

## Racing in Strong Winds (and staying upright)

So you've **tasted the thrill of reaching on the plane** and now you want to try racing in these strong winds – how do you handle the boat throughout the whole race? These notes are aiming to encourage less experienced sailors contemplating racing who are nervous about joining the fun of the race fleet when winds are strong(er). Also check out the previous article in this series on general sailing in strong winds. Call it “sailing defensively” – the enemy is the wind, not your fellow sailors. The number one piece of advice is to avoid collisions as they could damage your boat, or someone else's boat and you might capsize or have to do penalty turns. It's always safer to go a bit further / slower than to risk a collision – and you will get to the finish line more quickly.

These notes will help you to minimise your chances of capsizing, but don't go on the water if you are not prepared to do so and are adequately dressed for the conditions. Joining a race will mean that a safety boat is available and you can benefit from watching others. This has been written by two laser sailors, but most points apply no matter the boat you are sailing.

1. Can you **reef your boat**, or is there a smaller sail size? Check out reefing details from the class association or another sailor. For lasers, if you don't have a radial or smaller sail, you can reef. Take out the top batten and wrap the sail around the mast at least twice. Pull the downhaul tight. You may need to add a strop between the clew and the outhaul. Pull the outhaul tight.
2. Tighten the **toe strap** and keep at least one foot under it.
3. Sailing defensively rather than trying to maximise speed all the time can pay off if you stay upright when all around are capsized. Forget about roll tacks, roll gybes, covering someone else's wind, centreboard position (except when gybing when it should be half way up) etc, etc – **focus on staying upright and sailing the correct course!**
4. Don't worry too much about adjusting the sail controls and then you can keep your eyes looking out of the boat, looking for the signs of gusts and shifts on the water, and watching out for others. With experience you'll learn when to set your controls on shore and leave them alone (accepting they will not be optimal on all legs of the course), and when to adjust them (accepting that takes your attention away from the wind and moves your weight in the boat which can be risky in strong winds).
5. **The most fun part is the reach on the plane 😊!** Get your weight towards the back of the boat and play the main sheet to adjust for the gusts. In a low boat like a laser or topper, do not have the kicker too tight or the boom will hit the water as the boat heels away from the wind and capsize the boat 😞.
6. **Be ready for gusts to come in a different direction** to the prevailing wind. These changes of direction are known as 'wind shifts.' **Your aim is to adjust your sails / hull direction to the optimum position as the wind changes so that you maintain / maximise speed, point your boat in the best direction, and generally get to the next mark as quickly as possible.**
  - a. If you are going upwind, and a 'shift' hits you, you need to be ready to either:
    - i. **'head' away** from the prevailing wind to avoid capsizing backwards or ending up head to wind because if you don't, your boat would be pointing too close to the direction the gust has come from and you won't be going anywhere, or
    - ii. the gust might **'lift' you closer** to the prevailing wind direction which means you can point your boat closer to the mark you want to get to 😊.  
This is known as being 'headed' or 'lifted'. (Search internet for 'headers and lifts in sailing' to find some useful diagrams of this.)
  - b. If you are going downwind, be ready to let your sheet out or pull it in to catch as much power in your sail(s) as possible, then you can get on a 'plane' (**riding your own bow wave**) and that's fantastic! If you are on, or nearly on, a run you need to be really careful that the boat won't gybe unexpectedly as the wind changes direction. For this reason, **it's best not to be on a run in strong winds.** Consider two broad reaches instead of one run.  
**Always check your tell-tales / burgee and adjust your sails or boat direction to suit.**
7. To help you spot wind shifts, **look at other boats** who are in the area the wind is coming from – you will see them being hit by gusts, or 'falling into a hole in the wind' and then you will be ready

for the same thing and you can be ready to adjust where your weight is / where your sails are / the direction your boat is pointing. This can be really helpful when you are going upwind.

8. Try tightening the downhaul and outhaul but leave the kicker at a halfway setting. Loosening the downhaul off wind and downwind gives more speed and a more stable boat, but is less important than looking out for gusts and other boats and means you have to pull it tight before rounding the mark to beat upwind. With the Laser Radial pull it really tight upwind.
9. Don't worry too much about the **centre board**, except make sure that it is only **halfway when gybing**. Leeway (skidding sideways) is preferable to the boat leaning over as the boom is less likely to hit the water as it comes across. If the boom hits the water, you will probably capsize 😞.
10. If it is really windy and you need to gybe, one strategy is to sit/kneel in the middle of your boat to keep the hull flat while the sail and boom go across; once the boom has swung across let the sail out more than is required so it flaps around (less power), then move onto the correct side of the hull, make sure you are holding the tiller comfortably, and then pull in the sail to be in the correct position – wastes some time, but greatly reduces the chance of a capsize 😊!
11. If you are going up wind hiked out and the **wind suddenly drops**, or you get headed, before the boat capsizes on top of you, steer away from the wind, lean back and let the water take your weight. If you have kept your feet under the toe straps, wait for the wind to pick up and pull you back up. If it doesn't, get out of the boat and turn it away from the wind before getting back in.
12. Up to a certain wind strength, when going upwind, you should have your sail(s) pulled in tightly as far as they will go. This will allow you to point as high as possible into the wind. **Above this certain wind strength** (which will be particular to you), you may find that the wind is still overpowering you and you can't keep the boat flat. If this happens, **let your sail(s) out just a little** (~30cm of main sheet or 10cm of jib sheet should be enough) while keeping your boat pointing in the same direction. Your sail will 'back' just a little bit (the front of the jib, or the luff of the main sail will have wind on the wrong side), and your speed will decrease just a little bit, but you will still make good progress and in the right direction. Importantly, you will feel the boat become more upright and the risk of capsizing will be significantly reduced. Remember to hike out to balance the boat first, letting your sails out a bit is only to be used if moving your weight is not enough.
13. If you are very much overpowered upwind then sail with the centre board slightly raised.
14. When you do capsize, make sure that you turn the boat, if you can, away from the wind so that it does not get blown right over on top of you as it comes up. Check that the mainsheet is free before getting back into the boat.
15. Sometimes when you capsize, the laser's boom ends up vertical. You will not be able to right the boat if it is like that – you need to swim round to the sail side of the hull and pull the sail flat. For two-sail boats, make sure both the mainsheet and jib-sheet are uncleated before you try to right the boat.
16. Look to see how others launch their boats. With winds on shore or off shore this can be a challenge. You may find it easier to launch from a different place to normal. Help others with their trolley and ask for help with yours.

.....and finally, the banter in the bar after a windy race is all part of the fun 😊!!