

Sabre Nationals - A Post Mortem

by Peter Hackett



Sailing flat and fast through waves is largely about steering groove and mainsheet trim

The 35th 2012/13 Sabre Nationals sailed at Royal Queensland YS was the closest in the class's history. In my view there were four equally worthy winners, a view supported by the fact that on the last beat of the last race there were four position changes that would have resulted in four different championship winners. I was fortunate enough to be the beneficiary of the fourth position change in the last few 100 metres of this last leg.

Following this incredibly closely contested regatta, I thought I would take some time to reflect on a few of my perspectives about the experience: how I approached the campaign, what I focussed on and considered to be important, boat set-up , as well as interrogate some of my inner experiences.

Mindset / Attitude

"Hewitt says struggling Stosur must get the enjoyment back. Make it fun" This not unfamiliar headline in sport caught my eye during the recent tennis Open.

Intensity, tension, pressure, dealing with high expectations of both self and others. In today's highly professional approach to sport these range of emotions seem to be common place in our sporting culture where results, winning and gold medals are the barometers of success.

James Magnussen's 1/100th of a second the difference between glory and failure. Drug taking and lying as necessary measures to achieve cycling glory and all the spoils that come with it.

In this regard, I think elite sport is off track and is setting an unhealthy example for us everyday weekend rockstars.

So given this context, it is not surprising to see many examples of parents, coaches and kids placing an over emphasis on results, winning and high performance at, I think, the expense of fun, enjoyment and the healthy side of competition.

Certainly for myself, I experienced first hand this apparent conflict between the importance of winning with all the pressures, tensions and anxieties that come with it and the enjoyment and fun of the contest – the game we all love to play: racing sailboats. So what did I learn from this?

1. **Be a good competitor:** In the last race I crossed the line in near equal second in a photo finish with Craig, neither of us knowing which of us had crossed first and neither of us knowing what the final top four places were in the championship. Yet both of us were on a massive high, having enjoyed the excitement of an incredible contest all week.



Near photo finish in final race captured the theme of the whole regatta – close! I'm to windward, largely obscured from view by Craig McPhee to leeward.

Sailing back ashore I was pumped, not because I had won (I didn't know this yet) but because it had been an awesome week of racing with everyone and I knew I had sailed well and played my part in making it an exciting contest for others. Yes, the news of victory nearly one hour later was sweet but I was glad I wasn't attached to the final result either way. I was glad that winning and having fun don't have to be mutually exclusive.

So the old 'winning isn't everything, its the *only* thing' was well and truly crucified and in its place was the realisation that you're there to provide a great contest for others and your competitors are

there to challenge and bring out the best in yourself. The feeling of mutual respect I think is more important than the glory of winning.

I certainly felt this way after the invitation race where Scott and I had an epic battle, slugging it out in 20-25 knots, totally absorbed in our match race, oblivious to the rest of the fleet. He won, I have never had so much fun. And Chris and I have experienced the same thing countless times in our see-sawing duels all season, both loving the racing, regardless of outcome.

2. Focus on the process not the results: At the risk of sounding trite, this is another line we've probably all heard in sport before. But really practicing it and experiencing it made it much more meaningful for me. Sailing well and executing well everything involved in the process is the goal, the reward and is success in itself. Results are the outcome of focusing on executing the process well, not the other way around.

3. Manage yourself: Notice your feelings, clean up unhealthy/unproductive lines of thinking. Ask yourself what is underneath the anger, frustration, blame, worry, doubt, fear etc. Rewire your thinking to clean up whatever it is that is irritating you. Talking things out with close friends/ family can be a great way to deal with this stuff. Sailing with negative emotion is slow – it reduces your thinking capacity and limits your ability to be a good competitor.

4. Surround yourself with friends / people you get along with: They help you to keep perspective, keep balanced and see the humour. Having collective support is both reassuring and 'more eyes is wise' so it's great to discuss strategies, tactics, conditions, issues etc. Thanks to Robbo, Simon, Jasper and Nick for their support during the entire week of the regatta.

Boat Setup / Boat Speed

Boat speed secrets always seem to be a topic that people are interested in. I suppose it's a view that 'if I just copy/replicate the guys who are winning I will go faster'. Tempting and simple.

Well I think there is some truth in it but as always, plenty of subtleties also.

A few general points before some specifics. Firstly, all my work and focus on boatspeed was in the six months prior to the regatta so I could just concentrate on racing during the series knowing and trusting that my speed was fine. (the same principle applies to boat handling) My objective was to achieve equal speed that would allow me to compete on a level playing field, not a speed advantage.

If I was to self assess, I'd rate my speed as follows:

Upwind

- 15 knots and over: my strength, slight speed edge at times which I would largely attribute to weight (77kgs) and fitness
- 10-15: good speed, never slow
- 5-10: adequate, could hold own – just

- Less than 5 knots: vulnerable
- Overall a good balance across light, medium and strong wind ranges – which was necessary in Qld where we had a range of wind strengths. Certainly not the fastest in every condition.
- At times I would be slightly lower and faster as my natural groove upwind

Downwind

If overall my upwind speed was good with sometimes a slight edge, my reaching speed was a different story. In a word, inconsistent – sometimes fine, sometimes not. I can't actually remember passing even one boat on a reach during the series (actually I'm afraid George that you are the one boat I do remember passing when you were third around the first mark in the last race). At best I could hold my own and not lose out, however on many occasions I lost ground / places. So yes, not my strength and its where I need to focus my improvement next. Running I'm usually fine.

Setup

I don't think this is the optimum setup and I'm sure there is room for improvement but its good enough to be in the ball park through the range:

Equipment:

YMS hull

Irwin sail

Keeley mast

This is where I blatantly used the 'copy what works' approach. Chris was the benchmark so I copied him

Mast Rake: 5780mm from halyard block to transom. This is not a precise measurement since halyard block heights vary from boat to boat, I'd say allow 5780 plus or minus 30mm. (mental note to self: we should make the standard rake measurement to the black band)

Mast Step: Aft most position to allow boom to go out as square as possible on run

My rake is less than most boats (mast more upright) although compared to boats with their mast step further forward (eg Espresso) it needs to carry less rake to achieve the same centre of effort location. I make no rake adjustments for wind strength and run a fixed forestay length so the rake never changes. Rake is something I may start playing with in the never ending quest for more speed.

Rig Tension: Firm/tight ie no slop in stays but not bending the mast under compression. Note: my sidestays are 50mm further forward than the original standard YMS to again allow the boom to go out as square as possible on the run. As such I don't have a great need to run the rig slack to achieve the same end. A tight rig just stops everything slopping around and hence feels better. Like rake, I don't adjust rig tension. Sometimes, when I'm very confident its going to be a light air race, I will loosen the rig 1 adjustment on the shrouds, but the rake stays the same with the fixed forestay length. I didn't adjust rig tension during the nationals.

Traveller hawse: loose as possible so nearly block to block when using maximum sheet/vang

Tune / technique

Primary focus is on the fundamentals of:

- Mainsheet
- Steering
- Body movement to balance the power

I couldn't emphasise these basics enough. When in boatspeed mode and there were no strategic or tactical considerations to manage, these are the three fundamentals where I would focus my attention. Its very much attuning into the feel of the boat – how fast its moving through the water, power and heel. High in groove in flat spots and up pressure. Low in groove and eased sheet (1-3 inches) in waves and down pressure.

I try not to sweat the small stuff and keep the focus on controls really simple: particularly when head needs to be out of boat in big fleets. Nevertheless, controls do make a difference and these are some of my basic guidelines:

Outhaul: rarely adjust this. It comes on a bit when the oysters are blowing off the rocks.

Cunningham & vang: these work in unison. If I could connect them up on one control line I would. I use none of either until I start sitting out (8-10knots). Then they progressively come on together as wind increases. This basically defaults to 3 settings:

- Off: less than 10 knots
- On: 10-17 knots
- On really hard: 18 plus

On really hard is more about cunningham than vang. I stop pulling on vang once the crease forms between clew and forward edge of bottom batten. This crease is caused by the mast bending in excess of the main's luff round. On the softer Keeley mast, I find this is not an overly massive amount of vang.

Generally in medium winds (8-13) I sail with a very tight mainsheet and minimal vang as a way of controlling leech tension without depowering / flattening the sail ie straight/tight leech for pointing whilst retaining shape/depth in the sail for power. Cunningham tension to just clean up excessive horizontal creases in the luff.

Preparation / Training



Starting to campaign 6 months prior to the regatta meant putting in the hard yards of winter sailing

To a large degree, performance in regattas is determined before you even arrive. The quality of preparation and training before the regatta will put you in a position to be a contender or not. I felt I got a little caught out by the big fleet competitive intensity at the Blairgowrie Nationals last year. I was inadequately prepared both for this style of racing and also with gear failure. For me, I identified two areas of focus following last year's nationals: racing practice and reaching speed/technique.

Racing practice: Racing frequently in competitive fleets sharpens you and the accumulated experience in the heat of battle readies you for the competitive intensity at nationals. I also found it valuable to reflect on the races and interrogate my performance for learnings ie self coach. Talking over races with other competitors and getting their input also helps.

I tried to race as often as possible against quality opposition. Fortunately there is a great depth of talent in Victoria to pit yourself against, with many previous state and national champions: Chris

Dance, Gary Mclennan, Callum Burns, Wayne Bates, Nick Mouat, as well as top sailors who have recently upgraded to YMS boats and are now going super quick: Tim Van Der Veen, Alistair Danks, Brent Frankcombe. The depth also extends to club level racing where 7th – 8th placings were not uncommon for me.

There is a strong culture of open collaboration and sharing in the Vic fleet and this is certainly a key factor in the lifting and levelling standard of performance across the board for the benefit of everyone. Regularly racing all these guys, combined with this culture has played a key role in improving and developing my sailing.

Boat setup and prevention of gear failure was another lesson from the Blairgowrie Nationals that I addressed thoroughly.

Essentially, strong preparation breeds confidence and a readiness to just race, free of any other clutter in the mind.

Reaching speed: More and more in dinghy racing differences in downwind/reaching speed and technique is becoming the most significant determinant of results. Ainslie, Slingsby, Belcher & Page are all great examples of this. As I've already mentioned, this area has not been by ace card and remains an opportunity for me to continue to improve.

I still heard a lot of noise and grumbling in the rigging park about illegal pumping (also a theme from last year's nationals). This continues to be a tough issue to manage as we saw in the recent Olympics where many on-water penalties were dished out as competitors pushed the limits of interpretation of what is legal and what is not.

I think we need to confront this issue openly because it is divisive and interpretation can be grey. This also means practicing in club racing consistent with the propulsion rules.

In a sport where we need to self police, I think Paul Elvestrom's words on sportsmanship are good counsel: " you haven't won if in doing so you lose the respect of your competition"

Race Planning/Management

I learnt from the Blairgowrie Nationals that in big fleets, starts and the first beat are absolutely critical, perhaps worth 60-70% of the total race? This emphasis is the single biggest difference between big fleets and club racing. As such, this was my number one focus and was probably my greatest strength in the regatta and contributed most to my success. Out of the 10 races including the invitation, I rated my start and first beat as good-excellent in 8 races, rounding the top mark in the top 2-3 in many races. As such, I'll wade into a fair bit of detail in terms of my approach.



Port end starts involve considerable more risk in big fleets. Advantages from line bias or expected left hand shift can make the risk worthwhile. Always 'cross 'em when you can'

I have a regular prestart process that I go through that has five key steps. As much as possible I repeat this process in every race so it just becomes a natural rhythm or routine. None of this is rocket science but its more about the discipline of being thorough in all these areas, even between back to back races when you're tired, cold or hungry.

1. **Windshift patterns:** Objective is to get a good feel for the range and pattern of the shifts. Sailing upwind on each tack and recording compass headings of lifts and knocks. I would go through this process from 45 mins to one hour before the start depending on wind strength, being mindful of conserving energy if it was breezy. During this process I would also do several split tacks with my training partner (Nick Major) to assess differences across the course and get another opinion on the shifts.

Knowledge gained in this process proved invaluable. It was my primary basis for making the biggest decision and only decision you ever have to make on a beat: to tack or to keep going.

But it doesn't give you certainty, only better probability. Huey always has the final say and laugh.

Start Prep

2. Depending on readiness of the start boat, I would switch into start mode about 15 mins to go. The first step was to get a transit. Getting a good transit can be hard and often requires many attempts and practice using it to build confidence in identifying your often vague feature on the horizon. There were many starts where I didn't use the transit because I was either close to an end or other boats next to me were more important considerations. But its good to give yourself the option when you do need it.
3. Next, between 5-10 minutes to go I would be checking the bias. I would usually combine this step with checking the transit. Due to the risks of crossing a big fleet on port, again a learning from the Blairgowrie nationals, my basic principle was to start toward the starboard end unless persuaded otherwise. Significant port bias being the main persuasive factor.
4. Time permitting, I would then get the layline for the favoured end and practice one or two trial runs to get a feel for the approach. In most training sessions I would try to do about 5-6 starts using a simple drill of practicing time on distance to a fixed mark using a two minute countdown. I found this helped develop my judgement at near stationary speeds for time on distance, leeway drift, boat handling dynamics and acceleration.
5. At 2-3 minutes I would like to do a final compass reading of wind direction to determine if the wind was in left or right phase. In an oscillating breeze, starting toward the end of the direction of the first shift is a critical consideration. The bigger the expected shift (determined from step 1) the more important this is versus line bias. Finally, a glance up the track for pressure/clouds then into execution.

Doing this late check of wind direction can also reveal a change to the bias. In one race there was a large shift to port with a few minutes to go that only Alistair Danks and I capitalised on resulting in us port tacking the fleet and sailing in the direction toward the next expected shift back to the right.

Learning: Have a plan but be flexible to change it in light of new information. Aim to get that new information as late as possible before committing to your start plan.

Well thats a bit of a free wheeling blurt on what the nationals experience stirred up for me, I'd love to hear the stories, thoughts or reactions of others. And finally, thanks to all the sailors that made it the success that it was.

Peter Hackett

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