

Windward Gates

By Dave Perry

The concept behind the windward gate is a good one. Get more boats onto the run more quickly, keeping the fleet more compressed which makes for more fun and challenging racing. This is not a new idea. The legendary Paul Elvstrom advocated the use of a windward gate and a leeward gate in his book, *Expert Dinghy and Keelboat Racing*, published in 1967!

It took us until the mid-80's to sincerely try and accept the leeward gate; and at first there were a lot of complaints: it was confusing to the sailors, it required more mark setting, it was not fair if it wasn't square. But now most one-design sailors would be surprised to sail a course without a leeward gate.

With a single windward mark, if you are not in the lead group, you are relegated to overstanding more and more on starboard or take the high risk of approaching the starboard-tack parade on port (often leading to disastrous results), as the leaders extend their lead. And because of the wall of boats on the offset leg, rarely does it pay to gybe at the offset mark, making the boats sail higher on starboard on the run to defend their wind, again as the leaders further extend away.

One-design sailing seems to be growing again, especially in the area of one-design keelboats, and many innovations have accompanied, or helped spawn, this growth. Windward/leeward race tracks (eliminating the boring follow-the-leader, rich-get-richer reaching legs), shorter races and more of them a day, leeward gates, three-boat starting lines, and more. The windward gate is worth more experimentation.

Yes there will be growing pains. Port tackers will need to be careful, as they always need to be; and race management teams will need to set more marks (it is critical to use offset marks for each windward mark in larger fleets), and will have to learn the correct separation and angle of the gate (about 10 lengths apart and square to the wind). But sailed carefully, that port tackers should be able to get onto the run sooner by having a choice of marks to round. And if the gate isn't square to the wind, that just becomes a strategic factor, just as it is at the starting line and leeward gate (which are often not square either); and a boat may still come out ahead going to the "unfavored" mark if it is less crowded or she can get there sooner. And if the race management team is dedicated to running the best races possible for the sailors, then they should be willing to try new courses, if they are reasonably able to do so.