



The Sailing Life

Who would have thought that a baseball-playing kid from Cincinnati, Ohio, would end up making a career out of the sport of sailboat racing? The bookies in Vegas would have lengthened the odds greatly after my first day at junior sailing class, when, sitting in a dinghy drifting backward with the sail luffing—fully embarrassed—my sailing instructor came over in his motorboat and said with a sneer at me, “You really *don’t* know how to sail, do you?” There was certainly a good measure of happenstance involved, but the bottom line is that I loved sailing from the moment I first tried it.

Emerging from college, I pursued a calling that was far from the typical career paths of my peers at Yale, many of whom became lawyers, doctors, investment bankers, and corporate executives. I mounted an Olympic campaign, and then worked my way from boat to boat—regatta to regatta—in a manner that made it clear to those watching that I had never considered coming up with a “five-year plan.” Some observers have probably thought of me as broad-reaching through life. So be it. I would not trade my life and experiences in the sport of sailing for all the baseballs made in China.

What was it that piqued my interest in the sport of sailboat racing? Even today, looking back, it’s hard to pinpoint. As a child I’d always been drawn to the water, and there are some beautiful places on this planet that you can only see by boat. I suppose, too, that I possess a competitive streak (mellowed over the years) that racing helped satisfy. Another contributory factor may have been the intellectual challenge of racing a



sailboat, and the opportunity to learn about a variety of disciplines (teamwork, aerodynamics, meteorology, physical fitness, and seamanship, to name a few) and apply those lessons in a competitive environment. I'm sure another dynamic in play was my fascination (and friendship) with the people involved in this game of harnessing the forces of Mother Nature to make their boat go a little faster (and in a more clever direction) than their competition.

Looking back on a career that has moved into its fourth decade, I can't help but be thankful that my mother moved my brother, sister, and me from Ohio to Connecticut when I was thirteen, thereby curtailing a baseball career that likely would have fizzled out long before it ever really got started, and opening up the door to a sport that I continue to learn about and grow with. My steps along the way all seemed clear enough at the time, but I was not following any well-trodden path. When I started sailing, a professional sailor was someone who worked on, maintained, or delivered boats or had a "real" job in the industry, that is, in sailmaking, boatbuilding, naval architecture, or a related profession. Today, a handful of us make a living racing boats. But even among that group, the variations on the theme are many.

My first sailing job was as an instructor at a junior sailing program at Noroton Yacht Club in Connecticut. As much as I loved to race, I found I also derived great pleasure in teaching racing and sailing to others. Over the years, I've taught clinics, given seminars, coached teams, written articles and books, and had countless informal dockside sessions spreading my knowledge of and love for the sport. At a fairly early point in my career, I decided that the sport of sailing had given me so much opportunity and pleasure that part of my life's quest would be to share this penchant and skill set with others.

After my first America's Cup victory (sailing with Dennis Conner and the *Stars & Stripes* team in Fremantle, Australia),

that feeling of mission to help grow the sport of sailing strengthened. And in recent years, the opportunities for me to share the love have expanded, too—as an author, speaker, and even television announcer. And so we come to this book—an idea that took fruit in conversations with my friend Peter Economy as we discussed the deep wisdom and broad appeal of the classic golf book *Harvey Penick's Little Red Book*. “How about a book like Penick’s, but about sailing?” asked Peter.

So herein the reader finds some of my experiences—the lessons I’ve learned from my life on a boat. Some of these are in the form of tips for racers, while others are broader principles of life that I discovered applied just as well in my sailing career. Some of my most unforgettable sea stories are in this book, and I’ve asked a few friends and fellow sailors who I greatly respect to share a salty tale or two of their own. In these short, bite-size chapters, my aim is to whet the appetite of someone who has never set foot in a sailboat, as well as to share some of my most treasured racing secrets with the inveterate sailor looking for an edge. My hope is that this book will in some measure be a match for Penick’s in drawing newcomers further into the sport, and entertaining and enlightening those old salts who, like me, are already hooked.

So hoist your sails just as I’ve done for so many years, and keep learning because that’s the one thing that I’m sure of about sailing—there’s always more to learn!



Secrecy vs. Sharing

Although I can’t now remember exactly when it happened, there was a day many years ago when I went from being someone who asked all the questions, to being someone

whom fellow sailors came to for advice. It started innocuously enough—probably when a competitor wanted to find out how I played the wind shifts after I won a race at some collegiate regatta. Later, when I started sailing Olympic-class boats such as the 470 and the Soling, speed tricks—the “trade secrets” of the speed demons in these classes—were the most valued currency in the regatta parking lot.

In those days my heroes were guys such as Paul Elvström and Buddy Melges. Elvström—the “Great Dane”—won four gold medals in four different Olympiads, and he wrote books about how to win, sharing his philosophies and techniques with us mere mortals. When I got into the Soling class before the soon-to-be boycotted 1980 Olympics, I learned that Melges—the “Wizard of Zenda”—was as approachable as a small-town merchant. Buddy would drop what he was doing and answer any question asked of him, sharing his tips and techniques to make a Soling go fast. Now, this was the guy who won a gold medal in the Olympics with a string of bullets. Sure he was a sailmaker, but he’d help the guys who didn’t buy his sails, too. Any subject was fair game.

Being exposed to these mentors helped me formulate my own attitude toward sharing knowledge with my competitors. I strongly believe it is both healthy and right to help others, especially when they reach out for information. My attitude is that if telling someone my “secrets” enables that person to beat me, then I need to work harder and sail better. I see sports as an opportunity for you to test yourself against a yardstick (your competition). And if you really care about honing your performance, you will want that yardstick to be as high as it can be.

In those early Olympic campaign days, some of my peers were quite secretive, keeping their technical knowledge and techniques behind the curtain. But that’s a defensive position, not one that encourages growth. I’d rather be the guy trying to break new ground and developing new equipment

(including sails, rigging systems, and underwater foils) than be the one trying to protect the status quo. Sailing is all about demonstrating excellence in a bunch of different disciplines, and being able to make swift decisions and then execute them in a very changeable environment. So no matter how much knowledge you have, or all the amazing equipment you have on your boat, you aren't going to be a great sailor until you can put everything together at just the right time, while all the conditions around you (wind, current, the trim of your boat, the position of your competitors) are constantly changing.

That's what it takes to win—not just having the fastest system to pull up the spinnaker, or whatever happens to be the latest gimmick du jour.

Of course, as you move up toward the America's Cup level of competition, there are secrets—very big ones—protected by ironclad contracts, nondisclosure agreements, security guards, and remote-control cameras. To an America's Cup team, the design and engineering of their boat are priceless intellectual properties not unlike the Coca-Cola Company's top-secret formula for Coke.

Having come to the AC game with my well-developed attitude that sharing and being open with the competition is healthy, I had and still have a hard time with all the secrecy surrounding the Cup. I understand that it's a necessary part of the game, but all this secrecy can be taken to an unhealthy extreme. I think most sailors would agree (although probably not the designers and engineers), and that's why sailors so enjoy the offseason moments of an America's Cup campaign where, in exhibition regattas, the teams have more of a chance to interact. The boats they are sailing in these regattas are older-generation craft with few if any secrets left to hide. There are no fences separating the teams from one another or guards keeping spies out. It's more like a regular regatta.

Most of us grew up in this highly social sport of sailing, where competitors have to work together at some level to improve their sailing. When that part of the game is taken away, or changed, the game feels different.



The Rules

As with any other sport (and in life in general), there are rules in sailing that you have to follow. They are called the *Racing Rules of Sailing* and they have a long history that goes back well over a hundred years. Break the rules, and you are liable to be penalized in that race or even thrown out of the competition. In my experience, the smartest thing anyone competing in any sport can do is to know the rules as well as or better than anyone else. This means being better versed than your competitors whenever possible. But if you want to win at the highest level, your rules knowledge should meet or exceed that of the judges or umpires. A secret to success is often pushing your on-the-water performance or the equipment and setup of your boat right up to the line that divides what is allowed under the rules from what is prohibited—without actually crossing it. Now, to take your boat and its equipment to this line and not beyond requires an intimate knowledge of the rules. To be able to make split-second tactical decisions in crowded, fast-changing situations, a solid grasp of the rules is invaluable. Indeed, the foundation of all sailing tactics—the boat-for-boat strategic battle—is in the racing rules.

The sport of sailboat racing is governed internationally by the International Sailing Federation (ISAF: www.sailing.org). The ISAF updates the *Racing Rules of Sailing* every four years (updates go into effect the January after the Summer

Olympiad). Here, in condensed and creatively edited verbiage, are five of the most basic right-of-way rules that almost every racing sailor has learned. But using the rules to the greatest advantage in your racing requires that you go beyond the first step of knowledge (where many sailors stop) and learn all the right-of-way rules. They only occupy a small part of the rule book, but you should know them better than you know your own phone number.

- Avoid collisions with other boats and any turning marks.
- A starboard-tack boat (with the wind blowing on its right side) has right of way over a port-tack boat.
- For boats on the same tack, the leeward (more downwind, or farther from the wind) boat has the right of way over the windward (more upwind, or closer to the wind) boat.
- For boats on the same tack, the overtaking boat must keep clear of the boat it is passing.
- When rounding marks, the inside boat has the right of way.

Being on top of the rules is so important that America's Cup teams have full-time rules advisors who help the sailors refine their match-racing tactics and even represent their team in protest hearings. These same advisors (or other legal experts) help the teams analyze the Cup's design and construction rules to identify loopholes of opportunity and to ensure that the team's equipment is (just) on the right side of the law.

I'm not suggesting that you must take a similar "sea-lawyerly" approach to your sailing (unless you are planning to mount an America's Cup campaign). In fact, I find such overt use of the rules and flaunting one's knowledge rather uncool. And didn't Shakespeare write about the failings of a guy who "complaineth too much"? Remember, what goes 'round,

comes 'round. If you get known as a protest-happy sea lawyer on the water, your competitors will be less likely to give you a break when they have the opportunity. And believe me, in sailing it doesn't hurt to have a friend or two out there to wave you across in a tight crossing when you are the give-way port tack boat. Really understanding the right-of-way rules doesn't mean you will protest every time you can. It means that you use this knowledge to be more confident in your tight, boat-on-boat tactics, and you will actually lower the odds that you'll end up in a post-race protest hearing. The latter point is significant because any time you go into a protest hearing—no matter how strong you feel your case is—there is a very real possibility that you will come out the loser.



Keeping It Real

Sailing can be very serious business. When someone sinks millions of dollars into a boat and a team to try to win a race, you *know* he is serious. But I also know that no matter how important your endeavor, when you have some fun along the way, you end up doing better in the long run.

It's like when you're in school. The boring, "serious" classes and lectures just seem to go on and on and on forever. You can't wait to get out. But when you've got a good teacher—one who knows how to entertain and make the subject fun—the time goes by far too quickly. And guess what? You end up learning more when you're having fun. During my undergraduate years at Yale, I enjoyed learning from some of the most inspiring lecturers in the world, and my appreciation and retention of the course material soared. But I also had several classes with some real duds. They knew their stuff, but they had no charisma and

their teaching style was . . . turgid, to be kind. Needless to say, it took a lot more effort to soak in the material in those classes.

The two guys who have been at the helm of more America's Cup winners than anyone alive today, Dennis Conner and Russell Coutts, are great examples of people who, in the heat of battle, can make a joke and break the tension as a way to keep everybody balanced. Sure, they are inspiring and demanding to sail with, but their leadership style is relaxed, confident, and, quite frankly . . . fun. And Tom Whidden, who has won the America's Cup three times and grew North Sails into *the* global powerhouse of the sailmaking industry, is a master of the practical joke—he knows just the right time to play his cards, and he plays them very well.

When we were in Fremantle practicing for the America's Cup, we needed someone to fill in and trim the jib sheet—the guy assigned to the trimmer position was off taking pictures of the sail or something. Trimming the jib sheet requires quick hands and good technique that takes some time to master. On a 12 Meter circa 1987, the jib sheets (the lines controlling the corner of the jib) were thick metal wires—5/16"-diameter cable, each bearing thousands of pounds of load—that could bite you pretty badly if you made a mistake. When the boat is tacked the trimmer has to quickly wrap this cable around the winch drum with several full revolutions, before it takes up full load and gets ripped out of his hands. And as the tension increases on the wire, the trimmer needs to have a smooth technique to add additional wraps on the winch drum quickly, but precisely to prevent the wire from getting tangled. Doing it right requires rock-solid nerves and no small amount of finesse.

The head of our technical team, a friend named Robert Hopkins—who has done a lot of sailing—happened to be on board that day and said, "Oh, I've done this before. I trimmed for a while with the British team." So he stepped in for our trimmer, moving to the windward trimmer position next to the winch drum.

We were about to go into a tack and Tom turned to me and said, “Watch this.”

Robert was in position, facing forward, getting ready for the tacking maneuver. During the tack he would have to pull in maybe 50 feet of jib sheet wire and quickly wrap it around a winch as it loaded up with several tons of force. The jib sheet system is designed so that the wire leads from a nearby turning block to the winch drum at the perfect angle so that the wraps start at the bottom of the drum and then spiral upward like a spool of thread. If some slack gets into the system, the “perfect” lead is compromised, and the wire can easily tangle, wrapping on itself. This is called an override—it’s like a gigantic knot preventing the sail from being trimmed in. When this happens, it becomes a major problem for the crew and usually causes the boat to slow down. The risk of an override is greatest in the very middle of the tacking maneuver, especially if the sail trimmer is a bit sloppy in adding those wraps. Not good if you want to win a race (or keep your job).

So we went into the tack, and Robert started wrapping the drum and pulling the sheet in. Right at that moment, Tom reached forward, out of Robert’s line of vision, with a metal pole—a hydraulic handle. He flicked the jib sheet wire up, causing it to lead onto the drum from the top down instead of the bottom up. This triggered the heavy jib sheet wire to immediately wrap into a huge tangled mess and the tack had to be aborted. The entire crew (who had grown used to perfect tacks) turned to look at what had gone wrong and to see who had done it. Robert was red-faced—he had just tried his first tack as a jib trimmer in years, and he screwed it up. He turned around to tell Dennis how sorry he was that he messed up, and there were Tom, Dennis, and the rest of us just laughing away. Everyone on board had a good laugh—including Robert when he realized that Tom had set him up—and we carried on with our practice.

The late Roy Disney—former vice chairman of the Walt Disney Company—was a highly accomplished sailor with numerous ocean racing records to his credit. He was a great guy to sail with, and I enjoyed every one of the many miles I spent on the water with him and his team. During the two decades from the late 1980s to the late 2000s Roy headed one of the most successful ocean-racing teams in the world. Aboard a series of custom 70-to-90-foot sloops (Roy's boats—always named *Pyewacket*, after a cat in the 1958 film *Bell, Book and Candle*—kept getting bigger every time he built a new one), Roy and his team dominated ocean races—first on their home waters of the West Coast and then around the world. Once, during a shore-side conversation about his team's success, Roy told me about the importance of having fun when you're racing, even when you've put a lot of money on the line:

A big part of it for me is we laugh a lot. We keep a certain amount of perspective about how important all this really is to the bigger picture. If you blew something, fine, you blew something—now let's go and you can make up for it. But you've got to have fun. I've always said, "The minute it's not fun, why should I do it?" Everybody seems to understand that. There are plenty of times to get serious.



The Fine Art of Jury-Rigging

There comes a time in every sailor's life when something breaks on board. Unfortunately, instead of happening when

your boat is safely parked at dock or in your driveway, these breakdowns usually seem to occur when you're in the middle of a big race or far offshore and unable to get immediate help. Enter the fine art of jury-rigging—making temporary fixes to broken gear. The point is not to make it pretty, but to make it work—at least long enough to get you to safety or back in the race.

Because a race boat carries only limited spare parts and tools (varying by the size of the boat and the length of the race), jury-rigging requires a certain amount of creativity—sort of like that guy MacGyver in the television series of the same name. Here are some jury-rig essentials that every sailor should keep on board and easily accessible:

- **A sharp knife** This is one essential tool for most every sailing need—from cutting a heavily loaded rope to fending off Jaws.
- **Duct tape** It's amazing the sheer variety of things you can fix with duct tape. Get good-quality tape, not the cheap stuff.
- **Sticky-back** Also known as insignia cloth, this material is available from a sail loft and can be used to temporarily patch together tears and fix holes in sails and even boat hulls.
- **Rope** Always keep some extra rope around. It's amazing what you can do with some small-diameter (say 4 mm), high-strength (Spectra is a good choice) rope. This thin rope is easy to work with and to cut and tie knots in. And if you need to reattach two highly loaded parts, you can lace multiple loops and it will be as strong as much thicker rope.
- **Miscellaneous parts and tools** This depends on the size of your boat. A two-person Olympic 470 might

carry a Ziploc bag with the aforementioned supplies and a Leatherman-style multitool. On a larger boat, be sure you've got a few extra shackles, blocks, and fasteners in case parts break on your boat. And since even MacGyver needed a tool or two, throw an adjustable wrench, Vice-Grips, screwdrivers, wire cutters, hacksaw, hammer, sailmaker's sewing needles, Dacron thread, and a palm into a toolbox, too.

During our Soling Olympic campaign, Dave Perry, Tucker Edmondson, and I were racing in a big regatta—the Pre-Trials off the coast of Newport, Rhode Island—and as we sailed off the starting line in about 18 knots of wind, the pulley that held the mainsheet in the cockpit went flying. Its attaching shackle had blown to bits. (I guess I should mention here the importance of preventive maintenance to avoid the need to jury-rig things.) We were leading the series, and with the mainsail now luffing, we started to fall back from the fleet. My middleman, Dave Perry, pulled in the mainsheet from the boom and got the sail working again, but we needed to fix that pulley so we could trim the main effectively around the race course. Plus on that windy day, we needed Dave's weight hiked out over the side—not inboard holding the mainsheet near the boom.

I remembered a trick that my friend Tyler Keys had taught me on a big boat—how to make a temporary sheet stopper. I quickly asked for the rusty pair of Vice-Grip locking pliers that we kept on board, and adjusted the grip so it fit the diameter of the mainsheet. I then clamped it on the mainsheet where it was leading out of the pulley on the boom going down to Dave's hand. That took the load off the tail of the sheet so that Dave and Tucker could find a spare shackle and pin and easily reattach the errant mainsheet

block. We were back in business in a couple of minutes—all three of us hiking out over the side. And all thanks to those rusty Vice-Grips!



Head Games

Like most athletes, I've been in some pressure-cooker situations where your thoughts and emotions play a critical role in your performance. One of the things I've learned through the science of sport psychology is to use the routine of your daily activities in sport to help keep you in the moment, especially as the stakes get bigger.

Even though you're sailing in the most important race of your life, you're still going to go into the locker room and get dressed the same way as you do every day you sail. You and your team are going to go through the same pre-sail preparation routine, the same process of leaving the dock. You still have to hoist the mainsail, and do the same pre-race sailing to check out the wind—just like on any other race day. It's okay to be nervous, but use your everyday race preparation routine as an anchor to help prevent that nervousness from overwhelming your mind. It might help to remind yourself that this is just another day on the water and you have to follow the same steps that you always follow on your way to the starting line.

It's natural to be excited, but it is important not to let your emotion or excitement—the “arousal level,” as they call it in sport psychology—get out of control and hurt your performance. But that doesn't mean you can't be happy/sad and show emotion. Both can peacefully coexist as long as you are in control!