

# Assess Your Risk Level at the Start

David Dellenbaugh · BDA Magazine 2007 Annual, pp. 8-9

**Summary.** How to match the risk you take at the start to your situation in the race and series.

Dellenbaugh separates strategic risk (losing out to wind or current changes because you cannot be everywhere at once) from tactical risk (relating to other boats), and lists situations that call for low risk (first race of a big series, fastest boat, a 10-point lead in the last race, a large fleet, windy or wavy conditions) or high risk. To manage risk he advises staying away from packs, avoiding the edges of the fleet, using a line sight and using a consistent starting technique; diagrams show that both ends of the line are the riskiest places to start.

Every race is full of choices. You can go to the left side or the right; start at the pin end or in the middle; cover the other boats or sail your own race; duck a starboard tackler or lee-bow them. The chance to make hundreds of choices in each race is part of the challenge and fun of sailing.

Each of the decisions that you make in a race involves a certain amount of risk. If you go all the way to the left corner you may lose everyone on the right. If you start in the middle (where it's harder to judge the line), you might be OCS.

Risk is not inherently good or bad. But if you don't think about your own situation and how much risk you are willing, or need, to take, then your choices may not turn out to be very successful.

For example, let's say the windward (RC boat) end of the starting line is quite favored. Should you fight for a good start right at that end, or move farther down the line?

The answer depends a lot on your situation in the race and/or series. If this is the first race of a big regatta and you have great boatspeed and a chance to win, you'd be crazy to risk getting stuck in a crowd at the favored end. If, however, it's the last race of a series and you need to win the race in order to win the regatta, then this might be a good risk to take.

Same starting line, different choice. Every time you must make a decision, the level of risk varies and so does your interest in assuming risk. The important thing is to be aware of your big-picture situation so the choices you make will match your overall risk strategy. This is especially important at the start.

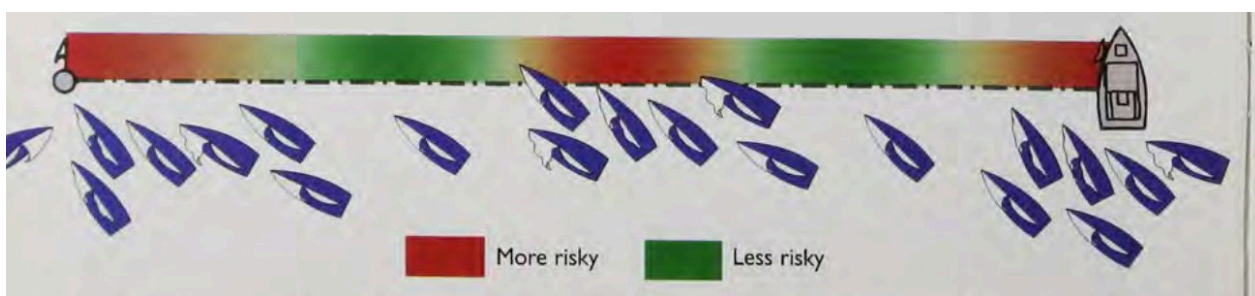
## Strategic risk

When you're planning an approach to the start, there are several kinds of risk involved. One is 'strategic' risk – the chance that you will put yourself into a position where you lose distance to other boats because of changes in the wind, current or other factors.

Since you cannot be everywhere at once, the start always involves a certain degree of strategic risk. If you start near the pin end, maybe the right side will pay off, or vice versa. If you start in the middle, both sides may come out ahead. You cannot eliminate strategic risk at the start, but you can do certain things to minimize it if you want.

## Tactical risk

A second type of risk is tactical, relating to other boats. Of course, some of this involves individual boats around you. But in this issue (on the macro view of starting) we are looking at fleet tactics rather than boat-to-boat tactics. For example, we know that both ends of the line often draw a crowd. Since it's fairly risky to start in the middle of a pack, it's usually a higher-risk move to start close to either end.



There are certain areas of the line you should avoid when you want to minimize risk at the start. Both ends are at the top of this list. Tactically, they are high-risk because the fleet often crowds together at each end, even when it's not 'favored.' Strategically, starting at an end is risky because you are committing to be all the way on one side of the fleet. The middle of the line usually gives you a more conservative start, unless you're in the middle of a pack. When you're fighting other boats, you have a much lower chance of getting off the line with clear air and speed.

## Low risk or high risk?

While you are preparing for the start, there is usually a certain level of risk that you want to take, or that you are willing to tolerate. This depends on a wide variety of differing circumstances.

**Low Risk:** Here are some situations when you would not want to take very much risk at the start:

- It's the first race of a big series.
- You are the fastest (or biggest) boat in your fleet.
- It's the last race of the series and you have a 10-point lead.
- You are sailing in a large fleet.
- It's very windy or wavy with a fair chance of capsize or breakdown.

**High Risk:** Here are situations when you might be willing to take more risk on the starting line:

- You are one of the slowest (or smallest) boats in your fleet.
- It's the last race of a series and you need to win the race in order to win the regatta.

- You are sailing in a small fleet that is very competitive.
- You have not yet used your throwout(s) in the series.

If you're thinking about starting in a high-risk area, you must consider whether the risk you are taking is worth the potential reward. A couple boats will usually get killer starts at the favored end, but many others will end up in trouble, well behind boats that started with less risk.

## How to manage risk

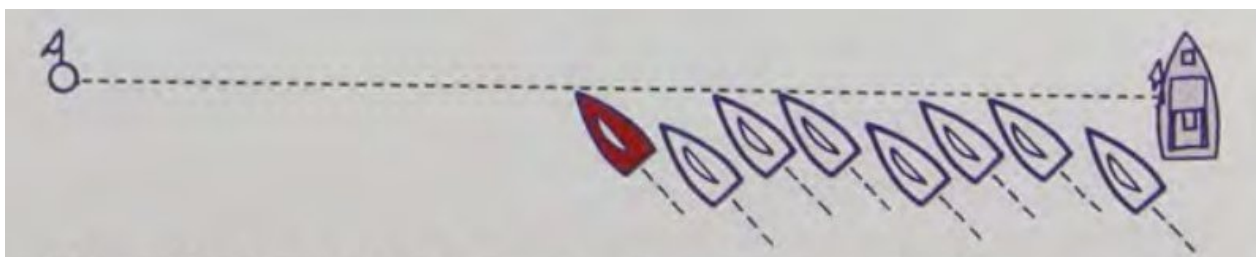
One key to success in sailboats is matching your risk exposure to your situation. It's fairly easy to think of ways to increase your risk on the starting line. For example, you could start on port tack, fight for "the" start at either end, or poke your bow ahead of the fleet in the middle of the line.

It's also easy to be conservative by starting in the third row, or at the unfavored end. The hard thing is finding a strategy somewhere in the middle. Ideally, a start should minimize your risk of making a big mistake, but not be so safe that you aren't competitive with other boats.

Here are some strategies you can use to help achieve this:

- Stay away from packs of boats. These tend to push over the line early, and make it hard to get off the line with clear air.
- Avoid the edges of the fleet. These extremes are usually risky, both tactically and strategically.
- Know where the starting line is by using a line sight (*see pages 8-9*). Make sure you are right up on the line without being over.

In a regatta or series, one thing that works well for me is using a consistent starting technique. I try to avoid starting at the pin end one race and the boat the next (unless something changes drastically). Instead, I use the same approach and aim for roughly the same spot at every start. This way I get into a rhythm that makes starting easier, safer and more successful.



The red boat may think she is getting a conservative start by positioning herself in the middle of the line, but her start is actually fairly risky. From a strategic point of view, she is all the way on the left side of the fleet. Though she is not fighting with a crowd, this is a lot like starting at the pin, so she will be in trouble if the wind does not go her way.

— David Dellenbaugh

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