li>Ask your crew for continual input on strategy and tactics.</li> </ol>           | <b>You are more experienced than your crew.</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spend less time on telltales and more time looking around.</li> <li>Talk to your crew steadily about speed, tactics, strategy.</li> </ol>  |
| <b>Converging with another boat</b><br>You're steering a doublehanded dinghy upwind on port tack. You see that you are converging on a collision course with a starboard tacker. <i>What should you do?</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are you in a position where you could lee-bow the other boat?</li> <li>Which side of the course do you prefer?</li> <li>Where is the windward mark?</li> <li>Are there other boats affecting your decision to tack or duck?</li> </ul>                                                                                 | <b>You like the right side.</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Duck behind the other boat and stay on port tack.</li> <li>Aim at the other boat and duck late so she can't tack on you.</li> </ol>                                          | <b>You like the left side.</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If you can lee bow the other boat, do that.</li> <li>If you can't lee bow, tack several lengths earlier so you aren't pinned from tacking again.</li> </ol> |
| <b>Light air downwind</b><br>You're sailing a boat with an                                                                                                                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Which is the longer jibe to the leeward</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <b>The situation as described.</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>The wind is heavy, not light.</b>                                                                                                                                                                                              |

| Situation/Question                                                                                                                                  | Information you need to know                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Sample priorities 1                                                                                                                                                                                        | Sample priorities 2                                                                                                                                                                                        |
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| asymmetrical chute down the last run of a light-air race. There are other boats around you, and the wind is shifty. <i>Which way should you go?</i> | <p>mark?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you see more wind velocity on either side of the course?</li> <li>• In which direction do you expect the wind to shift next?</li> <li>• What's the best [illegible] way to sail with clear air?</li> <li>• What is your series position and what do you need in this race?</li> </ul> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sail toward the best pressure.</li> <li>2. Keep your air clear.</li> <li>3. Sail the longer jibe to the finish.</li> <li>4. Stay on the headed shift.</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sail the longer jibe to the finish.</li> <li>2. Stay on the headed shift.</li> <li>3. Sail toward the best pressure.</li> <li>4. Keep your air clear.</li> </ol> |

— *David Dellenbaugh*

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Originally published as "Want better results? Get in the groove by setting priorities." (a Speed & Smarts "Toolbox" chart, listed in the contents as "Top Tips from David Dellenbaugh") across a two-page spread in the BDA Magazine 2004 Annual. © David Dellenbaugh / Speed & Smarts, reproduced in Dragon News by permission. Reproduced with permission. Transcribed for the Peticrows Dragon Archive (petticrows.com).