



Find time to make better decisions

One thing that makes sailboat racing fun and unique is that there is so much to think about. Most sailors have to make hundreds of decisions during the course of any single race. It's the quality of these decisions that separates the top sailors from the rest.

According to the dictionary, a *decision* is "the act of making up one's mind; determination by making a judgment." How do sailors make wise decisions? You need to create an environment where it's easy to make up your mind and exercise good judgment.

In my experience, the critical element is time. The more time you have to make a decision, the more likely it is that you will end up making a 'good' or 'correct' decision. Less time means rushed judgment and lower odds of making a decision that leads to success.

A business analogy

This phenomenon is evident in almost every area of life. Consider two bosses who each have to hire a new employee. At Company A, the boss has three weeks to find a new person, but at Company B he has only three days. Which company is more likely to get a better employee?

The answer is Company A, of course. Boss A has time to interview a lot of candidates and to call the best ones back for second and even third interviews. She can learn a lot about each applicant and take time to evaluate them all carefully.

Boss B, however, is much more rushed. He doesn't have time to interview nearly as many candidates nor to get to know any of them very well. He might get lucky and find a great hire the first day, but the odds are against this.

How to gain more time

In sailboat racing, more time also produces better decisions. Imagine that you are sailing upwind on port tack, for example, converging with a

starboard tack. You must decide how to keep clear of them, and this decision is important because you will end up going either toward the right side of the course (if you duck S) or to the left (if you lee-bow S).

The question is: Are you more likely to make a better choice if you first become aware of S five seconds before there would be contact, or 30 seconds earlier? If you don't see S until they are five seconds away, you won't have time to think. You will just have time for a knee-jerk reaction, and your odds of going the right way strategically are not much better than 50%.

With 30 seconds, however, you will have time to review your strategic plan and quickly discuss the situation with your teammates. This gives you a much better chance of coming out of the situation headed in the right direction (see page 7).

The key, then, is figuring out how to increase the amount of time you have for critical decisions. Of course, just having extra time does not guarantee that you will make more good decisions. But if you use that time wisely, you'll improve your odds. Here are some ways to buy yourself more time and to use that time productively.

1. Define your goal(s).

Before making any decision, you have to know what you are trying to accomplish. In sailing, that's usually pretty easy – your goal is to win the race, or to do as well as you can. But it's not always so simple.

For example, let's say you are leading a regatta going into the last race. Your goal for the first beat of that race might simply be to round the windward mark in the top ten, which means you need to avoid taking big risks like breaking a rule or sailing to the wrong side. This goal should affect almost every decision you make on that leg.

Here's another example: Near the end of the race, as you are sail-

ing up the final beat, are you trying to pass the boat(s) in front of you or stay ahead of the boat(s) behind? Your answer will have a big impact on the decisions you make as you approach the finish line.

The point is that you should set goals for each race (or leg) and use these as a framework to guide your decision-making. Having goals will not buy you more time, but it will help you use the time that you do have more efficiently.

2. Keep your eyes open.

The most obvious way to create more time for decision-making is to do a better job of anticipating the decisions you will have to make. One common mistake for sailors at all levels is getting into situations where they have to make instant, unanticipated decisions.

In the classic port-starboard meeting upwind, how many times do sailors become aware of the starboard tack only after hearing a sudden hail of "Starboard!" from



JH Peterson photo

behind their jib or genoa? When this happens, it means you won't have enough time to make a good decision about how to keep clear.

To improve decision-making, keep your collective heads out of the boat. Look around and discuss potential situations that might develop. Keep asking yourself questions like, "What should we do if we can't cross that starboard tacker?" Or, "If the boat to leeward of us tacks, will we tack or duck?" By thinking ahead and formulating 'contingency plans' (action plans to handle situations that might arise), you will buy yourself time and improve the quality of your decisions.

3. Make a strategic plan.

In addition to knowing your broad goals for the race, you should always have a strategic plan to guide you. A strategy is your plan for how to get around the race course as quickly as possible (in the absence of other boats). It could be as simple as "play the left side of the first beat," but it also might need to change at any time because wind conditions are always changing.

An updated strategic plan is very helpful for decision-making



because it gives you a road map of where you want to go. This is critical when other boats get in your way. Even if you don't have much time to make a decision, you can always go with your strategic plan.

For example, say you are on port tack and all of a sudden you hear "Starboard!" from a boat you hadn't seen. Without a strategy in mind, you instantly flip a mental coin, tack or duck, and then hope that you made the right choice.

When you do have a strategy in mind, your decision is simpler. If you prefer the left side, avoid the other boat by tacking. If you like the right, bear off and duck. This gives you a much better chance of exiting in the right direction.

If you're not sure about what your strategy should be, go with a reliable rule of thumb. For example, sail toward the next windshift, or get onto the longer tack to the next mark. These principles can be very helpful for making decisions.

4. Collect information.

In order to make good decisions (i.e. decisions that have a high chance of success), you must always have a clear picture of your situation. For example: Where is the best wind pressure? Is there current? How will the wind shift next? What are the other boats in your fleet doing? How does your boatspeed compare to your competitors?

If you don't have good answers to these questions (and a bunch more like them), it will be difficult to make quality decisions. So collect information, and do this constantly because things are always changing. Ask your team questions like "What do you see on the left?" and "Which boats are gaining?" When you have a good understanding of what is happening around the race course, it's easy to make decisions.

5. Identify your options.

Before making any decision, it's good to get all your possible options on the table. For example, let's say you are racing upwind on port tack and you're not sure you can cross a starboard tacker approaching.

What are your options for how to keep clear? A quick brainstorm will produce at least four choices: 1) Bear off and pass behind the other boat; 2) Try to cross in front of the other boat; 3) Tack into a close lee-bow position; or 4) Tack farther to leeward of the other boat.

Once you know these options, it should be relatively easy to make a decision if you have previously set goals, gathered information and made a strategic plan. Of course, you won't have time to brainstorm options before every decision, but it's a great idea if you have time.

6. Evaluate, learn, improve.

After each race, try to look back at the key decisions you made and review these with your team. Were they good decisions, or bad? Look at the process you used to make them and figure out what you can improve. Evaluate and correct your decision-making process just as you would any maneuver.

The best sailors usually make a lot of sound decisions. They are not right all the time, but the overall quality of their decision-making is quite good. That's what your goal should be – to make incremental improvements in the quality of your decisions. Create an environment (by doing the things mentioned on these pages) where each decision you make has a slightly better chance of working out. If you can improve your success rate (from say 70% to 80%) for the hundreds of decisions you make in every race, you will see a noticeable improvement in your racing performance. •

One of the main keys to good decision-making is anticipation. If you round the windward mark and then choose your strategy for the run, for example, you will be way behind the game. Instead, start planning this half way up the beat so as you round the mark you know whether to exit high or low. Decisions that are made quickly, at the last moment and with little thought are generally not good decisions. For the best results, start thinking about each decision as far as possible in advance of when you actually have to make it.