

Thoughts on sportsmanship from:

DAVE PERRY

Why should competitive sailors be concerned with the subject of sportsmanship? Find out in this discussion with a top sailor and thinker.

Can you start by describing how you define sportsmanship?

DAVE: It's an attitude of respect for the game, the rules, the people you're racing against and the officials. Respect means you go about your job of competing fairly within the rules and try your hardest to win, without

doing anything that is unfair to others. Sometimes you'll win and sometimes you won't, but people will always have a good feeling about racing against you.

In addition to sailing within the rules, another strong signal that you respect the game is taking your penalties. Part of sportsmanship is knowing that, since there are no referees or umpires, the game needs people to take their penalties. When you do that, people really trust you.

And that's part of having respect.

Some people think the term "sportsmanship" means a perfect, goody-goody nice person. But that's not what I'm saying at all. A good sport is someone who adheres to a code of ethics and doesn't compromise the quality of the game. If you subscribe to that, you can't help but have other sailors respect you.

Why is sportsmanship important?

Sailing is a game, a sport, and when you choose to play a sport what you're really saying is "Let's all start from an equal place and see who can do it better." When everyone is playing the same game, it's exciting and challenging. But when some people try to win without regard for the rules, that compromises the game. Since sportsmanship is about respecting the game, I think it's important to be a good sport; otherwise sailing won't be very pleasurable, and people will stop doing it.

Doesn't the definition of sportsmanship vary from person to person and from fleet to fleet?

People may have slightly different opinions on manners, but in general the sport of sailing has one code of behavior or conduct. For example, we all go out there and agree to race by the rules without referees. We agree to go to each other's aid when necessary. We agree to sail fairly. And we agree to take penalties when we know we've infringed a rule.

Other sports don't have a code like this because they use referees or umpires. But in sailing everyone is expected to follow the rules, be respectful of each other, help each other, thank the race committee, be appreciative of the host club . . . Those are the things the sport stands for, and they're universally agreed on.

Who defines what is "good sportsmanship" under the rules?

Protest committees decide any protests that come up under the Fair Sailing rule or rule 75 (see pages 8-9). However, such decisions can be appealed, which means the ultimate decision will be made by the national authority for each country. So the definition of sportsmanship starts at the grass roots and can be refined on up the line as necessary.

Compared to 10 or 20 years ago, how would you rate the level of sportsmanship in sailing?

I don't sense a great difference between twenty years ago, when we were racing in college, and now. In those days there were a lot of sailors who were great sportspeople that you trusted and respected. Then there were a few who would try to win by taking advantage of the rules and their competitors. It's roughly the same today, though I think people today may be more aware of the need for good sportsmanship. There are certainly more sportsmanship awards given now, and that draws more attention to the issue.

One problem we face today is that kids generally have less respect for authority in all parts of life. So I think junior sailors need continual



INTERVIEW

David M. Perry is one of the world's most respected teachers and thinkers in the sport of sailing. In addition to being a world-class competitor in the Olympic and match racing arenas, Dave is an authority on the racing rules and a long-time supporter of youth sailing. He is currently a member of the US Sailing Appeals Committee, and his book "Understanding the Yacht Racing Rules" is a bible for many sailors.

Dave's work with junior sailors and ethics has produced two sportsmanship trophies in his name that are awarded annually at the U.S. Youth Championships and the CISA Racing Clinic. His list of awards won includes the Sailing World Hall of Fame, the 1994 Captain Joe Prosser Award for exceptional contribution to sailing education and an honorary doctorate from Piedmont College. Dave was also the athletic director at Greens Farms Academy in Westport, CT.





Dave Perry has spent a lot of time working with junior and youth sailors on the subject of sportsmanship in racing. He points out that role models are usually the biggest influence on young sailors' behavior. That's one reason why it's important for all of us to set a

you have to thank the race committee after you cross the finish line. But I think this shows good sportsmanship because you are acknowledging that these volunteers have made it possible for you to race.

When a port tacker crosses cleanly just ahead of a starboard tacker, sometimes I still hear the hail "Protest." Wouldn't it be nice if the skipper of the starboard boat said, "Hey, nice job." Acknowledging and even appreciating that the port tacker made a good move would be playing the game at a very high level of sportsmanship. That goes beyond the rules.

I also extend sportsmanship to how we treat our own teammates. Sometimes I hear sailors say things to others on their boat that make me cringe. I believe anything that lessens the quality of the game is contrary to good sportsmanship.

What can someone do about this?

I think the best thing one person can do is simply set a good example. You and I are both similar there. When we talk on the boat we try to say constructive things without a lot of swearing, yelling, blaming or making excuses. People who are near us (our crews and competitors) tend to pick up on that tenor.

If there's someone in a fleet who is lowering the quality of racing, fleet members should talk to that person. If a Laser sailor is rocking and rolling all the time, for example, explain to them what behavior you consider acceptable and legal.

When it comes to protesting, what is considered sportsmanlike?

That's a good question. The rules don't require anyone to protest. Rule 68 very clearly says a yacht "can" protest another yacht, which is permissive. The system is there if

reminders about the importance of showing respect for our sport.

How does sailing compare with other sports?

I think almost every sport is now dealing with issues like trash-talking and fighting, both verbal and physical, more than they were in the past. Basically there has been a decline in sportsmanship that reflects a similar decline of respect in society. But I don't think sailing has fallen as quickly as most of the other sports.

You're involved as a coach in many sports besides sailing. How do you promote sportsmanship there?

In some high school games I hear a lot of swearing, but at my school we've decided we won't tolerate this from our teams. If our coaches hear an athlete swear, they will pull him or her off the field. We also won't tolerate talking back to an official.

My philosophy is that everyone should try their hardest to win, but you have to do this within a respectable code of ethics. I don't believe sportsmanship is more important than winning, and I don't think the two are mutually exclusive. I think winning just means you're trying to out-perform your competition.

Good sportsmanship means you're doing it in a way where you maintain respect for your competi-

tors and the game. I think the two go naturally hand in hand.

I'm never one to say that winning doesn't matter as long as we are good sports. I think it's important to try to win, but always within a code of behavior that is respectable. Otherwise you will do whatever you can get away with. Referees can't make you be a good sport. It has to come from within.

Does all of this apply to sailing as well as other sports and to adults as well as kids?

Everyone has to be guided by a code of ethics, and it works out best in any sport when all the competitors are guided by the same code. I think sailing is great because sportsmanship must come from within yourself. Our sport teaches an intrinsic respect for ethics. If you can control yourself, then you can play the game at a high level, and you've learned a great life lesson.

You've been talking about a "code of ethics." In sailing is this what you call the racing rules, or is there something else?

The racing rules define one part of what I consider good ethical behavior. They're a big part of it, but there's also a lot more involving the interpersonal side.

For example, the rules don't say

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you choose to use it, but I don't feel it is poor sportsmanship if you choose not to protest someone else's infringement of the rules.

On the flip side of that, I don't think it's unsportsmanlike if you *do* choose to protest someone else's infringement. Protesting is what's supposed to happen in our system of rule enforcement.

The choice of whether to protest or not doesn't really involve ethics. What does involve sportsmanship is *how* you make that choice. For example, I think it's unfair to protest any situation that you don't honestly believe is a true infringement of the rules. That's an abuse of the system and I think it's unsportsmanlike.

I also believe the decision to protest should not be affected by personalities, by who's ahead of you in the race, or by other arbitrary criteria. You can draw your line in the sand wherever you want about when you will protest, but once you've done that be consistent.

Poor sportsmanship

Three things I see that reflect poor sportsmanship at regattas are the following:

- 1) Not taking your penalty when you know you have infringed a rule;
- 2) Lying (stretching the truth) in a protest hearing; and
- 3) Acrimonious communication with other boats.

Regarding the last point, I don't mind hearing the word "Protest." Protesting is not poor sportsmanship because it's part of the game. But if you choose a tone of voice which is mean and nasty, that is unsportsmanlike and, in my opinion, unnecessary.

If someone gets in your way, avoid a collision and protest. You don't have to yell at them in a way that makes them feel bad or stupid. They probably didn't try to foul you on purpose, so why treat them in a way that is disrespectful?

Part of the problem with poor sportsmanship is poor role models. How do you deal with this?

Because our sport isn't on television, it's harder for sailors to have role models, either positive or negative. As a result, most sailors' role models are the people in their local area. These people – the top racers, long-time sailors and so on – are the ones who set the tone for our sport. The great thing you learn from these positive role models is that you can be both successful *and* fair at the same time.

Do you have any sportsmanship role models yourself?

When I was younger, I looked up to my sailing instructors. They were hard racers, but I never heard them swearing or talking about ways to cheat. When you don't hear this, you don't even begin to think about doing it. The adults at my home club, including my parents, were also great sportspeople who would never for an instant consider compromising the rules.

When I campaigned a Soling for the Olympics, the person I respected a lot was Dave Curtis. With Dave, you always knew he was trying his hardest to beat you, but he wouldn't do anything unfair. He was the classic guy who, if you crossed him by an inch on port, might even say "Good job." He certainly wouldn't say protest if he didn't really have to alter his course.

Dave almost never raised his voice, and after the race he was the first guy to answer a question about speed or strategy. I never felt he was trying to play mind games with people, and I respected that. Of course there were other sailors out there who were not like Dave, and I knew I didn't want to be like them.

Does being a good sport decrease your chances of winning regattas?

I would say just the opposite. If you are considered a good sport by your fellow competitors, then it will be a tremendous help in your racing. There are so many times on the race course when you need a break. Maybe you're just barely crossing a

group of starboard tackers near the windward mark. Or perhaps you are very close to getting an inside overlap at the leeward mark. If you're the kind of person who has earned the respect of the people you race with, then other sailors are more likely to say, "OK, go ahead," when it's a close call.

But if you're the kind of person who is known to be very selfish and all you care about is winning despite the quality of the game for anyone else, I can guarantee you will have a much harder time winning. You'll be lucky to get any favors on the water, and that reputation will precede you right into the protest room where it is very much a credibility exercise. Like in all other parts of life, "what goes around, comes around."

In the long run a poor reputation will hurt your chances of winning, and a good reputation will help your chances. Maybe in the short term you can ignore hitting a mark and win a race. But even if no one else knows about it, *you* will know. And at some point that will begin to eat on you because you'll know you are cheating.

So I would never say you have

Good sportsmanship

There are many ways to be a good sport, including these 3:

- 1) Comply with the rules;
- 2) Be respectful to your crew, competitors and officials; and
- 3) Be helpful to your competition on shore.

This last point might be as simple as lending someone a life jacket or a boat part. You could argue against this by saying that preparation is part of competition. If they have a broken part, maybe it's their tough luck.

But for me that's not part of the game. If someone breaks their gooseneck, I will try to help them because I consider that good sportsmanship, and it will give us the best racing on the water. That's where the game is for me.

to cheat to win. In fact, as I said before, I believe it's just the opposite. In the long run, you will never be a winner if you cheat.

Do you ever use a code of ethics to guide you while you are a competitor?

When I was seriously competing, my crew and I spent a lot of time working on a general approach to competition. We tried to focus on all the little steps along the way, all the hurdles that needed to be overcome in order to achieve our peak performance. By focusing on our performance instead of the outcome, good sportsmanship came naturally.

In sailing we already have one code of ethics within the racing rules. The four fundamental rules set out the basic behavior that is expected whenever you are racing – render assistance, agree to sail by the rules, be fair and take your penalty when you know you have infringed a rule.

But there's the whole other interpersonal side. That code of good sportsmanship comes from more of an oral tradition that has been passed down. It's what our parents call "Corinthian" sailing. Recently I've spent more time working with sailors and other athletes in the area of sportsmanship, and I've written down what I believe is a proper code of ethics. We use this in the Junior Sailing Association of Long Island Sound, and we have a similar code of conduct for sports at my school (*see sample*).

One reason why people leave the sport is because they find that the other people they are racing with aren't the kind of people they like competing against. They just don't like the atmosphere. This has nothing to do with the racing rules or the cost of the sport; it's the way people compete that either attracts you or turns you off to the sport.

Can sportsmanship be legislated?

I think rules can influence behavior, but they don't have much effect on attitudes, at least in the short run. And for me, a truly good sportsman is someone with a good atti-

A code of ethics

In every athletic contest I will strive to win, but always within these high standards for conduct and good sportsmanship, regardless of the team level, the score, or the opponent.

- I will treat other people as I know they should be treated, and as I wish them to fairly treat me.
- I will regard the rules of my game as agreements, the spirit or letter of which I will not evade or break.
- I will treat officials and opponents with respect.
- I will accept absolutely and without quarrel the final decision of any official.
- I will honor visiting teams and spectators as my own guests and treat them as such; likewise I will behave as an honored guest when I am competing away from home.
- I will be gracious in victory and defeat.
- I will be as cooperative as I am competitive.
- I will remember that my actions on and off the field reflect on me and the organizations I represent.

This sample code of ethics was written for another sport, but it could easily be adapted for sailing. Try it for yourself and/or the rest of your team.

tude. But social psychology has shown that, over time, behaviors can influence attitudes. If you make someone behave in a certain way, you may eventually get them to see the benefits of that behavior, and you can change their attitude.

This can work with sportsmanship. If you raise people's consciousness by writing rules about good sportsmanship and the consequences of poor sportsmanship, then over time they will begin to behave that way, and hopefully their attitudes will change.

I don't think people like to be poor sports. And in our sport, the vast majority of sailors aren't – that's one of the cool things about sailing. Unfortunately, it only takes one person in a fleet to start a snowball rolling. That person starts pushing the rules or gets a little mouthy, and others feel they have to follow suit, even though they'd rather not.

Can't someone also have a positive effect by setting a good example and being a role model?

Definitely. I'm a big believer that one person *can* make a difference, especially if they get a group to talk about sportsmanship issues. For me, the best way to change behavior is not through rules, though I think rules are important. The best way is to have the people who are racing each other agree to a code of ethical behavior among themselves.

Everything is about choice. At any given time in a sailboat race you have choices to make, not only about what to do with your boat, but about what you are saying and so on. If you pass all your options through the "good ethics" filter, then everything will be great. But if you consider unsportsmanlike options, then you're going to get into trouble. The key is to keep making the right choices. •