

From the Experts

TECHNIQUE
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INTERVIEW
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Getting off the Line, A Bowman's Perspective

IN SAILBOAT RACING THERE ARE THOSE WHO "do bow" and those who simply own the bow, particularly when it comes to starting big keelboats in rush-hour traffic. The master of the pointy end shoulders a great deal of pressure as the prep flag drops and boats pile on top of one another. Call the line right and the bowman is a hero; pull the trigger too early and he or she must live with the consequences for the rest of the race.

"Regattas are won and lost by one or two points," says Curtis Florence, hailed as one of the world's best bowmen by Rolex Yachtsman of the Year Terry Hutchinson, "and that makes starts pretty important."

Florence, 39, a Farr 40 and Mumm 30 world champion bowman, knows how to get his team on the line and off and running. After witnessing his prowess onboard the Farr 40 *Barking Mad*, we pressed him for his insights on how to conduct starting-line affairs from the front of the boat.

In the pre-start, what's the best way to make sure the front of the boat knows what the back of the boat intends to do?

At about 3 to 4 minutes, go back to the mast, look at the tactician, and ask, "What's your plan?" You want their ideal starting strategy so you have an idea of where they want to go.

As you get into the final approach, what's the back-and-forth?

The dialogue in the last 30 to 40 seconds is about establishing your position, making sure you're



“You can learn a lot by watching certain race committees. Peter Reggio for example, if you’re over at 10 seconds, it’s pretty much a guarantee he’ll call you over, even if you dip back down below the line; they won’t see you go back. Know that if you’re over within 15 seconds you’re going to get called.”

going to have a good clean lane to accelerate off the line. There should be a lot of dialogue about the number of boat-lengths to the line.

Some of the best bow guys know how much time they have so they will turn around and say, “Look guys, we need to burn some here, we’re coming in early.” You want to keep full boatspeed going all the time.

The bowman should have a good sense of feel for the boat. It’s knowing when you’re going full speed, to be able to pull the trigger. Know when you’re reaching down the line and when you’re on the wind; you have to know what the true sailing angle is to the line. If I think we’re late within 30 seconds, I’ll come off the bow, go straight to the rail, and hike. That way, the back of the boat knows we’re racing.

With ondeck computers and GPS, how much responsibility for a perfect start is on the bowman nowadays?

Most of the big boats will have a Deckman, and there should be a dialogue with whoever has the computer. Sometimes the computer and the bow guy might be of the opposite opinion. Sometimes the Deckman is wrong. On smaller boats, there’s more responsibility for the bow guy because there is no Deckman, and when you get to big fleets, the line gets really small. Think of it this way: the line becomes the boat above you and the boat below you. You’re really trying to judge yourself off that. It’s great if you can poke your nose out and see both ends of the line.

If the back of the boat trusts you, they will listen to you. There will be situations where they just don’t trust the bowperson at all, and if this is the case, you talk about it afterward and say, “Look guys, I pulled the trigger and nothing happened. What’s going on?”

Sometimes it’s a matter of talking things out and finding out what happened, why the boat didn’t turn up, or why you were late for the start. If they can’t hear you, you need to know that sort of stuff.

What’s your pre-start routine?

Standard practice is getting up on the line, checking both ends, getting a line sight, if possible. The big thing for me is finding whether there is current or tide and whether it will be pushing us over the line or holding us off the line.

When you’re racing offshore without good land bearings, how do you make do without line sights?

“I have a little trick I like to use when we’re starting at either end of the line. There’s always people sighting the lines at either end, so if you’re



close to the boat and you can see the person calling the line, you look at their eyes to see where they’re looking. If can

see where they’re looking, you can see exactly where the line is. If you’re near the committee boat end, and at their transom, and the guy calling the line is looking upwind further forward, you know you have three or so more boatlengths to go. If you’re looking back at them, you’re in trouble.”

In this sort of situation you’re using the computer [on the big boats], plugging in the marks on the Deckman three or four times before the start to make sure they’re right. Also, be aware of the boats around you; if the guy next to you is slow you might not want to be where you are. You want to be near your competition. A good start in these conditions just comes from knowledge and a sense of being on the starting line. In big fleets, for example, there is going to be line sag, so if you know you can take advantage of that, don’t be afraid to stick your nose out there.

How much is too much information from the bow?

The very first thing I do is to not let us get too far from the line. If you get too far along, you might not be able to get to the spot you want when you get back. While we’re setting up, I’ll call distance to the line. I’ll give them the time and tell them how long it takes to get back to the line. When they’re sailing toward the line, I tell them how much distance they need to burn, or how much time they need to speed up.