

Set goals, keep learning and have fun!

This article was written by David Dellenbaugh and is reprinted from Speed & Smarts newsletter.

Sailboat racing is supposed to be fun, and usually it is. There are the rewards of figuring out a shifty windward leg, the thrills of high-speed planing reaches, the beauty of being outside, and good times with your competitors.

Unfortunately, there are also times that feel less than satisfactory – when you capsize at the jibe mark, when your skipper makes a tactical error and starts yelling at you, when you bang the corner and end up way behind, or when the weather turns cold and wet. The challenge is to turn these negative experiences into positive ones and learn from them so they won't get in the way of success and fun the next time.

It's not surprising that psychological factors have a large effect on racing. Sailing well requires that you figure out many variables at once, and this may pose a greater challenge than any other sport.

The good news is that this makes every race uniquely challenging; on the other hand, it also means the mind's tricks and quirks come more into play. When you depend on sharp, creative thinking to get around the race course quickly, any extraneous mental blocks or flare-ups are bound to slow you down.

It is surprising, then, that we concentrate so much on tuning and tactics, but so little on how to deal with our doubts and feelings. Only recently have some top sailors enlisted the services of sports psychologists to help them get around the buoys faster. These champions know that even if they have the fastest boat in the world, it won't help them if they're “psyched out.”

While most of us don't have access to a sailing “shrink,” there are many things we can do to foster a positive, reflective mental approach to racing. And this effort may actually help improve our performance on the race course more than anything else.

Develop a mental game plan

To figure out where you should go, you have to begin with where you are. Think about yourself and the time you spend sailing. Which parts of the sport are most enjoyable? What are your strengths and weaknesses in racing? If you had a magic wand, what would you change about your involvement in sailing? How do other sailors view you? Getting a clear picture of yourself in the present will help you focus on the future.

The next thing you should do is start thinking about goals. The most important thing to keep in mind is that you have the potential to achieve your highest goals. Don't sell yourself short. Whether your objective is winning everything in sight or having the best time of your life, you can achieve almost anything you put your mind to. If you don't believe this, at least accept it as a working assumption; it will ensure that you don't settle for false limits on yourself.

Set your sights on a goal

Achieving any goal is simply a matter of figuring out what to do (we're all smart enough for this) and then having the determination to get it done (this can be a little harder). For example, we know from experience that most of the skills necessary for winning races (pre-paring the boat, figuring out the wind, executing good tactics, etc.) can be learned. It therefore follows that becoming a very good sailor can be achieved with sufficient learning and practice. You just have to want it badly enough. (There are, of course, certain physical limitations. It would be difficult, for example, for a 200-pound person to become a champion 470 sailor.)

With the preceding in mind, think about specific goals that are important to you. Then make a written list or chart (see below). Begin with longer range objectives, and then figure out a step-by-step program of short-term goals to move you in the desired direction.

For example, if your ultimate goal is to sail in the worldwide match racing circuit, you might start by organizing a campaign for the national match racing title next year. You could bring in guest skippers to practice starting tactics with you. During the winter, you might learn the rules inside and out. Besides providing a tangible measure of success, having goals like these will give you confidence and keep you moving forward.

Of course, the scope and nature of the goals you set are affected by the amount of time and money you have to invest. It would obviously be difficult to wage a successful Olympic campaign if you have a full-time job, three kids, a dog and a mortgage. This doesn't mean you have to give up competing with the best; it just means your expectations must be geared to reality.

Even if you do have the time and money to compete at the top, it's a good idea to look for the many other rewards of sailing: making friends, conquering the elements, learning, relaxing and going fast. As Charlie Brown said when his baseball team lost their season opener 123-0 and the players wanted to quit, "It's not the winning that counts. The fun is in the playing."

Take a learning approach

Whatever goals you choose, the key to achieving them is learning. As you are sailing, watch every race with a detached, objective point of view, as if you were floating over the course in a blimp. This helps you store valuable information in your memory files and keeps expanding the experience on which you can draw for future decision-making. Once you've crossed the finish line, here are some ways to reinforce what you've learned:

- * Review every race. Sit down briefly with your crew or skipper at the end of each day and go over the racing. What went well? What did everyone learn? What should be done differently? Give every crew-member at least one compliment, and write your ideas in a notebook.

- * Keep a learning log. After racing, write down what you learned about weather, tactics, boathand-ling, speed and so on. This will make you more aware of learning opportunities, and you'll find yourself returning to the dock with a lot to write about.

* Focus on solutions. When something doesn't go your way, figure out how to change it next time. Don't complain or blame. Addressing the question, "What can be done to get better or solve the problem?" will be most constructive.

This learning and evaluation process is a continual one that should include an occasional review of progress made toward the goals you've set. There's sometimes a fine line between goals that are too easy to reach (and therefore don't mean much when you attain them), and ones that are too difficult (which invite feelings of failure). Finding the middle ground where goals are challenging, yet not impossible, is a trial-and-error process that takes time. Don't be afraid to modify expectations of yourself or to set new goals when it's appropriate. Good luck! •