

2015 US Youth Champs Debrief

Congratulations to everyone who was selected and competed in the US Youth Championship in Bristol, last week. There were so many amazing performances throughout the week, and I can't wait to see the results that this level of competition here in the United States will produce on the international stage – keep pushing each other! As the fleet coach, I spent a lot of time looking at the full range of skill levels across the fleet, and hopefully you all came away from the event with a few key points to work on in practice. In this debrief, I will focus on strategy and tactics, which played a big role in the outcome this weekend, but for those of you who are looking for input on boat speed, boat handling, or other techniques, I encourage you all to check out the instructional video section at www.McBrideWilsonSailing.com, and browse through our past debriefs in the Sailor Resource section.

Strategy

In the past I have written a little bit about the process of refining your strategic process, and I have suggested a three part process involving (1) identifying important course considerations, (2) formulating and executing a game plan, and (3) evaluating what actually worked after racing. In this debrief we'll look at how that process applied to racing at the Youth Champs.

Considerations

Over the course of the four day event, we saw at least as many wind directions, several different sea states, significant current variation, land effects and shorelines coming into play, and many more factors, which needed to be accounted for in creating a mental model of the course. As a result, it was important to start collecting data right away. On the sail out, it was helpful to determine which direction the current was going, and whether one side had better pressure. Finding a partner to sail out with, and share information with was very useful, and allowed you to check several research items off before you even arrived on the course.

Doing a course split was a very important piece of information this week, especially if you could get multiple boats involved.

My list of considerations looked something like this:

- Course skew – look upwind at the windward mark and determine the long tack
- Current gradient – check buoys, course split
- Cloud/wind correlation – significant relationship between clouds and pressure on day 1
- Starting line skew
- Starting line length – most important in final race, when line was longer
- Pressure – texture and color of the water
- Sea state – is there more or less chop on one side

Execute Your Game Plan

This was one of the main topics during our debriefs this week, and bad races could usually be attributed to one of three mistakes: failure to create a game plan, failure to execute your game plan due to boat handling or timing, or the lack of discipline to stick to a game plan. For those of you who have not yet heard Grant Sphanhake's talk on strategy, one of the main points that he makes, is that while 70% of Olympic sailors understand tactics and strategy in theory, only about 20% actually remain disciplined, and execute their game plans on a regular basis.

This was especially critical on the venue at Roger Williams, as the pressure often built as you got into the sides of the course. Especially on day one, I saw many teams jockey for position at the boat end, and then remain on starboard tack all the way into the left side of the course. There are some circumstances in which this would be okay – for example, if the boat end was particularly favored, or if you thought that there was a geographic right shift with left pressure – however, I spoke with many teams who liked the left for pressure, and still set up at the boat end.

Frequently, I believe that teams did not push to start on the side that they liked because they were not confident in their ability to execute a clean start from that position. I think that at the next few domestic events, as a group we really need to take the opportunity to push hard to be the first boat to execute the game plan even if it means fighting for the favored end. At the international events in the next few months, getting a clean start anywhere on the line will be more difficult than winning the favored end in the small fleets that we have been racing in, so we need to build our confidence, sense of time-distance, and acceleration skills before we see international competition.

Finally, we need to be more disciplined in sticking to our game plans, even when circumstances don't go our way. If you like the left, but get shot out at the start, often times it pays to find a mediocre lane back left, instead of ditching your game plan all together and going left. To make this happen, it often helps to have a "plan B" figured out before the start: what will you do in the event that you have to bail out at the gun? If the pressure is uniform, maybe your plan B is to tack and play the opposite side, but more often this week, the best plan B involved clearing out very briefly before looking for a sneaky lane to get back to the side you wanted to win.

Post Race

While many of the races from last week are still fresh in your minds, I would encourage you all to document the previous two items (considerations, and game plans). The final step in the learning process is to try to then analyze what actually happened, and figure out why it was the same or different than you expected. For example, if you saw current gradient across the course, you saw a skewed windward mark, and you saw a square starting line, and all of these things prompted you to make a game plan to go right, did it work? If not, was it because you missed a consideration? Was it because you were wrong about a consideration? Was it because you just didn't execute well? If you are disciplined about always executing your original game plan, this final step of the process will provide you with tons of takeaways to begin building your mental archive of strategic knowledge.

Keep It Simple!

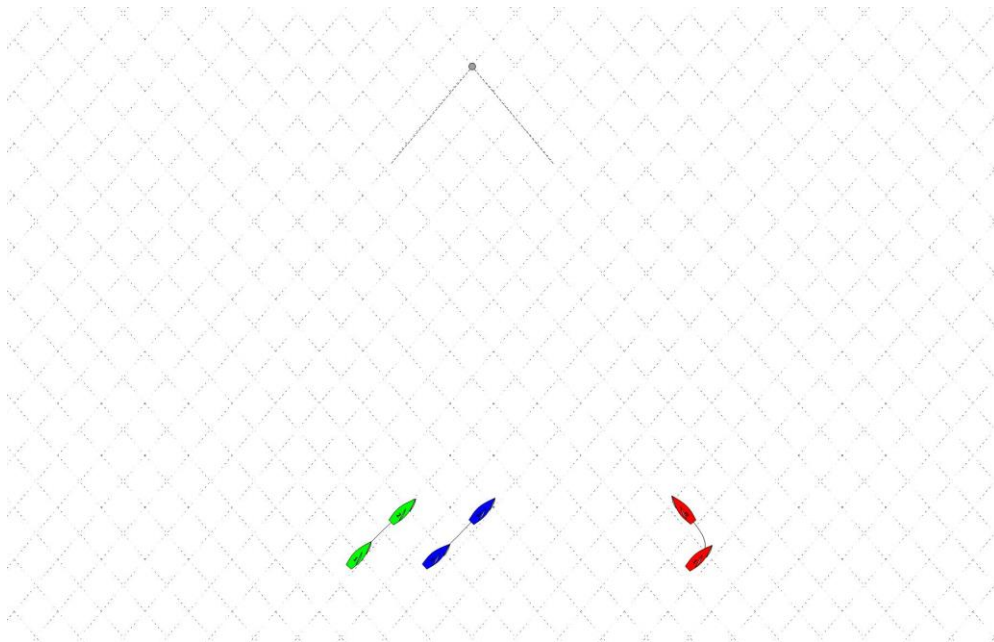
My last comment on strategy is on the importance of simplicity. There were so many variables this weekend, and often times it was impossible to work through them all systematically. As you build your mental archive of strategic knowledge, it is important to cultivate trust in your intuition. On several occasions this weekend, I think teams got too focused on trying to reason through all of the variables, and ended up missing the big picture changes happening on the course.

Teams who kept it simple, controlled the fleet, and focused on winning their side, almost always rounded the top mark in the top 5. In the end, averaging a 3.5 won the regatta, so if you could pick off one or two more boats in the next three and a half legs, you were in good shape!

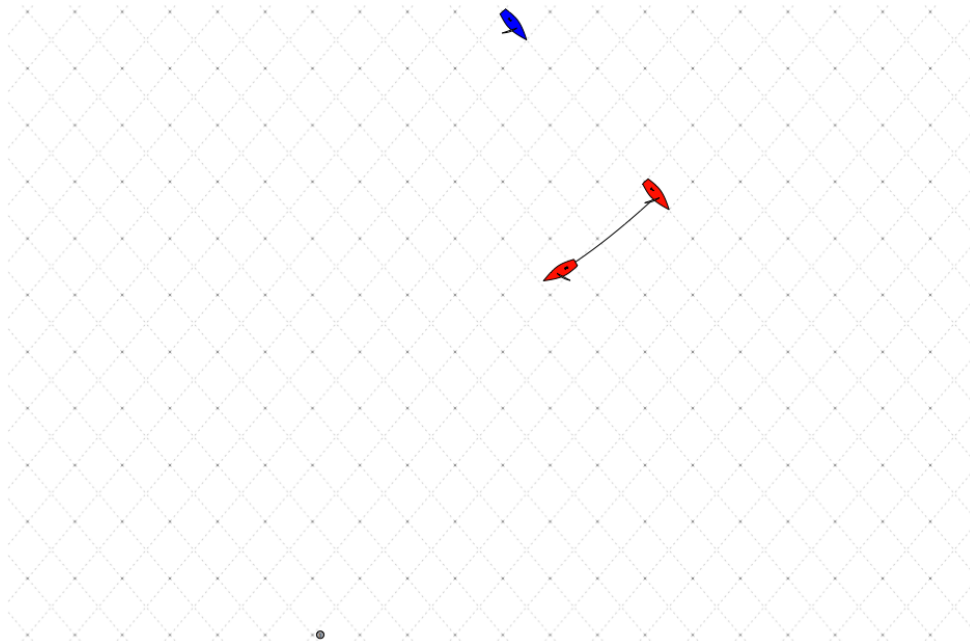
Tactics

Playbook Play UW 5: Stay off of laylines upwind and downwind

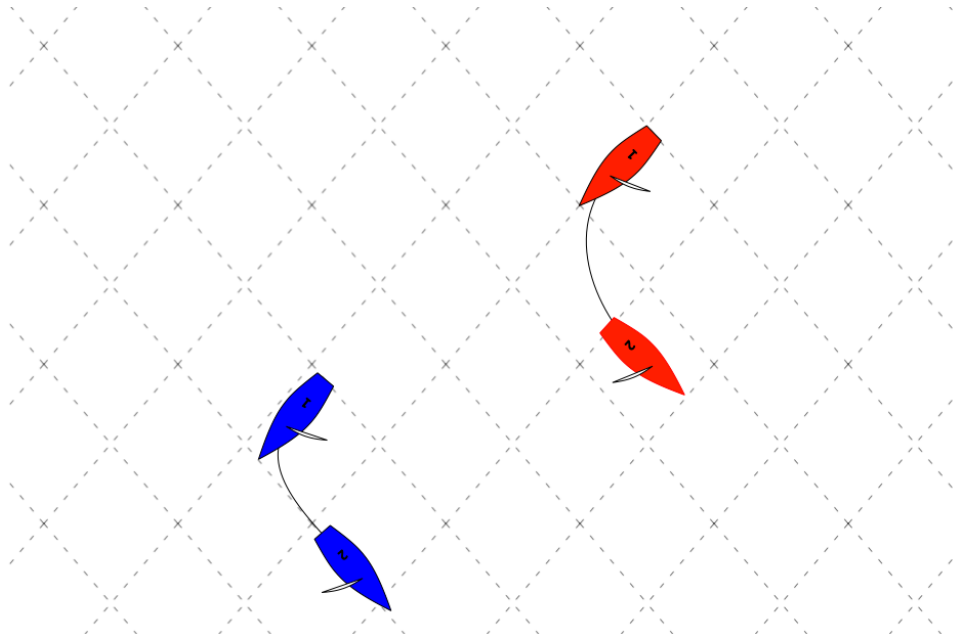
(especially important near cats this week)



To keep options open later in a beat, and ensure that lead boats won't tack on her, Red should avoid getting to layline until the last 20% of the beat. To accomplish this, tack back early and center up on the course. If you like the right, you can lead nearby boats back later in the leg. Consider getting to the layline even later if there are more boats in front of you than there are immediately around you. More analysis of this play will be available in the online playbook soon.

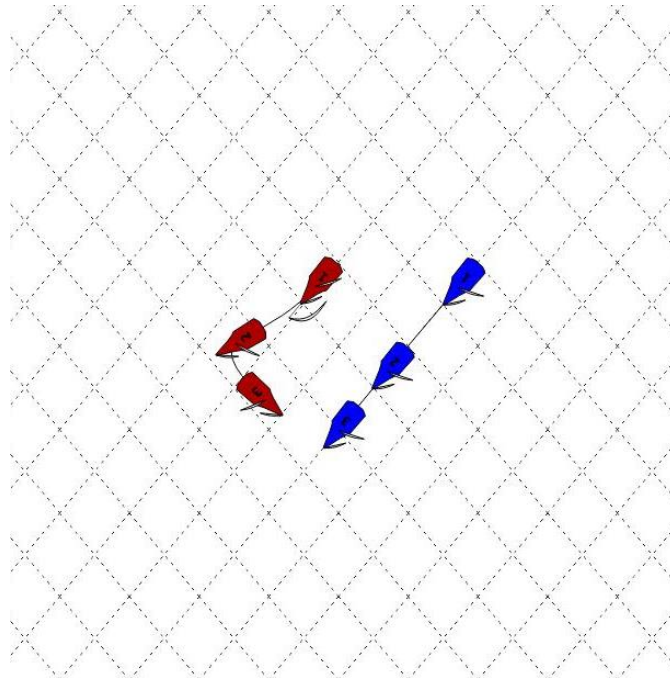
Playbook Play DW 1.1: Stay between your competition and the mark

Red should lead back towards the mark before Blue is tempted to gybe back with them so that she can get in between Blue and the mark. At position 2, where Red has gotten to the mark side of Blue, if Blue has extended towards the right (looking upwind), then red should gybe back to keep her bow forward of Blue, and to minimize leverage, but there is a good chance that Blue will gybe with Red.

Playbook Play DW 5.1: Jump the boat ahead unless separation is large

In scenario DW 5, Red is setting up to jump Blue on the next gybe. This is the high percentage move, as Red maintains contact with Blue, and remains in control of her destiny, but the farther ahead Blue is, and the closer to the finish the pair get, the more difficult it gets for Red to affect Blue's air, so the longer it will take to make the pass. At a certain ratio of distance from the line to separation, Red should gybe away, and look for opportunities on the other side of the course to come back with starboard advantage. If Blue rounds the top mark with a lead >8 boat lengths, the leverage should be created immediately by gybe setting, but if Red is in touch, she should pursue Blue as long as the lead does not grow to more than 8 boat lengths, or the distance to separation ratio doesn't shrink below 1 boat length per 50m to the finish line.

DW 6.1: Escape from pinning leeward boats early on the downwind



As you get closer to the finish, or to the leeward marks, controlling your competition with starboard advantage becomes more powerful, so it is important for Red to break the leeward pin as early as strategically possible (i.e., if the left looking upwind is going to pay, she should wait until later in the leg, but still execute the play before layline). To break the pin, Red should heat her angle up to create space with Blue, and then gybe aiming straight at Blue. Blue will be forced to either gybe early to protect the starboard advantage, or cross ahead, and hope to make enough of a gain to be able to cross Red later.

Tactically, the correct move for Blue here is to gybe ahead of Red, to lead back right (looking upwind). At this point, if the port gybe angle is on lay line or below, Red should keep her angle hot to try to roll Blue. If the port gybe angle is above lay line (i.e. at least one gybe left before the finish), Red may consider sailing a VMG angle to set up for the next jump, depending on how much starboard will be left.

For more plays and tactical ideas, check out our playbook online, and follow our monthly playbook updates by subscribing to our newsletter.