

10 Top Tips for Great Starting

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The first five minutes are the most important part of the race. How we do in this crucial period will most often set the agenda for our whole race and go a long way to defining our finishing position.

Strange then isn't it, that unlike golfers or tennis players, who spend hours and days practicing their swing and serving techniques, most of us very rarely undertake any kind of practise of our starting technique, compared with the two or three hours of on the course racing practise which inevitably follows each start. To borrow the old golfing analogy, you can't win the race on the start and first beat, but you can lose it...

So here are **10** top tips that most probably won't immediately make you into a champion starter, but should help you stop making the mistakes that mean your race is lost before you've rounded the first mark:

#1 - Boat Preparation

This sounds like an obvious one, but always make sure that everything on your boat is working properly, rigged correctly and nothing is likely to break or come undone, before you leave the shore. It's much harder to fix anything when you're on the water! Also, you'll need a clear head with no distractions for your starting strategy and worrying whether your kicking strap is going to hold together won't be a help.

#2 - Know the Course

Make sure you've made a good note of the course and have been through it in your mind, checking that the stated mark rounding directions make sense. SWSC is a small lake, but you'd be amazed the number of times even long-time members head off to the wrong marks or worse still miss out marks of the course during a race.

#3 Have a Clear Plan

Get to the start line early and develop a plan of how you see the start and the first beat going. Sail part of the beat to work out if there are any major and/or consistent wind shifts or wind shadows that will come into play and work those into your plan.

Work into your plan also, where you think everyone else is likely to be starting and consider whether you might be better to steer clear and go for space and clear wind.

As you progress up the beat consider that even after a reasonably long first beat, it's highly likely that boats will be approaching the first mark at the same time so plan to approach the first mark on starboard tack and thus with the right of way whenever possible.

#4 - Timing

Make sure you have a decent watch that can count down from 5 minutes, 3 minutes and 1 minute. If you sail a double handed boat, make sure you and your crew are both aware of the timings, know your starting strategy and are reacting to circumstances in the same way.

#5 Know the Start Line

When you get to the start line make sure you survey the start area, the line and the first beat to work out which is the favoured end of the starting line. If you're unsure as to how to work this out, a simple way is to head to the middle of the line and put your boat head to wind. The end that the bow points towards when head to wind would usually be the favoured end.

However, what might normally be considered as the favoured end is not always be the best end to start at for a number of reasons:

- There might be a lot of boats at the favoured end and no room for you. In this situation it could be better to sail for space and clear air and avoid the gaggle who are all shouting at each other and slowing each other down.
- There could be more wind away from the favoured end.
- If the race officer has done his job properly, the line might be fairly unbiased with no advantage to starting at one end or the other. If this is your assessment, then the best plan is often to start somewhere towards the middle of the line with space around you and plenty of options.

#6 Know the Racing Rules

Some of the racing rules are different before the start compared to when the race is underway. Make sure you're aware of the basic rules and understand how to use them. We'll cover these rules in another article but there are plenty of online resources that can help:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFCuwTuW200>

http://www.ribc.info/RYA_Racing_Rules_Basic.pdf

<https://www.sailingscuttlebutt.com/2020/08/22/luffing-rules-before-the-start/>

#7 Don't be Over the Line!

If you're over the line (OCS / on course side), you'll have to go back and clear your start behind everyone else, or worse still if a black flag was flying, you'll be disqualified and that's your race over!

To avoid either of these scenarios it's vital to have a clear idea of where the start line actually is.

On a busy start it's sometimes difficult to see both ends of the line and if you can't see both ends you can't tell whether you're over or not.

A good way of making sure you always have a good idea of how you're lying compared to the line is to select a transit on the bank. Sail towards the port end mark on the line and on starboard tack. Now select a point on the bank that's in line with the port end mark as you sail towards it. By using this transit point you'll know where the line is even if you can't see the committee boat, which would usually be at the starboard end of the line. You've no excuse for being over the line now...

Now, before the start, practise your run in to your chosen spot using your transit.

#8 Full Speed at The Gun

This is possibly one of the most important things to master if you want to be a starting wizard! You and/or your crew should always be counting down to the starting gun. Don't wait until zero to start accelerating the boat. Depending on the type of boat you sail it will take at least 5 seconds which equals a couple of boat lengths to reach full speed. So, work out and practise with your crew if you have one, the manoeuvre of getting your boat up to full speed. Practise slowing almost to a stop and then sheeting in and combining it with a rounding up manoeuvre whilst at the same time heeling the boat to leeward and then bringing it upright to achieve full speed. Work out the distance and time this takes and factor that into your starting plan.

Aim to accelerate at 5-seconds to go or earlier if you have room, so that you're at full speed when the gun goes. If you leave it until the gun goes to pull the sails in and get going you've probably lost a couple of boat lengths to most of the fleet.

#9 Keep Clear of Trouble

So, the gun's gone, you've made an OK start and you're up and racing. Now your main focus must be to avoid being slowed or diverted from your first beat plan by other boats.

There are a few main ways to avoid this:

Clear air – on the first beat, if you're not sailing at full-speed you'll be losing ground to most of the rest of the fleet and this has more impact in terms of your race position on the first beat than at any other time of the race.

Sail flat – Your boat will go faster and importantly, lose less ground to leeward if you sail it flat. This applies of course to the whole of the race, but if you can't sustain a flat boat for the whole race at least aim to sail flat on the first beat.

Avoid other boats – even if you have right of way it's best to steer well clear of other boats and avoid them slowing you down at this critical time of the race. If you're close hauled on starboard and approaching a port tack boat, the last thing you want is for him/her to tack onto port just below your bow and lee-bow you. This will slow you down and even force you to tack off and ruin your first beat plan. In this situation consider calling them to 'carry on' or bear away behind them and thus keep your full speed on. Remember boat speed is King on the first beat. Don't get too hung up

Stay calm and sail fast – the first beat is a time for focus and concentration. Try not to get distracted by other boats or get into any arguments or fracas that will distract you from the task at hand, which is to keep clear air and sail fast. Any disputes can be sorted out in the bar after the race, your job on the first beat is to get to the first mark first!

Keep Your Head Out of the Boat - Don't get too hung up on the boats that are right next to you. Try and keep a good eye on what's happening right across the racecourse, or if you're sailing a double handed boat, have your crew tell you what's going on whilst you concentrate on keeping the boat sailing as fast as possible. You need to know which boats are gaining, which are losing, where the wind's coming from, where it's shifting, are there any patches of pressure that you can see coming and should be heading towards and how are you doing in relation to the first mark.

#10 Use the Wind Shifts

The wind at SWSC is a notoriously shifty. Getting in sync with wind shifts can deliver surprisingly large gains (or losses) on the first beat. It's really important that you're aware of when the wind is lifting or backing and when to tack or when to carry on in order to realise the gains that are on offer. As with the other areas mentioned above any gains or losses made due to the wind shifting on the first beat will be amplified in terms of your overall race position so try and make the most of them.

We'll cover the detail of how to use wind shifts in another article, but a few basic tips are:

- Always make sure you're sailing as close to the wind as you can. If you're not, you won't be able to tell when the wind is shifting – often I see boats sailing off from the start line on a fetch or close reach, without even a thought for where the rest of the fleet are heading. This isn't good!
- If you get headed it's probably worth tacking, assuming you have room and it's not taking you out of your route to the first mark.
- Always aim to sail on the tack that's taking you closest to the first mark.

As I said at the beginning of this article, it's unlikely that cracking these top tips will transform you overnight into a champion starter, but they should help you stop making the mistakes that lose you the race on the first beat.

Hopefully they'll also add in some small way to your confidence and enjoyment.

Happy racing!

PJ