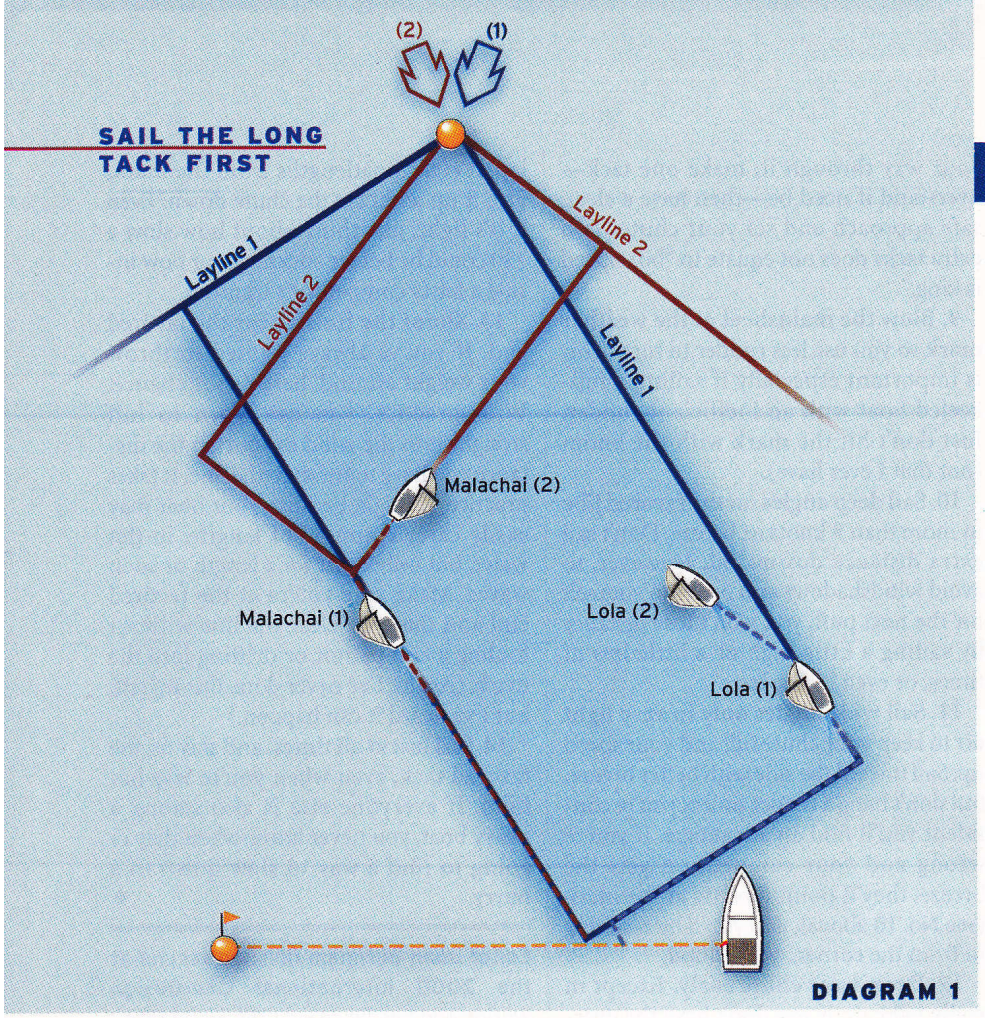

DIAGRAM 1

By sailing closer to the mark, Malachai sails less distance than Lola when the wind shifts.

STRATEGY BY JOHN ALOFSIN

Keep it Simple Upwind

IN JUST ABOUT EVERY SPORT, IT'S EASY TO GET caught up in the minutia and overlook the basics. Consider the golfer who can't hit the ball straight: Often the solution is sought using high-tech clubs, mental imaging, or biomechanical analysis when the answer is simply keeping one's head down during the swing.

Similarly, sailors who aren't doing well tend to look for solutions in new gear, complex tuning tips, or intricate local knowledge. In doing so, they often ignore basic strategy. If this sounds familiar, consider three essential tenets of upwind strategy that are most often overlooked. Take a step back and focus on these concepts; your game will improve and you'll realize there's no substitute for a strong dose of common sense.

Sail toward the mark

Rarely is a racecourse perfectly square. So, before the start determine the course geometry by assessing whether the windward mark is to the left or to the right of the true wind direction. Once you've done this, remember: Always sail toward the mark. Strategy doesn't get more basic than this, but I'm amazed at the number of sailors who sail away from the windward mark for one reason or another. The adage, "Always sail on the lifted tack," is another way of saying, "sail toward the mark." After all, the shortest distance between two points on a racecourse is a straight line.

If a mark is set to one side of the course, you'll spend more time on one tack than the other. If the windward mark is set to the left side of the course, starboard tack will be what we call the long tack. If the mark is set to the right side, port tack will be the long tack. What's the long tack? Well, simply, it's the tack that puts your bow closer to the mark. The rule of thumb is to sail the long tack first. This works for two reasons: By sailing on the long tack, you'll avoid getting to the layline early in the leg. And staying away from the layline will allow you to better take advantage of windshifts. Consider the following example.

In Diagram 1, the race committee set the weather mark, accidentally favoring the left side of the course. Malachai, who checked the course geometry before the start, knew that starboard tack was the long tack. After starting, he sailed to the middle of the course (1). Lola, on the other hand, tacked shortly after the start and sailed out to the starboard layline (1). When the wind shifted left later in the beat (2), Malachai, in the middle, tacked and was lifted toward the mark (2), sailing on the new long tack, while Lola, having tacked on the starboard layline, is left with two options: She can sail the headed tack toward the middle (Lola 2) or tack and sail to the new layline. Either way, Lola has sailed more distance. Even if the wind shifts to the right as they near the weather mark, Malachai, by staying in the middle of the course, will still sail less distance; Lola will be overstood. In any windshift, a boat sailing on the layline is at a disadvantage.

On any windward leg, if you sail the long tack first, you also minimize the likelihood that you'll have to "hip up" on boats that are already sailing on the layline. In Diagram 2, Morgan is unable to tack ahead of Leona sailing on the layline. He has to duck, sail past Leona into clean air, and then tack on her windward hip—now he's well past the layline. The next boat that comes along is forced to do the same. Eventually this progression results in a pack of boats that have hipped up on the layline (see Diagram 2). These boats overstand and sail extra distance. Also, because

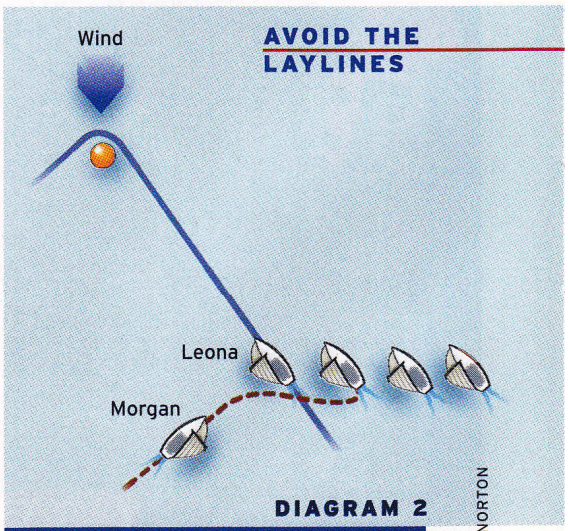

DIAGRAM 2

Morgan "hips up" on Leona and overstands, as will others reaching the layline early.

DAVID NORTON

of the disturbed air and water created by the pack, the boats are sailing slower than the boats that've avoided the layline.

Use the land shift

Evaluating the course geography is the next principle of basic strategy. If you're sailing near land, you must gauge how it'll influence the strength and direction of the wind. As wind passes over land, it slows due to friction. This creates windshadows on windward shorelines. A higher shoreline will create a windshadow that protrudes farther from shore. The lighter the wind, the more pronounced the windshadow effect will be. You can often detect differences in wind velocity by comparing the darkness of the water close to and farther from shore. However, the best way to determine the size of the windshadow is to sail through the questionable area with a tuning partner before the race starts.

Just as friction can slow windspeed, it can also cause the wind to bend or change direction. Wind tends to bend so it exits the land more perpendicular to the shoreline. This bending causes a windshift that you may be able to use to your benefit. In Diagram 3, Chip uses the windshift closer to the shore to sail a lift, while Judy misses out and sails in the unaffected, headed breeze.

Play the current

Most sailors know to sail toward any current that helps and to avoid current that doesn't. How do you tell where the current is stronger or weaker? Generally, current is stronger in deeper water and weaker in shallow areas. Thus, sailing near land usually means less current. Another way to detect current strength is by observing wave conditions. When current and wind are running in opposite directions, wave action increases. In these conditions, above-average chop indicates stronger current. If the wind and current are flowing the same way, then areas with more current will usually be smoother.

Current is often mistakenly ignored if its strength and direction are uniform across the course. If current is pushing boats toward one layline, boats will spend more time on one tack than the other. Although the mark may be directly upwind, the current can skew the leg. As a result, you may find yourself on the layline sooner than expected, which exposes you to the problems discussed previously.

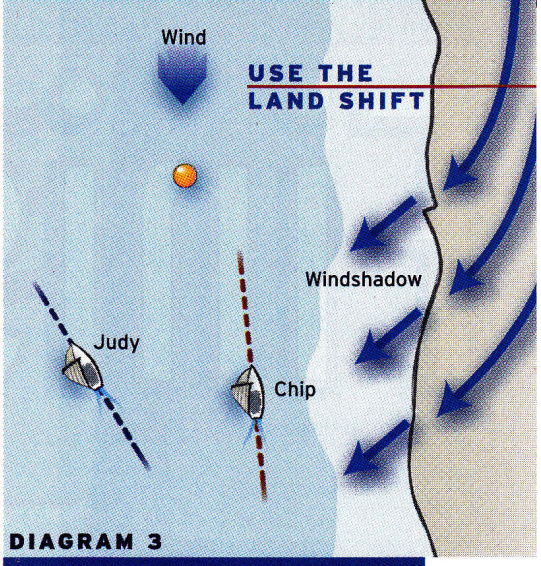

DIAGRAM 3

Wind will shift as it travels across land.

Over the years of crewing for some of the best sailors in the world and coaching some of the newest, I've found that experienced sailors tend to focus on a few simple concepts, and those starting out often try to focus on too many. Whenever possible, limit yourself to one or two reasons for going in a particular direction. If you can make one of the three basics of strategy fit the bill, then you probably have a handle on what's important, and you're probably climbing up the standings. ✦

DAVID NORTON

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