



Starting

A good start is one which helps you quickly begin executing your race strategy.

Starts can be crowded, chaotic and stressful. To get a good start, you need a game plan that takes into account all the data gathered during pre-race preparation. Once the game plan for the start is devised, then tactical decisions can be made about a preferred position on the line and the actions that will be taken immediately following the starting signal.

The importance of a good start should not be understated. It is not necessary to win the start in order to win the race, but a good start is highly desirable. A good start will give you the freedom to pursue your race strategy without interference.

In deciding where to start you must consider three factors:

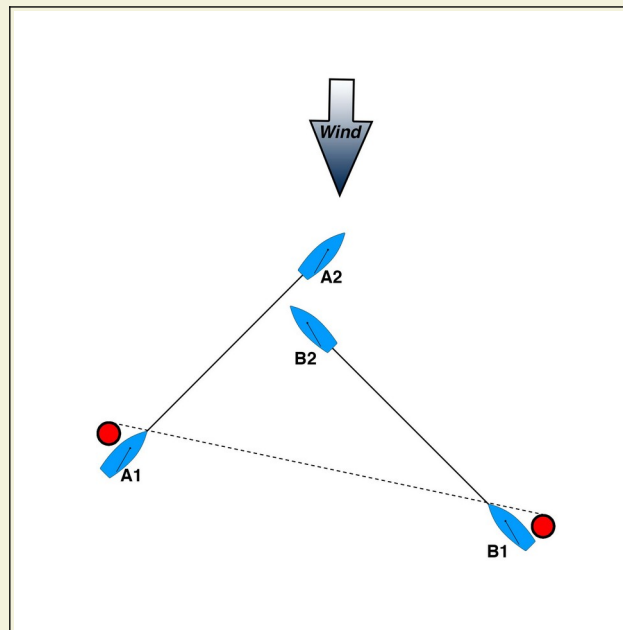
1. The race strategy (particularly for the first leg).
2. The set of the line.
3. How you make it work.

Line Bias

Line bias describes a start line that is not set square to the wind. If there is any bias, there is an advantage to starting at the end which is furthest upwind - this is called the favoured end. A line set square to the wind does not have a favored end. When the line is biased, one end or the other is favoured.

For a line with a 5 degree bias, the advantage at the favoured end is 12.5% of the length of the start line. If the line is 10 degrees off square (not uncommon), the advantage is 25% of the length of the start line. These numbers are significant; in a fleet of a dozen boats, the line will likely be long enough that a 5 degree bias will allow a boat at the favoured end to cross ahead of a boat starting at the non-favoured end.

Note that the position of the windward mark has no influence on which end of the start line is favored. Line bias alone determines the favored end.



Line Bias

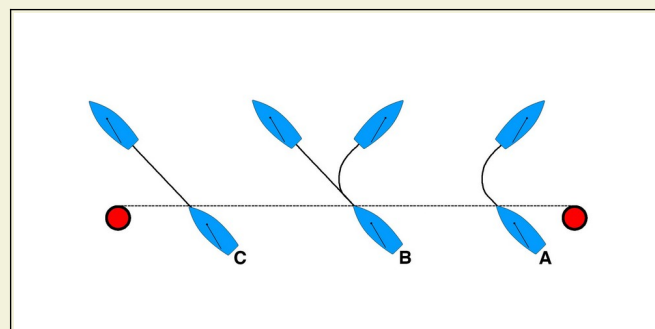
In the above diagram, we show a starting line that has been laid with a port end bias. A has started at the favoured port end (A1) and at the first cross is ahead of B who has started at the non-favoured end (B1).

Where on the line to start

If the race strategy is to sail up the right hand side of the course, then the right end of the line is preferred. By starting near the right end we are free to tack and go right immediately after starting. Clear air at the start is a little less important, as you will be tacking away. Freedom to tack and go right is the first priority.

If your race strategy says go left, then a start near the left hand end is called for. More critical than the exact position on the line is ensuring you start in clear air, and the freedom to continue to the left unimpeded. Tactics on the start line will focus on finding a space near the left hand end and protecting it from boats lining up to leeward.

If there is no clear advantage to either side, then a mid-line start is indicated. There are several advantages to a mid-line start. From a starting perspective, it is often the easiest and least crowded place to start. From a race strategy perspective, a mid-line start gives the greatest flexibility, as it offers the freedom to go either way. You will still need to protect your chosen spot so that you can sail off in clear air.



Line Starting Position

In the diagram above, A wants to go right so starts towards the right end of the line. B starts at the midpoint and has options to head either left or right. C wants to go left so starts near the left end of the line.

Protecting your spot on the start line

At the start you will want to accelerate away from the line as quickly as possible. There are two boats that can get in your way:

- A boat to leeward that can come up underneath you, forcing you to keep clear by pointing higher. Pointing higher will slow you down and allow boats to windward to sail over you and blanket you with their dirty air.
- A boat to windward that can sail down over you and blanket you. Your defence here is to also sail lower and faster to get your nose in front.

You can protect the space to windward by coming up under the boat above you and forcing them to keep clear. If they are being forced towards the line, they may even bale out and look along the line for a more friendly spot. Develop a reputation for doing this and boats will stay away. More difficult is protecting the space to leeward because as windward boat you have to keep clear.

Sometimes the easiest way to ensure a clear space to leeward is to start away for the crowd.

Mid-Line Starts

Unless there are strong reasons to push toward an end, a mid-line start is often the best choice. The advantages include minimal crowding on the approach and strategic flexibility once you clear the line. You can set up for your start with a variety of approaches and protecting your spot can be easier.

Starting at the favored end

When your choice is one of the ends, it is best to target near - but not right at - the favored end. A favored end draws a crowd, and you will get much more consistent starts by staying out of crowds. Slide along the line just far enough to clear the crowd and you will have a much easier time getting a good start. In fact, you may end up with the best start, as the boats in the crowd deprive each other of the air and room necessary to accelerate off the line.

Even when one or more boats do get good starts right at the favored end, many more are buried. By hedging toward the middle of the line, you dramatically increase the odds of getting a good start.

Going Right

If your goal is to start right and tack out immediately, it may be worth it to go for a start right at the right hand end of the line and even if you end up in the second row it's OK, since you'll be tacking out. However, most boats will want to start at the right end and sail off on starboard, so

that end of the line is always highly contested. Chances are high that a good number of these boats will have a similar strategy to yours for the first leg and you will be fighting for clear air. The front row a little further down the line might take some crowd pressure off your start and allow you to sail off the line at full speed.

Going Left

If everything favors the left side, then get ready to battle! There is little margin for error in these starts, and few spaces in the front row when the pin end is favored. Clear air is essential because you can't tack out. Again, a start part way up the line may be the easiest way to get the second best start. You'll more likely be able to create space for clear air and room to accelerate. In fact, a jam up at the pin may leave you with the best start.

The Countdown

A few points about the last minute before the start:

- Don't sail around aimlessly during the countdown. Use the time to test your start plan. Know in the conditions where you have to be in the last 10 seconds.
- Don't sail too far from the line, especially in light conditions.
- Put in a couple of short tacks to confirm the wind direction and line bias. If there's been a change, there's still time to reassess your starting plan.
- By 15-20 seconds out make sure you are well set up to start in the spot you have picked.
- By 4-8 seconds, depending on wind strength and your distance back from the line, you should be sheeting on to accelerate to the line. Go!

Many boats looking for a start at the right end, will line up too early and drift down the line. This will often leave a gap you can exploit by starting a little further back from the line and knowing when to sheet in and accelerate.

Rules At The Start

Remember the rules that most often apply during the pre-start.

- Definitions: Keep Clear – You have kept clear if a right of way boat does not have to take avoiding action, or can change course in either direction without making contact.
- Rule 11: An overlapped windward boat must keep clear of a leeward boat.
- Rule 12: A boat clear astern must keep clear of a boat clear ahead. If you are the clear ahead boat, you have no obligation until the boat behind establishes an overlap to leeward.
- Rule 13: If you change course past head to wind, you must then keep clear until close hauled. A boat that luffs past head to wind to close a windward gap, or tacks below a starboard tackler, and stays above a close-hauled course, has no

- rights until it bears away to close-hauled.
- Rule 15: If you acquire right of way, you must give the other boat room to keep clear. If you are a boat establishing an overlap to leeward you must initially give the windward boat room to keep clear. The windward boat must react immediately.
- Rule 16: If you change course, you must give the other boat room to keep clear. As the leeward boat, you can luff to head to wind (no further), but you must give the windward boat room to keep clear.
- Rule 22: If you are returning to the pre-start side of the line, keep clear of boats that have started.

And then there are the rules that don't apply during a start:

- Definitions: Proper course – There is no proper course before the start.
- Rules in Section C do not apply at a starting mark surrounded by navigable water. So mark room (Rule 18) and obstructions (Rule 19) do not apply. Don't barge in at the starboard end expecting room – you won't get it.

Be confident of your rule knowledge, and respect your competitors. An early, clear and polite hail establishing your intent will engender respect and prevent an incident.

Conclusion

Starting is a game of choices requiring a balance between overall strategic goals, line bias, and crowding. You must consider the nature of each section of the line; the difficulty in tacking clear after a left end start, the tendency for crowding at the right. When the advantage falls entirely to one end of the line you must consider the risks at the favored end as opposed to attempting a more conservative approach at some distance from the favored end. Once the decision has been made on where to start, your tactical ability and boat handling skills must be come into play.