



PHOTO PETER NEWTON

The Sailing race

As our 'new to sailing' series continues, **Rupert Holmes** takes you step-by-step through the essential elements of the sailing race...

At risk of stating the obvious, the three key elements of any sailing race are the start, the course and the finish. Same as for any other kind of race, right? Almost, but the sea (and even inland waters for that matter) don't lend themselves to marking out an obvious and continuous racecourse as with a running, motor sports or horse racing track.

Instead, we normally sail one or more laps around a series of marks – typically buoys – which can be arranged in a wide variety of configurations. The simplest of these has only two marks – one at the windward end of the racetrack and one at the downwind end. This creates a 'sausage'-shaped course with a windward leg followed by a downwind leg.

As we can't sail directly into the wind, our actual track will be a series of tacks from the start line towards the windward mark. On the downwind leg some boats will head directly to the leeward mark, but others – particularly modern fast planing designs – will usually sail a further series of zigzags to maximise their apparent wind. Although this involves sailing a greater distance, it is more than compensated for by the increase in speed.

The second common course shape is a triangle. Again this typically starts with a windward leg, which is then followed by two broad reaches, with a gybe at the second corner of the course. Sometimes the sausage and triangle courses are combined, doing one and then the other on alternating laps.

Both these courses give excellent racing, particularly when the windward leg is accurately set as a true beat. However, it relies on the efforts and skill of the race officials to set the marks for each day of racing and if the wind shifts during the day, they must be re-laid. To facilitate the race officers' task, many clubs lay permanent marks, which are then used to find the closest fit to an ideal course, which makes racing much easier to organise. Of course, when you have a large number of marks that are already laid, it's possible to devise courses of many different shapes, although for most classes both the challenge and fun factor are maximised when legs are either a true beat or involve using the spinnaker.

Part of the challenge of racing any sailing boat is that it's a very tactical activity – positioning (and continually repositioning) yourself to

maximum advantage in relation to other competitors, at the same time as taking advantage of any changes in the wind direction is vital to success. Most opportunities to gain places (or lose them!) are on the windward legs, hence the popularity of courses that start in this manner.

Conversely, two-sail reaching legs are very frequently a procession, with little chance of overtaking those in front. This is why they are generally not a feature of sailing courses, although they may be encountered on some longer distance races, or where there are restrictions on where you can sail: such as in narrow rivers and estuaries. Another situation in which two-sail reaching may be involved is in offshore races, or those that involve sailing around an island. Such races are often popular for the challenge they represent and the fun of taking part, even though the wind may not cooperate with creating a textbook course for good racing.

The start and finish

A good start counts for much more time than the handful of seconds it gives you at the outset of a race. One important reason for this is that those at the front of the fleet sail in a much cleaner and less disturbed wind than those towards the back, hence the front-runners can relatively easily extend their lead.

The starting sequence is signalled using a combination of guns (or hooters), whistles and flags. Five minutes before the start, a gun and class flag indicate the 'warning signal'. Technically it is the deployment of the flag that signals the exact time. The reason for this is that on long start lines it can take several seconds for the sounds to reach to the far end of the line, however for most purposes this is not a problem and most sailors rely on the sound signals. At four minutes before the start the 'preparatory signal' is indicated with a second gun and code flag 'P'. After this time outside assistance is prohibited and vessels may not use any power other than the sails – so dinghies can no longer be paddled and yachts cannot use their engines, even if conditions are almost calm.

One minute before the start a further signal is sounded, usually using a whistle. At the start, a further gun or hooter marks the start of the race. If any boats are over the start line (i.e. on the course side of the line, or OCS) when the starting signal is made, a second sound signal will be made to indicate that there are competitors that must return to the correct side of the line before continuing to sail the first leg of the course. Occasionally, if a large proportion of the fleet is OCS, a general recall will be signalled and the starting sequence will begin again from scratch.

Ideally the start line will be laid so that it's exactly perpendicular to the wind direction, which sets the fleet up for the first windward leg. Although in practice this can be difficult to achieve and there is normally a bias towards one end.

The start line can't be inked onto the water in the way that the start line for a running race is painted on the ground. Instead it's an imaginary line between a buoy at one end and the mast of a committee boat or onshore flagstaff at the opposite end of the line. Equally, in a sailing race

there's no such thing as a standing start as with a Formula One race, for instance. At the start gun you want to be just behind the line and sailing at full speed, but judging this accurately can be difficult for even the most experienced. Don't worry about occasionally being over the line at the start, if you're never over it's a sign that you're consistently being too timid.

When starting from a fixed line, with one end on shore, the line may not be perpendicular to the wind, in fact you might start on any point of sail. This is quite common at many clubs, which use fixed marks and a fixed start line for ordinary club racing.

With laid triangle and sausage courses, the finish is often part way up the windward leg, or at the windward mark. A windward finish adds to the challenge, very often keeping the results open until the very last moment. As with the start line, the finish will be between a buoy and the mast of a committee boat, or flagpole ashore.

The 'Racing Rules of Sailing'

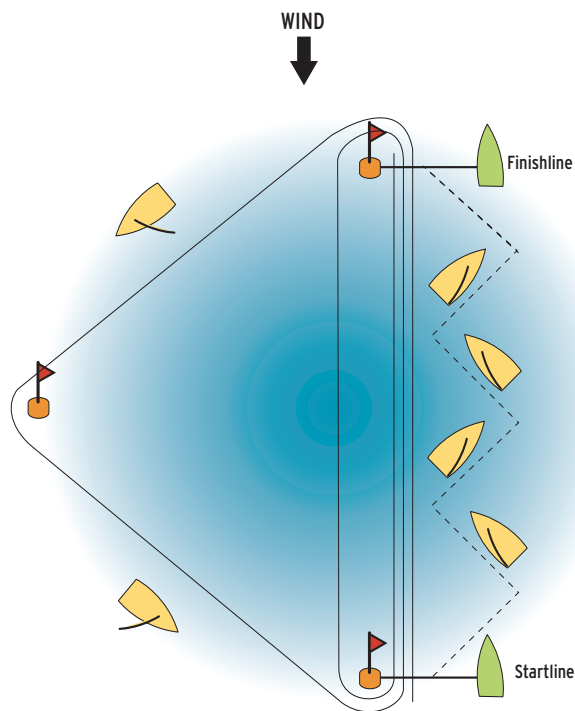
These are internationally recognised and have been developed over a long period of time by the International Sailing Federation (ISAF). They're updated every four years, with the next update scheduled to take effect in January 2009. Here are some of the basic elements of the rules:

- A boat on port tack (i.e. with the wind coming over the port side of the boat) must give way to one on a starboard tack.
- A windward boat must keep clear of one to leeward.
- An overtaking boat keeps clear.
- It's worth noting that the International Regulations for the Prevention of Collisions at Sea apply to boats while they are racing and take precedence over the racing rules – the fact that you're racing confers no additional rights whatsoever over other water users, although some may voluntarily give you room. In addition, a race boat that's not engaged in a race should not impede those who are racing.
- There are also additional rules governing mark roundings: for instance, if a boat's bow overlaps

Below Races are often won and lost on the start, but don't be too eager – someone will be watching from the committee boat to make sure you're not over the line early.



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doesn't accept a penalty, or retire, then the alleged infringement should go to a protest, which will be heard after completion of the race.

In some longer races the penalty is applied as a percentage of the elapsed time taken to complete the course, with two or five per cent being common figures. Either of those figures make for a big penalty in a five-hour race.

Sailing instructions

These are the specific instructions that relate to a particular event or series of races. They will include the method by which the course is communicated to competitors, and the starting procedures to be used, in particular the location and layout of start and finish lines.

In addition, the SIs define any deviations from the Racing Rules of Sailing. Common areas in which there may be changes include the procedures for penalties and protests, as well as starting sequences.

Who organises racing?

The overwhelming majority of racing in the UK is organised and run on a grassroots basis by the

“ At the start gun you want to be just behind the line and sailing at full speed ”

Above A typical 'triangle and sausage' course, with a beat, run, and reaches.

Below Mark roundings can get busy, so it's worth reading up on the rules of the road.

Further information:

www.rya.org.uk
www.sailing.org

the stern of the boat ahead two boat lengths from a mark of the course, the leading boat must give the other room to round inside.

The full rules can be found on the ISAF website at www.sailing.org/racingrules.php although it's well worth buying a book that also explains the rules.

Penalties

Boats who acknowledge infringing a rule can take a penalty, which usually involves making two complete turns, although this is often modified by the sailing instructions. If the offending boat

members of individual sailing clubs. Race officials are usually enthusiastic volunteers, many with a huge amount of expertise in this field. Most clubs also rely on the competitors themselves in this respect, with active members asked to act as a race officer, or crew a safety boat, for one or two days each season.

Almost without exception, clubs are affiliated to the Royal Yachting Association, the sport's UK governing body, which organises racing and other boating activities at a national level, including training schemes and coaching programmes. They include courses for race officers and safety boat drivers. In turn, the International Sailing Federation is the worldwide body that governs the sport of sailing.

Your first race

If you've not raced before it may be worth observing a couple of races at your chosen club that involve the class of boat you will be sailing, if possible with an experienced commentator. This will help to crystallise the various different elements of the race in your mind, giving you a better picture of what you'll be aiming for once you're out on the water.

Try to avoid confrontation and stay out of trouble – it will take a while for your judgment of close-quarters situations to develop, and it also takes time to build up an in depth understanding of the rules. In any case, it's a good principle to follow as getting (metaphorically) entangled with other boats is usually slow and is something the best sailors in a fleet will try hard to avoid. ■



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