

## **Secret Sabre Business**

Several people have asked me what was the “secret” knowledge that helped me to win the National title this year. There is no single “secret”. Sailing is a complex sport with a large number of variables and many skills needed to be successful. Since I have a limited amount of time that I can spend on the water I have to be very careful to identify those skills and variables that really matter and focus on them. Many people have the same difficulty getting time on the water, but still want to improve their performance. Hopefully knowing what I considered to be most important will help!

At the end of last season, I identified a number of key areas I needed to improve, and this formed the basis of my preparation. Before Eden I concentrated on the following areas:

### **1. Physical Fitness**

You do not need to be an Olympic athlete to sail a Sabre, but you should aim to be fit enough to be able to sail up to 4 short course races in a day. Fitness is important not only to be able to hike for the duration of each race, but to allow good decision-making. Simply put, the difference between the champions and the rest are the decisions made on the racecourse. If you are physically fatigued you will make poorer decisions. Improving your fitness delays fatigue, allowing better decisions, and improving your recovery time so you will do better in the next race.

My fitness training focussed on endurance aerobic work, strengthening the thighs and trunk, and (because I have a back problem) promoting flexibility in the lower back. I would typically do about four 45-60 minute sessions per week. Around 30 minutes of each session was spent pedalling an exercise bike with the resistance turned up high enough to have my heart rate going at around 150-160 beats per minute. The rest of the time was spent stretching my lower back and doing strengthening exercises (eg. sit-ups, wall sits etc.)

### **2. Speed to Windward**

I believe good speed to windward is imperative for two reasons: First, to get clear of the pack after a start, and second because of the amount of time spent going to windward on championship courses (3 out of 6 legs for a short course, 4 out of 9 legs on a long course).

All last season I felt my windward speed was pretty ordinary. Nothing I did to my rig settings or sail battens helped. My sail was more than 2 years old, and the lower leech hooked (particularly in light winds) so it was time to replace it. I spoke to John Hooper (Hooper Sails) and we talked about my sailing style, and the issues I had with my existing sail. He made some suggestions to clean up the leech, and the resultant sail is great, with much better windward speed.

### **3. Starting**

Since I have been sailing Sabres, I have felt that my starting has lacked consistency. Particularly in the 100-boat fleet at last year's nationals, a poor start combined with lack of windward speed meant I was frequently in the 30's at the first windward mark. You can't win races from there!

The solution was to practice starting drills whenever I was on the water. I would also spend a lunchtime or two each week at a local park practising on a “start” line between 2 trees using a 2 minute count-down. This gives you practise at time-on-distance work, a skill essential to good starting. By carrying a stick and putting it in the ground at the “start”, I could also sight along the line and get immediate feedback as to how close to the line I had been.

### **4. First Beats and Race Strategy**

After reflecting on my season, I realised I hadn't been disciplined enough to consistently develop a race strategy. This is a particularly hard area to work on if you can't race regularly. Fortunately an article in Australian Sailing last year about a sailing simulator provided the answer.

I downloaded the Sailing Tactics simulator from [www.poseysail.com](http://www.poseysail.com). The simulator is very life-like and has been invaluable in helping me to practise working out a strategy, then “sailing” a race to see how well the strategy works. It has also been invaluable for starting practise. You can run race after race, and start after start in a couple of hours in the comfort of your home.

As you can see from the first 4 points above, there is a lot you can do off-water to improve your sailing. Developing off-water training techniques allows you to be more focused when you do make it onto the water.

#### 5. Roll Tacking

It is vital to be able to tack well. You need to be able to come out of a tack going just as fast as before you started the tack. If you can't, you have a major handicap. You will be hesitant to take windshifts, outsailed tactically by those who can tack well, and spend significant time each race sailing slowly. A lot of my on-water time, therefore, has been spent practising roll-tacks, with particular emphasis on acceleration out of the tack.

#### 6. Reflection On Races Sailed

Hindsight is a terrific teacher if you take the time to "listen"! After each sail, write down what went well and what went poorly. Take particular care to identify your weak points, because they show you areas you can improve. Ask yourself how can you prevent the weak points from being repeated. Then visualise yourself sailing a race, but doing things correctly! Visualisation is also a great way to learn and cement new skills.

#### 7. General - Sail Without Racing

Spend some time on the water just enjoying the thrill of sailing and allowing yourself to get to know your boat, experimenting without any pressure. About half my time on the water before going to Eden was spent playing and experimenting. Spend some time trying to answer such questions as:

- how far can you pull the windward gunnell down during a roll-tack?
- what is the optimum speed for pulling the new windward gunnell down when completing a roll-tack?
- how "high" can you point when sailing by the lee on the run before the sail gybes itself?
- exactly what effect does the rope traveller have on your sheeting angle when it is tight, medium and loose?
- how fast can I accelerate from a dead stop?
- how long does it take to do a 720?
- what effect does rig tension have on my sail, both upwind and down?

#### 8. Researching Twofold Bay

Find out all you can about the regatta location. Pay particular attention to landmarks that may affect the wind, and to channels or shallows that may affect the current. The internet was a good source of maps, charts and pictures. Also useful was talking to people who had sailed there before. This information is helpful in getting a good feel for the regatta site, and developing race strategies.

However, a good pre-regatta preparation can be of limited value if you don't have a good pre-race preparation. At Eden, four important pre-race exercises stand out.

#### 4. The Rotary Lookout

The morning of each race, I spent some time at the Rotary Lookout watching the wind move over the water. From there you could see the wind shadows, and the way the gusts of wind came down onto the water off the surrounding hills. It is very important to observe these things, since it helps with developing your race strategy. In particular, the windward and leeward marks were nearly always close to shore. Therefore, it generally paid to take whatever tack took you out into the middle of the bay, away from the disturbed and lighter wind along the shoreline. Similarly, whenever approaching the windward mark it nearly always paid to be in the centre of the course in the last quarter of the beat because as you approached the shoreline the wind was a bit lighter and more variable in direction. If you were in the centre of the course you had room to take advantage of unexpected wind shifts.

#### 5. Course Geometry – Location of the Buoys

Before the start it is important to know where the buoys have been laid and their geometry relative to the wind. I would locate each buoy and try to associate it with a prominent landmark. Then, before rounding each mark I would try to locate the next buoy. In the first heat the rain squall at the first mark reduced visibility and caused the early leaders to sail high while I reached down beneath them and into the lead. This emphasised to me the importance of knowing exactly where to go before you round each mark!

Course geometry is also important. Is the windward mark directly to windward, or will one tack take you much closer to the mark than the other? For instance, it is useless scoring the perfect pin end start on

starboard if you can lay the windward mark on port from the committee boat end! (Don't laugh – it happens!).

### 3. Detecting Wind Patterns

Before each race it was important to spend at least 30 minutes sailing to windward to get compass bearings on both tacks. Sail on one tack for a long time to determine if the wind is shifting in a regular or irregular pattern. Sail through knocks and lulls to see what happens and what they look like. If on a knock on starboard, tack to port to see what heading you have for a lift on port (and vice versa). I generally found that the wind was oscillating. Out in the centre of the bay the oscillations were generally well defined and fairly predictable (ie. you could expect the wind to swing through 30 degrees about every 2-3 minutes). If you could discern the pattern, you could then position yourself relative to the fleet to ensure you got the maximum advantage. Knowing the timing of the next shift was also important on the start line. If you kept track of what the wind was doing in the last 5 minutes before the start (much easier said than done!), and adopted a flexible starting strategy, you could get into phase with the wind oscillations very quickly and thus establish a handy lead.

### 4. Mental Attitude

Finally, I believe having the right mental attitude is vital. You **must** believe in yourself and your capability to match it with your competition. If you have the attitude that others are better than you, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy since you have already conceded the race. I have found that my best results come when I am eager and looking forward to a competition. If I am pre-occupied with something or bemoaning the fact that the wind is not my preferred wind strength, I generally sail poorly. Similarly, if I am more concerned with achieving a particular result I find I am tense and fearful, rather than eagerly anticipating the battle ahead. Instead of focusing on the result, strive for excellence in all areas of each race. If you try to be the best in each facet of sailing the results you desire will naturally come. So, work on your attitude and don't be afraid to sail against the best. If you lose, you can say you were beaten by the best. However, if you win you will have the joy of knowing you have beaten the best.

Good luck, and good sailing!

Alan Riley