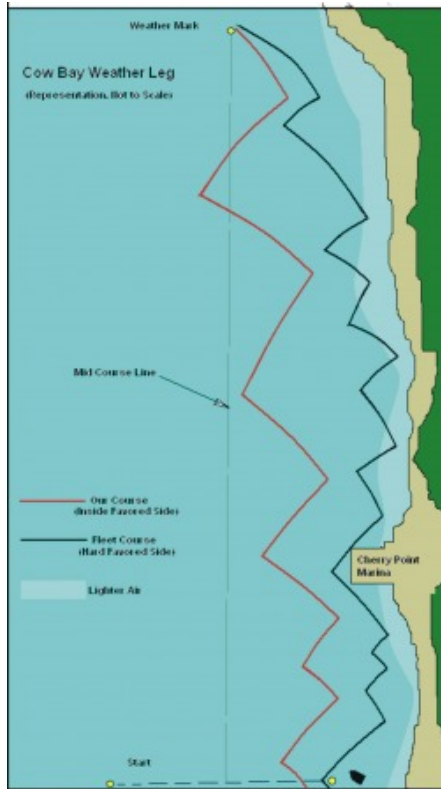


## Cow Bay Alex Fox Notes

### The art of sailing - Playing the inside by: Sailing writer Alex Fox



Playing the inside of the favored side of a race course on the upwind leg has its risks and rewards. Making it pay off can require patience and a little bit of luck. Recent regatta experiences have led me to the conclusion that it's really viable strategy, but there are a few things that need to happen if this particular plan is to be successful. Here's a rundown of recent experience at Cow Bay regatta and some of the lessons learned.

Cow Bay is certainly one of my favorite regatta venues and this year (2010) I was really looking forward to the competition in the Martin 242 fleet. Historically the racing there features windward leeward courses, set close to shore, and the weather legs invariably involve some short tacking up the beach. There are the two typical reasons for this: number one is the geographic lift on starboard tack close to the shore and the second is some current benefit or relief closer to shore. Sure enough, soon after the first start signal, we were tacking onto port and headed for the beach. We found ourselves in amongst the lead group of boats and we were surviving, just barely. Our speed seemed to be in the ballpark with the frontrunners, but we were having trouble with our tacks. I suppose this wasn't too surprising, since our primary jib trimmer was new to racing Martins. The timing it takes to slam the jib home before it fills and the mechanics of moving across the boat, takes some

practice. Unfortunately I wasn't taking this into account and I found myself getting a little bit frustrated and distracted. Net result was poor steering and the inevitable slide back into the fleet. Mixing it up just wasn't working for us and it was about that point that I realized we needed to make a change in our strategy. Maintaining the status quo would only have resulted in us getting swallowed up deeper and deeper, so that was quickly ruled out. The knee-jerk reaction in cases like this is often to abandon the favored side in a random search of more wind, a shift, or other such miracles. That seemed a little desperate since this was after all only the first beat of the first race. The more sensible option seemed to be trying to limit our tacks to fewer than our immediate competition, while staying in touch with the favored side. A few interesting things began to happen as a result of this. Number one was that I began to steer better and the boat was going faster. Number two, the crew were able to settle into their roles because of less pressure. Our tacks improved due to more setup time and we could choose to tack in the lane we wanted. It was easier to focus on the best pressure or a favorable shift, and things began to work out. These factors, combined with a bit of good fortune, found us in place third around the weather mark. We picked up one boat on the run and were threatening the lead at the beginning of the last beat. Again we were drawn into short tacking the shore and into a tacking duel with the lead boat. It didn't take long to figure out that we were once again coming out on the short end of the stick. We were able to hang onto second but challenging for the lead was another thing all together.

So, a satisfying start to the regatta but some questions remained about the best way to approach the weather legs and lots of unanswered questions for race two. Was the strategy of limiting our tacks a good one, or did we just get lucky? Could we get our tacking to the level we needed to compete at the top level? Was the crew planning to mutiny and refuse to sail, if I didn't shut up and let them do their jobs? These questions and more would likely be answered in race two. The pressure was certainly on, as we approached our second start. The committee boat end was favored by a considerable amount, say ten degrees. Combined with the draw of the beach, pretty much the entire fleet was stacked up at the committee end with forty seconds to go, everyone was early with sails luffing. Our plan was to start with speed to leeward of the pile up. Hopefully get bow out and be able to tack for shore soon after the gun. Keeping with the strategy of limiting our tacks, we wanted a little space to allow us to put the bow down and sail fat and fast on port tack. Another consideration was that we wanted room and time to setup for either a lee bow or a dip on the boats coming off the shore. This strategy at first glance may seem a bit defeatist, but it was part of our overall strategy to be in the top three or four boats around the weather mark. The allure of the shore was like crack to an addict, as one by one the fleet tacked onto port and headed in. We were the last to tack and from our vantage point, it was clear that the *early in boats* were doing well. We had good speed and clear air, so I wasn't unhappy with our position. As the leaders began to tack off the shore, they looked pretty good. It looked like the lead boat might cross us by two to three boat lengths. As we converged, our only option was to tack in underneath and slightly bow out. Soon they were peeling off back into the shore again and we extended for another five boatlengths before tacking. This lead group

was still looking pretty strong as we all headed back towards the shore on port. However, we had made up ground on the second group of three or four boats, so the plan seemed to be working alright. The trailing group of boats were also on the shore side, but they had even less opportunity to be able to take advantage of the shift or the current due to disturbed air and extra tacks while fighting for a breath of clean air. Even amongst the three leaders there was a certain amount of messing each other up going on. The third place boat was now starting to fall back to us as they persisted in chasing the shore advantage. The above scenario repeated itself several times up the beat and we were happy to remain in contact with the leaders. Eventually we were able to cross the third place boat and consolidated our gains to round in the top three one more time. The idea of hanging in there while not getting within ten boat-lengths of the favored shore seems impossible, but it worked, so let's evaluate the possible reasons why.

- 1) Stacked up start line: With the bulk of the fleet going for the favored end, what happens is that only one or two boats will actually get the great start. Even then, they may be advantaged by position only and not actually up to full speed when the gun goes. The rest of the boats are in a congested pack, slowing each other with dirty air. By starting a little away from the mess we were able to hit the line at full speed, getting a little jump, more than making up for the fact that we were the last to tack onto port.
- 2) Clear unimpeded lane into shore: Avoiding heavy traffic meant we didn't have boats trying to squeeze us all the time. We were sailing at a higher average by being in clear air with the ability to foot fast.
- 3) Fewer tacks: We were able to stay in clear air for the majority of the leg. This gave us lots of time to prepare when we had to tack. We weren't hell bent on getting to the shore, meaning fewer tacks minimizing losses.
- 4) Outside the melee: Being just out of the fray was a bit like watching a *sh\*t fight* as opposed to being in the middle of it. This different perspective made it easier to see what was really paying off and what wasn't. This meant less stress, more focus and probably less energy being used as well.

As the second race progressed the wind built into the mid-twenties making for a fantastic downwind leg. After some searching for the leeward mark, we maintained our third place for the final slog to the finish. Fortunately for us the two leaders insisted on bouncing us back out every time we tried to make our way to the shore. After two or three tries the path of least resistance was calling our name loud and clear. Each extra tack was taking its toll on the crew so it was an easy call to put the traveller down and just give er for the pin end of the line. This had turned into a two hundred yard drag race for all the marbles. We're getting closer to the line and also experiencing a gradual lift. Now we were just laying the pin and there was no good reason to tack. Nothing to do but hike hard and keep her flat as we're down to three boat lengths from the line. There were still no horns, so the other boats hadn't

crossed yet. Two boat lengths, hike harder, one boat length and horn. Wow, that was us! Glancing over my shoulder, the two leaders were well to windward, but because they'd put in a couple of extra tacks we'd gotten bow out on them and just managed to pip them at the favored end of the line. Nice work!

We continued to use the play the inside of the favored side strategy throughout the rest of the regatta and it generally served us well. There were of course a few occasions when the strategy was a break even or even a losing proposition. In order to minimize this we needed to keep an eye on a few things.

1) Equal or greater pressure: There were definitely occasions when the shore was favored but there were also times when the inshore boats would experience wind holes or lulls. The pressure off the shore tended to be steadier. This made up for the inshore current and shift advantage at times.

2) Less traffic: Fortunately we were mostly by ourselves in this strategy and that made it easier to keep the boat going. If more boats had joined us it may have been more difficult to make it pay off.

3) Counting on the extra tacks: If the inshore boats indeed put in a greater number of tacks, some of them down speed, then we were OK. When the inshore boats sailed efficiently they could realize the benefits and we were bound to lose some distance to the leaders.

Cow Bay is but one venue and on the long windward leeward one design courses you'll inevitably be doing lots of tacks. In this particular case we were able to tailor our overall strategy to our strengths and weaknesses as a crew, by limiting our tacks and maximizing our boat speed potential. It wasn't a *Hail Mary* approach, when things weren't working out, but a conscious adjustment to the racing conditions. So next time you're having a difficult time competing, maybe take a look at making a subtle change in your mindset and strategy. Look at the pros and cons of any changes you make and reevaluate as the racing progresses based on real information and results. Good sailing and I'll see you on the water.