

Racing Strategy on Lake Washington
With Wayne Balsiger, Sandy Pratt and Keith Whittemore
Corinthian Yacht Club
April 9, 2007 7:30 – 8:30 PM

Tonight we plan to talk about racing strategy on Lake Washington. We will cover various wind directions including the NW wind, the ' BilGates' wind, the SW wind, the SE wind, the Easterly wind and the Westerly wind as well as mention some dead spots and great spots for lifts.

Introductions

Sandy Pratt is starting his 60th year racing on the lake. Sandy sailed El Toro, Flatties, I-14 and is now a T-bird sailor, Sandy won the 1975 T-Bird Internationals at Shilshole.

Keith is starting his 46th year racing on the lake in a Thistle. He sailed Penguin and C-Lark. He is just back from finishing 5th in the Mexican J-24 nationals and winning the last two races of the J-24 worlds.

I am starting my 26th year of racing on the lake, with a few regattas in years before I moved here. I first sailed Penguin, then C-Lark, a Laser and mostly a Thistle sailor. I have finished 13th in Nationals and won the Pacific Coats Championships. At MidWinters West, we finished 2nd in the President's division.

So we have 129 years of experience here.

Let us begin with Sandy Pratt talking about the NW wind

[This is from Wayne Balsiger. Sandy and Keith's versions follow at the end.]

The NW wind

The NW wind often occurs with fair weather, and is an oscillating wind. There is a shore affect so you generally want to go left and get the header. Tack too soon and boats that went farther to shore are now inside of you and lifting.

After the weather mark, going right (as facing downwind) often works better. Jibing to Port can work. It depends on how big the snow fence is and if you see any wind or puffs coming straight down the lake.

After the leeward mark, staying on Port is safe, clearer wind, and maybe a header before the layline for the finish. But often taking soon after the mark and going left will find a header on starboard, allowing a lift on port layline, but watch for all the dirty air below the start line and boats on the run.

For a second weather leg, it often pays to go right, but left can also pay as you may get a header and lift over by the west shore.

Also, some times you see two winds on Lake Washington at the same time.

The ' BillGates' wind

My rule of thumb is if your bow is pointing at Bill Gates' house on Port tack, it is a good night to go right. You are likely to have a header on Port, slightly better wind, and a lot less boats around you. But the left side will look great and may beat you to the mark. This is obviously a north wind.

Downwind, going left (facing downwind) can pay as the wind is right shifted and puffs come in from the east side of 520 bridge.

The SW wind

This wind is one of the several Lake Washington winds where there can be two winds at the same time. Going hard right to shy of the layline is very safe. You will get lifted as you go up to the mark.

However, the guys that go left and hangout for a long time on starboard often get a header and come in with good angles to the mark.

The SW wind is one where you can be on port pointing 20 degrees below boats above you to your left.

The SE wind

The wind bends around Mercer Island so going toward the island on starboard is good, expecting a header, and then tacking to port lifted into the mark.

Downwind, staying east can see puffs but watch for wind on the right. If going to a leeward mark, usually leave the start line to port, but going left can pay as the angle around the finish line maybe better.

Light SE wind

Light SE wind, can have two winds in middle of the lake. I once went around the now leeward mark up by the tennis court with a quarter mile lead (even took a picture). We were pointing straight south toward the finish, but Marty Seelig and others came around the mark, went east and got into a new wind a little bit east of where we were and sailed around us as they won the race.

The Easterly wind

This is always a light wind with very big shifts. It is like a big cats paw splaying out from Meydenbauer Bay around Dabney point to the north and Mercer Island. Look for wind strength, go left or right, but not up the middle and hope you pick correctly.

Downwind, left (facing downwind) south tends to do better. On the second weather leg from Leschi to the mark or finish, south is safer, but watch for winds from the left side. You don't always want to leave the line to port.

The Westerly wind

This is also a shifty wind. The fleet will split, half going south and half going north. Keep an eye out for wind as the first to see it will pay off. The 'breeze' may be slightly stronger near shore. Going north you may get a header and be lifted into the mark. Hope the wind holds and you beat the southern boats. Going south, you likely will get a header near the mark, but hope you had more wind first to beat the northern boats.

On the run, go for wind strength.

On the final beat, going onto starboard is usually closer to the mark, and then later cross back to the north.

Dead spots and great spots for lifts

Sandy knows all these spots so let's start with him.

Near Leschi moorage can be light, so some people avoid it.

Any questions?

So there you have it, the racing strategy on Lake Washington. Thanks to our panelists, Sandy Pratt, Keith Whittemore and myself Wayne Balsiger, and thanks to all of you for coming.

Racing Strategy on Lake Washington—by Sandy Pratt

General

Wind velocity can be read by the darkness of the water or the number of white caps on windy days. Wind direction on Lake Washington is altered by the land surrounding the lake. The water is relatively flat on Lake Washington between the two floating bridges which means less mainsail twist is required than on Puget Sound.

Preparation for Racing

---Scrub Bottom

1. Get to course 30 minutes before Preparatory signal
2. Tack up the course and write average compass headings for port and starboard tacks on bulkhead. Set halyard tensions, outhaul, backstay and Genoa fairleads.
3. Fly spinnaker back to start line to be sure lines run free.
4. Check start line by going head to wind on extension of the line and sighting across a bulkhead or traveler track.

Starting

1. Plan to start 2 to 3 boats from the favored end of the line.
2. Plan to have room to leeward for acceleration during starting.
3. If someone gets a safe leeward on you during the start heel the boat to weather. This gets your sails away from the leeward boat so he cannot get a lift from you. This also loads up the keel which helps get you to weather of your competitor.

North West Wind

After starting it usually pays to go left. A header will come as you approach the Seattle shore. The air is often dead to close to shore on a North Westerly. Keep track of the lay line so as not to over stand. On Falcon my crew tells me where we are relative to the lay line. I tack when we are at 2:30 o'clock position relative to the boats centerline. When an oscillation heads you boat there is an opportunity to tack to port and clear boats that were on your hip. We plan to tack back to starboard about 10 boat lengths from the mark..

After rounding we concentrate on getting the spinnaker flying and staying in clean air. A hitch on starboard jibe helps to get clean air. We jibe on headers and try to avoid sailing dead down wind unless the boat is going hull speed.

After rounding the leeward mark I think that the Medina side of the lake usually produces better results

for ¼ to ½ mile. There seems to be quite a header and less velocity going toward the Seattle shore.

Bill Gates wind

This is usually a warm clear day with the wind coming in at compass headings from 330 to 005 degrees (North to North North East). Velocity will appear highest on the east shore so you want to go to port tack to pick up lifts off the eastern shore.

South West Wind

It is possible to get a lift by going towards Mercer Island on starboard. It is also possible to get a lift by going in towards the Seattle shore. Any course up the middle is not likely to pay off unless there are multiple direction changes which does not often produce a first at the weather mark.

South East Wind

Continue on Starboard tack after starting until headed by air off Mercer Island, Then tack for weather mark.

Easterly Wind

Usually starboard to lay line for weather mark is a good plan. This is a light fluky wind. Look for dark water and go where the wind is. Seldom is up the middle good here.

Westerly Wind

This is a light fluky wind also. Usually head south to the lay line or more is good. By looking at the water you can tell if there is any wind near the mark or on the other tack.

Lake Washington Racing By Keith Whittemore

General

There really only two true breezes in the Seattle area, they are northerlies and southerlies, the rest are transitional. Off the coast the wind is mostly westerly and in good weather it comes down the straights as a westerly sea-breeze and heads south down the sound as a

Northerly. In bad weather the southerly comes through the Chehalis Gap and works its way North.

The winds on the lake (and sound) are very much affected by the land masses they need to work around. The Northerlies are more consistent because from where we race, the end of the lake to the north is much further than to the end of the lake to the south. (Harry likes to use his old sails on southerlies as he feels speed is not what wins races in southerlies)

The lake is a great learning place to sail because you can see the wind on the water unlike a lot of other places. There is not too much boat traffic on Tuesday nights.

We always get out early and do about ten head to wind checks at the center of the line to check the line and get a feel for what the wind is doing. From the middle of the lake you can see the flag on the Two Union Square building. This is a great indicator.

The lake is the lake and corner shooters will always win "some" races. The goal is to win the series not the race. Tundra Rose likes to go up the middle and hit shifts but in some conditions you just need to be in certain areas. In these conditions we still try to work the shifts but favor and protect these favored areas.

Northerlies

(Good weather Northerlies always fill from the sound so you can get a good idea what will happen by calling a friend with a view of Puget Sound)

NW – Bow is pointed at the West bridge pass or further West of that.

This means that the breeze is filling from the West and there will be a port lift inshore up the beat as you approach the tennis club. This is because the wind is coming from the northwest and it can flow through the lower terrain that is north past the tennis club. It is more north to the south by the moorage because it funnels down the lake in these areas where the hills are very high.

It will be lighter on the beach.

The "lane" is the key, too far out and boats get lifted off you, too far in and you run out of air. The port layline is tooooooo far.

Down wind you want to get off the shore but this can be difficult with the boats on the lay line. If you have a big westerly shot, sail real low.

North – Bow is pointed at the middle of the bridge.

This means that the breeze is mature and you can go either way with the shifts but it is safer to favor the left side.

Down wind you work the shifts and puffs.

(If the first beat is short you need to be cautious not to start too far down the line for fear of not being able to cross the boats when you want to tack back to the mark)

NE – Bow is pointed at the East bridge pass or further East of that.

This is not a solid breeze and the most likely change is for it to go west. For this reason we almost always go left and try to start where we can hold our lane. The boats that get forced right usually come out way behind.

There is less wind to the right.

Down wind you want do a bare away to go out in the lake but at times boats will jibe quick and jump you. Also a westerly shift will hurt so it is a bit risky.

Finishing – On that part of the lake it almost always pays to go right. The guy's forced left do extra tacks, are in the wakes and wind shadow of the boats coming down wind and somehow those damn dreaded Thistles are always causing trouble around the committee boat part of the finish line. There are a lot of things you can do in a pack to go right, such as slowing down, going below the guy in front or doing a "coast up" after the mark. Likely you will pass boats in front of you that were forced left.

Southerlies

(Southerlies are much puffer because the wind is coming down from above over the hills. Puffs hit the water and spread out like a fan. You will get lifted up both sides of the fan. If the puff is above you, there will be a lift. If the puff is on or below your bow, you will get headed. Keep the puffs over your forward shoulder. (Watch the clouds they will give you great indications of what is happening!)

SW – Bow is pointed at the West bridge pass or further West of that.

This means that the breeze is filling from the West and the puffs will likely be starboard lifts. (Lift and wind.. good !) In general just below the starboard layline is a good spot but depending on where you are in the fleet it is easy to go too far and this is real bad.

It will be lighter on the beach.

The “lane” is the key, too far out and boats get lifted off you, too far in and you run out of air.

Down wind you want to get off the shore but this can be difficult with the boats on the lay line. If you have a big westerly shot, sail real low. (We tend to do bear-away’s on the first rounding and gibe sets on the second when the fleet is spread out more.

South – Bow is pointed at the middle of the bridge

This is a solid southerly and you can hit the shifts but favor the direction that you think the wind may go (or come from)

One side will win but if that is live and it will not be by that much. We tend to protect the right.

Stay in front of the puffs and hit the shifts.

SE – Bow is pointed at the East bridge pass or close to that.

We hate this breeze as it can be all over the pace as the wind works its way around Mercer Island. We like right to get back out in the lake but have had a lot of boats lift off of us.

The “lane” is again the key, too far west and boats get lifted off you, too Far East and you run out of air.

Down wind you want to get off the shore but this can be difficult with the boats on the lay line.

Finishing – On that part of the lake it almost always pays to go a bit right. After the mark you need to go straight at least until you get above the traffic.

Starting – Because Kevin is very good and knows the lake well, if the wind is coming from an “odd” direction he will set up the course and line to where he expects the wind to shift to. (He is correct a lot) If it does not shift likely the line will not be good and you can have a one tack beat so you need to be ready to tack. An example of this is on a south easterly the pin is likely favored as it will be Kevin’s expectation that the wind will go west. In this condition many times we have taken the pin, tacked and laid the mark.

The 'Fake Winds'

Easterlies and due Westerly's during the sailing season are not real. They are transitional and are a pain to sail on.

Westerly's

The breeze is likely filling and is falling over the hill. We always favor the side with the most wind and the side that we believe the wind will head. This is checked by the flag on Two Union Square Building. It is very light inshore so you need to come in to the mark hot and fast.

For downwind, take the gibe that gets you off the beach fastest.

Finishing – Same advise as upwind.

PS: Westerly's can go either way...

Easterlies

This is our least favorite breeze to sail in (it is not real) we always favor the side with the most wind and the side that we believe the wind will head.

Finishing – Same advise as upwind.

PS: Easterlies go south a lot

Other notes -

- Get down to the boat early
- Clean your bottoms (Starbright, Cheap Diver and Swim)
- Check your rig every race day
- Always put your spinnaker up before the race
- Get out of the back of the boats

- Down wind we have someone stand up by the mast and call the puffs so the helmsman can concentrate on driving.
- Start towards the favored end but not in the jam ups as there is more that will be lost than gained and as you are picking your line location, think about the first shift.
- Have someone continually watch to see if you are gaining or loosing (Falling in or lifting off)

J-24's

- Helmsman should almost always be forward of the traveler

Thunderbirds

- Bow person should be lying low and not standing in front of the mast