Brain Food

by Dave Perry

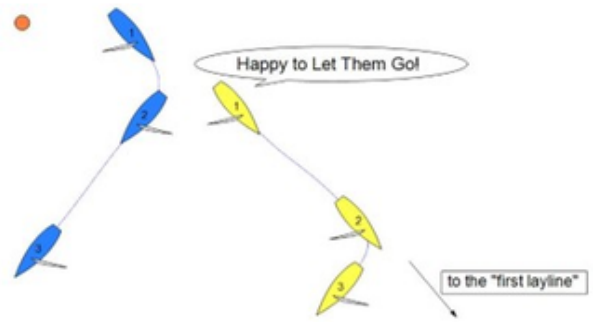
How to keep the lead in a close race downwind

In a close match race, you often round the windward mark just ahead of your opponent. It turns out that the trailing boat passes the leading boat over 50% of the time. These are not good odds for the leading boat. Here are some suggested tactics for keeping the lead in a close race downwind.

1) Happy to Let Them Go!
The key to knowing what to do is knowing where the "first layline" is. The "first layline" means, on the first run, the starboard-tack layline to the leeward mark; or if a gate, to the right-hand gate mark (looking downwind). On the second run, the "first layline" is the starboard-tack layline to the Pin end of the finishing line (right-hand end looking downwind).

If you are not at the "first layline" yet and the trailing boat gybes, do not gybe (which is what most inexperienced match racers do)! You are "Happy to Let Them Go!" You sail 2-3 lengths and then gybe with your wind clearly behind them. Your opponent is now in Downwind Jail. At first, they may be able to gybe and go behind you…never let them go behind you (called "crossing over"). You may be able to "hunt" them (head up and prevent them from getting behind you, and force them to gybe back to starboard). But if you can't prevent them from going behind you, you have to gybe *before* they get to you, and stay to their left (looking downwind). Eventually you will arrive at the "first layline" (see what to do later in this article).

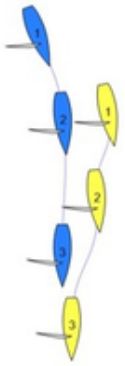
But if they get at all advanced on you on starboard tack (either because they are sailing faster, or because you are sailing higher and closing the distance with them), they will get to the point where they can NOT gybe at all, or cannot gybe and get behind you. And if they cannot sail into the zone of the leeward mark/right-hand gate mark or Pin on starboard-tack…you own them! Welcome to Downwind Jail.



2) Sail Deep
Your first strategy while on port tack is to try to sail a little lower than your opponent and move your opponent to windward of your centerline, without any risk of them overlapping you to leeward, which would be a problem given that there is no rule 17 in match racing, so they can luff you aggressively. Be sure

your trimmer is aggressively squaring the spinnaker and letting you know if they have good pressure in their sheet. Then gybe when you get to the "first layline." If your opponent crosses over, you have clear air, and as long as you can sail into the zone on starboard tack, you beat them to the mark.

If your opponent also tries to sail deep with you, both boats will go slower and slower. At some point, you can head up and sail away from them, and as they are heading up, you can gybe and cross them. Or, from a slow dead downwind position, you can lead the gybe, and they won't be on your wind after the gybe.



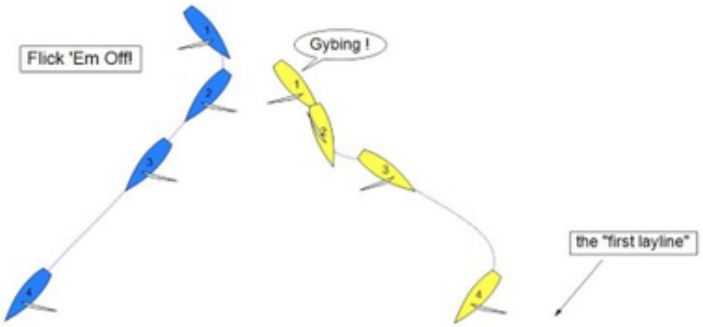
3) Flick 'em Off

Even better, set up for a "fake gybe" and see if you can get your opponent to gybe first *before* you get to the "first layline." Then you go another 2-3 lengths and gybe with your wind safely behind them. A "fake gybe" (or what I call Flicking Them Off) works best when the trailer is within one (1) length of you. The reason it works is that the skipper of the trailing boat plans to do a "simo gybe" and knows you are nearing the layline where you will gybe, and is in a heightened state of anticipation. Try the "fake gybe" when you are about 8-10 lengths from the first layline. You need to time to reaccelerate after the "fake gybe" and still get your real gybe in before getting to the "first layline."

My signal to my bowperson that any gybe is a "fake gybe" is a closed fist. I simply call their name and hold up a fist. They know not to take the pole off the mast, even if I gybe the boom. If I want to turn the gybe into a real gybe, I call out "Real Gybe".

To execute the "fake gybe" in a way that slows your boat the least, initiate the fake with a casual "stand-by gybe" or some words that might put your opponent on high alert. Have your bow person begin to go through their maneuver to gybe the pole, but don't take the pole off the mast! What will send the trailer into a gybe is seeing you stand up, bear away, and begin to pull on the mainsheet as if you are gybing the boom. Watch them out of the corner of your eye (don't stare at them…it is a dead give-away) and when they "bite" (gybe), you simply heel the boat to leeward, head up, build speed, sail 2-3 lengths and gybe with your wind behind the trailer. The trailer is now in Downwind Jail.

If the trailer does not bite, simply head up and build speed. The trailer may even be more to windward of your centerline now. Gybe on the "first layline" and be ready to Gybe Hot if the trailer simo gybes with you.



4) Gybe Hot

If the trailer is still close behind you when you get to the first layline, you need to "gybe hot", which means gybe onto a tight reach. Your bow person needs to feel the rate of turn of the boat and the pressure on the pole. If they can't get the pole on the mast immediately, they simply drop to their knees (they should always wear kneepads) and hold the guy down. While kneeling there, they can attach the pole to guy. But the key is to put tension on the luff of the spinnaker so the trimmer can keep it flying as the boat heads up.

The goal is to get your wind in front of the trailing boat's wind. Telltales on the shrouds are extremely helpful in easily seeing where your apparent wind is. The bow person should be telling you where your wind is relative to your opponent ("our wind is half a length in front of them", etc.). Your other goal is to be pushing your opponent well above the first layline so that if they do roll you, they cannot then sail into the zone of the mark without gybing. Now they are in Downwind Jail.
