

# dealing with the handicap fleet

Much of the dinghy racing in Chichester Harbour takes place in handicap fleets. In this year's racing tips, *Mark Rushall* explains how to win in a mixed fleet



## Dealing with the handicap fleet

Take a well tuned boat, finely honed boat handling, merge with the strategic tips from the last five years' *Harbour News* and a sprinkling of tactical advice available from the variety of books and magazines in chandleries, and you'll be well on the way to winning both dinghy and keelboat class racing at any of our local sailing clubs.

Not all of us who race in the harbour are lucky enough to have a class start, or even other boats of the same class to race against. Though handicap racing has long been part of the culture of British dinghy sailing, there are few published words to help those of us who prefer to sail the class of our choice. Here are a few hard earned tips.

**key advice is: don't get distracted from the bigger picture**

## Keep out of trouble!

If you read no further, write this down and repeat out loud whenever approaching a busy leeward mark! When sailing in a class fleet, it's obvious when an individual luffing or covering duel - or a log jam at a mark - is distracting us from the 'big picture'. In a handicap race, every boat length's diversion from the fastest route - and every unnecessary manoeuvre - is time given away to the faster or slower boats.

Keep thinking: just how much time is a defensive manoeuvre going to waste, compared with sailing a low line and

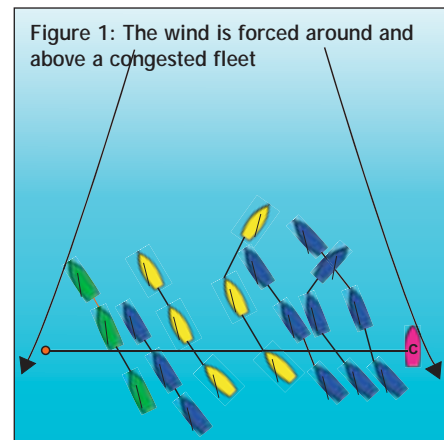


Figure 1: The wind is forced around and above a congested fleet

letting the faster boat quickly past. If a bunch of faster boats is approaching as you round the windward mark, make an early detour well above or below the rhumb line so the faster boats can come by causing the minimum of distress. But whatever happens, don't get involved in a protracted luffing/covering match, unless you are sure that there are no other boats close on corrected time in the big race!

## Plan according to the class mix

Emsworth based Chips Howarth has a well earned reputation for achieving success in handicap races, as well as being Fireball world champion:

*'I ask myself: how big is our rig compared with the other boats I am starting with? If I'm sailing my Fireball against 505's or 14's, I feel that the overall effect of the wind being forced above and around the edges of the fleet has a major effect on my relatively small rig (Fig 1). I therefore plan to get much closer to the sides of the course than I would in a single class start, even overstanding the windward mark if it is a big fleet. I always start near the end of the line, and sometimes even start on port tack at the starboard end if there is a*

*gap, so I can get quickly to the side of the course. Playing the shifts up the middle of the course never seems to work for the smaller boats, whereas if I've got the biggest rig in the fleet, it's not such an issue.*

*If I'm the fastest boat downwind, especially in an asymmetric boat, I'll avoid the middle of the run. The smaller boats are like obstacles, just waiting to slow you down. I'd rather gybe off and go the 'wrong way' down the run than try to weave a way through them.*

*'And to keep out of trouble means more than just knowing your rights. It's all very well approaching the leeward mark with rights but if the slower outside boat doesn't appreciate just how much room we need for a gybe/drop, it's going to be a mess. If he is going to wait until two boats lengths before he starts to react there is not going to be room: I'm better off dropping early, following him round, and explaining the rules another day!'*

## Think ahead, and remember your strategy

Small boats are usually more manoeuvrable, and often faster to accelerate than bigger ones. But a perfect pin end start in a Solo is no good if the RS 400's just squeeze up behind and to windward and prevent a tack over to the favoured right hand side. If our strategy is to avoid the main tide, it's even worse when they roll forward and give us dirty wind all the way to the slack tide on the left!

Ian Porter from Emsworth Slipper has twice won the Glyn Charles memorial pursuit race in his Wayfarer, as well as many other harbour handicap races.

*'I apply the same basic rules as for a class race: check out the line, work out which side of the beat will be favoured. In the harbour that is usually a tidal factor. I then look out for what the faster boats look like they are planning. I'd probably go for a slightly more conservative start so I don't get forced away from the 'right way'.*

An example might be a beat across Pilsley, where the left hand side of the beat is favoured. Rather than starting right at the pin end, and getting sailed over by all the faster boats, one could start to windward of them, half way up the line, on a nice line transit. That would give a clear lane all the way to the favoured side of the beat: a better bet than a boats length's line bias gain followed by half a beat of dirty wind!

*'In pursuit races it is easy to get caught up with the boats in your fleet. But you do have to remember your overall goal: if it is to win the event not the class your tactics have to be more bold: covering the Wayfarers into the strong tide in the middle of the channel may ensure a win in the fleet, but it won't help the race against time and handicap with the rest of the fleet. To win overall be prepared to be bold, and if you are ahead of the other boats in your class, keep pushing to maximise the other external effects (tide, wind bends, etc).'*

### Every second counts

In a class race, we tend to work harder at those manoeuvres when there are other boats nearby: we leave the spinnaker drop later trying to gain or break an overlap, we work hard on the perfect 'wide in, tight out' rounding to give a small advantage over the boats around at the leeward mark. But if we are in a nice space, we'll make a more conservative drop, overstand the windward mark a little rather than risk two extra tacks, and so on. In handicap racing we can't afford to relax in this way: that overstand may be just enough for the Finns to beat us on handicap! Handicap races are often won and lost by seconds.

There is always an opportunity to save time at the finish line. If it is an upwind finish, try to establish which is the end of the line furthest from the wind (if the line looks easier to cross on port tack, the favoured end will be the starboard end!). Aim to finish at that end, and depending on the weight of the boat, around one boat length from the line, luff to head to wind. A perfectly timed 'shoot' of the line shortens the distance to sail to the finish, and can gain those vital seconds on corrected time.

### The Moth factor

A hydrofoiling Moth is so much faster than every other boat on the water that an extreme defensive tactic is the only way to keep out of trouble. Simon Payne from HISC describes pursuit racing in the Moth:

*'Don't bother shouting 'starboard': by the time they hear you it will be too late! Treat every other boat as if it is a stationary obstacle: your job is to find the most efficient way around the obstacles. And make sure that the race committee know where you are on the course: it's embarrassing to reach the finish line before they do!'*

Similar advice from Mike Lennon, who won this years' Glyn Charles Pursuit Race (as well as the Prince of Wales Cup) in his International 14:

*'My first concern is the class race you have with your own fleet - you have to win that to win the handicap race. But then there are the basic passing manoeuvres; climbing through the other classes efficiently can help with your own fleet struggle.*

*Very slow boats: take the shortest distance to get round them, windward or leeward as you go past so much quicker the dirty air of a leeward pass has little or no effect.*

*High pointing keel boats: pass to leeward if approaching from astern or slightly to windward of the stern line. High pointers don't leave much dirt*

*for faster low pointers. Trying to pinch round them to windward can be very slow Large groups of slower boats: avoid at all costs! Look well ahead and try and stay to one side of them - in light air the windward side is imperative.*

*Approaching marks: If possible, try to plan the mark approach to get the inside berth: it is often easier for the bigger faster boats to sail through dirty air to this favoured position tactically. But in stronger winds not getting too involved is often the fastest way to the front.*

*After the mark: Work out which is the favoured tack or gybe before you get there. If you want to 'gybe set' don't get to windward of a line of RS 200's! Look for a gap on the approach and slow down if necessary to get in it.*

*Down wind: In Fed week, finding a clean line where you can sail your boat to its optimum can be difficult. You have to look a long way down the course and try to anticipate where the boats coming up wind are going and thus where they might tack. This can be difficult when you are not all on the same course. A good rule of thumb is if the tide is under you going down wind the boats coming up*

Consider the Moth Factor!



Keep a watch out for bigger boats rounding the race mark just behind you



toward you will try and stay out of the channels, and visa versa. Fast asymmetrics have a very narrow optimum downwind angle: the slightest luff above this angle and you are on your ear with no visibility and sailing much further for little more speed. To bear away slightly from this angle means huge deceleration and the apparent wind moves aft. So you end up slower and not much lower. The clean line down wind can gain you many yards on boats in your class, and big chunks of time on handicap.

Bear in mind how much faster than you the boats around you are sailing. Sometimes you hold on too long before tacking only to find when you do, you cross the boat you were worried about comfortably.'

### Tacking, ducking, and waving

There is little point an Optimist trying to lee bow a Flying Fifteen! The Fifteen will sail straight past, and deliver a big bag of dirty wind as it does so. But an Optimist which ducks a Flying Fifteen loses at least three boat lengths: catastrophic compared with ducking another Oppie! Depending on the beating strategy, there are a couple of less painful alternatives:

Sail high and slow: As soon as he knows he has to alter course, the slower boat sails high and slow for a couple of boat lengths. Rather than giving away distance, he has traded speed and gained a bit of height. As soon as it is clear that the big boat is clear, he resumes normal best upwind course (Fig. 2).

Tack early: He tacks at least four boat lengths to leeward of the faster boat. If he chooses to keep going on starboard, the bad wind effect is much reduced. Alternatively he can tack back onto port before it even arrives.

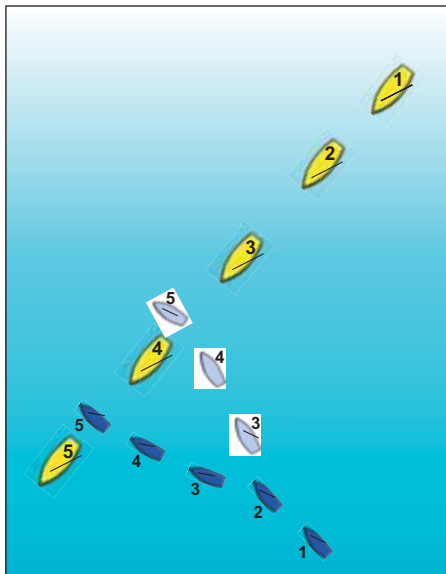


Figure 2: By sailing high the Optimist can wait for the Fifteen to go by

Wave them on: Though it may be very satisfying for an RS 400 to slow an Osprey down by calling starboard and forcing it to tack, it will hurt in the long run. Eventually the Osprey, with its big rig, will be up and running: it is not fast enough to disappear before the lee bow effect starts to hurt. Unless the boat on starboard tack definitely wants to tack, a clear wave and early 'carry on' call, and a duck of a couple of feet is much less painful. And the Osprey might return the favour next time round!

### Know the angles

Every class has an ideal downwind running 'vmg' angle, which may vary depending on wind strength. Lasers sail straight down the run, or even sail by the lee. Asymmetric boats sail much higher angles, which get deeper as the wind increases. When running in mixed fleets it is really important to be aware of the characteristics of the boats around,

including the faster ones behind, and the slower ones ahead. For example, a Laser should always avoid getting stuck to windward of an RS 200. However the overlap was created, the Laser has to keep clear and will get forced off its fastest course, losing time against the clock. It's not in the RS's interest to get into this situation either: the spinnaker will collapse and it will take an age to get clear: all the time the clock is ticking!

### Keep an eye on the clock

If we know how many minutes per hour our major competitors allow us (or we allow them) we can get a rough check on the overall situation half or three quarters of the way through the race. By now, hopefully, the fleets are more spread out, and strategy becomes more than just finding clear lanes. If we look like we are well ahead, we might sail a little more conservatively: tacking (or gybing) before we hit the shallows: keeping a loose cover on the other boats in our fleet. If we are behind, we can push a little harder: we've nothing to lose! If it is close, remember that seconds mean places in handicap racing: a really slick spinnaker hoist, or a windward mark overstand, could make all the difference.

### Enjoy!

Let's finish with a couple more tips from Ian Porter:

*'And never give up: even if your handicap calculations tell you that other classes have an advantage half way through the race, remember that a change in wind strength can easily negate this advantage. But if you do find yourself on the wrong side of everything, just go out and enjoy it!'*