

## SAILING WORLD

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# Big Boats, Big Tactics

**With high tonnage, there are long-game tactics to consider, but in high-stakes, high-ego superyacht racing, it's never as simple as it appears.**

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My first superyacht race was in France in 2008 on a 112-foot Swan, and the first tactical call of the week was whether to race with the spare anchor, 300 feet of chain, and the Jet Ski, which we discovered in the bow locker. Lighter boats are faster boats, of course, but we quickly learned that when the boat weighs north of 200,000 pounds, it's best to focus on sailing safely and not upsetting the captain by making him leave the toys on the dock.

Very few superyachts are built with racing performance as a top priority. The key to racing them successfully, therefore, is to understand the limitations we have to work with. That's the fun of it, too, because there are always plenty of hands on deck. I raced for three years on a 185-foot ketch that had a Steinway baby grand piano down below, as well as a pair of Napoleon's cannons on deck, but we pushed the boat hard around the racecourse. With the yacht's permanent crew, race crew, the owner and his guests, we would typically race with 40 to 50 people on board at once, and while it's one of the prettiest superyachts ever built, it's no light-air rocket.

Once we heeled enough to get the leeward rail wet, which was around 14 knots of breeze, we could sail well to our handicap. In 15 knots and flat water, we could finish a tack in about one minute and 20 seconds. The tacking angle was around 110 degrees, which isn't too bad for a 320-ton ship. Light air was a different story. In less than 10 knots, the tacking angle was more like 130.

When the wind was up, we had one shot at sheeting the genoa on after a tack. If we tried to sheet harder, once the genoa was fully pressed, the computer would tell the captive winch to ease instead of trim because the loads were too high. Going downwind, if the apparent wind dropped and the mainsheet went slack, it would trigger a low-tension alarm on the captive winch, which sits deep in the bilge. When that happened, the engineer would disappear into the bowels of the boat to make sure there was no actual sheet override. An override, as you can imagine, could be catastrophic once the sheet came under load again.

Most superyachts utilize a wireless communication system so the bow squad, trimmers and afterguard can be in constant contact. Typically we'll have four to six crew members in the communication loop so each area of the boat knows the next move. And each team has a designated safety officer whose sole responsibility is to communicate with other boats via VHF during the race, with the ultimate goal being to avoid any collisions. I work closely with the captain and the engineer to ensure we're not pushing the boat beyond its limits.

The start of a superyacht race is simple but rarely easy. Organizers wisely set up the races in either a Powered By pursuit format, where the boats start in order of handicap performance (slowest to fastest), or on a staggered-start format (typically two-minute gaps), with a handicap applied after the finish. If all the boats get their timing right, there should be only one boat in the starting box at a time. In reality, however, it doesn't always work out that way.

For example, two hours before the start of a race at the 2015 St. Barths Bucket, I got a text message from the tactician of a 200-foot Perini Navi. The day's starting order had just been published, and based on the predicted windspeed, his steed was scheduled to start a mere 30 seconds in front of us.

His text asked, in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek way, what my starting strategy was. The course began with a 4-mile beat. It was windy. I was racing on a 185-foot, 320-ton beast. His whip was only 10 feet longer but nearly 200 tons heavier. We knew we would be higher and faster than them once we got going, but we had to pass them safely.

My answer to him: "Opposite tack from you, and don't be late for your start."

Well, that was the kiss of death. They started on starboard but were about 30 seconds late. Pretty good timing for the 500-plus-ton Perini Navi, but it presented a significant problem for us, as we were committed to our timing two minutes out. We had already unrolled our big genoa and were approaching on port tack, rumbling toward the line at 13 knots of boatspeed. We were happy with our timing but overcanvassed, with the leeward rail awash. We had more than 50 people on board. This was not a quiet boat, and now we had to execute an unplanned 250-foot dip.

While doing so, we had to honor a mandatory 40-meter safety gap and still head up around the other boat's transom to clear the starboard end of the line. The only way to slow our beast was to ease everything and bear away to a near flat run. By the time we got cooking again toward the starting line, we were more than 45 seconds late for our start and had completely screwed up the boat behind us.

Appendix SY of the Racing Rules of Sailing has a unique way of managing when superyachts meet, by requiring a 40-meter distance between any two boats. Forty meters equals 130 feet. That might sound like a lot, but it's really only a boatlength of an average superyacht, and in fact, we're now seeing more 50- and 60-Meters racing. It can take many minutes for some of these behemoths to execute a tack or a jibe, and the timing depends on the efficiency of the hydraulics as well as electrical and computer systems working perfectly throughout the maneuver. The steering systems are often geared, which requires a significant commitment on the wheel before the boat actually responds to the helmsman's turn.

In reality, tacticians and drivers get puckered when the boats get less than a boatlength from each other, because it takes a shockingly long time to execute course changes. The last thing an owner wants is to be on SportsCenter's highlights reel. So what happens when a fast boat that starts late approaches from behind? Of course, the slow boat wants to stay ahead if possible, but if a pass is inevitable, it'll fight to force the faster boat to go around the long way (through its dirty air to leeward). The fast boat has one tool it can use to great effect. In addition to the 40-meter rule, there is an obligation for the boat clear ahead to sail its proper course when the boat behind gets to within 80 meters. The faster boat can now pass knowing it won't get luffed, but it must maintain the 40-meter buffer until clear ahead.

Tactically, the play is for the faster boat to sail directly at the transom of the slower boat and put a man on the bow with a digital range finder and a communications unit, relaying distance to the afterguard in the cockpit. Once the gap reaches 80 meters, the safety officer calls the other boat on the VHF and declares the intention to pass to windward.

Quite often, a much slower boat will cede the space by bearing away, signaling to the faster boat behind that it can play through quickly, but if the speed differences are small, the cat-and-mouse game gets much more interesting. The tacticians, using the safety officers and the VHF, try to lock each other into obligations under the racing rules and may fudge the range-finder data just a touch to reinforce their case on the water. Add a third superyacht to the mix, and the situation gets even more interesting.

A fast boat is almost guaranteed to sail through dirty air as it picks off the slower boats one by one. It's known that a ketch fights through dirty air better than a sloop does, for the simple reason that at least some of a ketch's sail plan is always in clear air as it passes through to leeward.

It's essential to decide well ahead of the intersection how to approach each boat. It's also beneficial to know which ones are happy to let you through quickly (perhaps they are scored in a separate class) and which ones won't roll over without a fight. For a slower boat, the tactical game is based on sailing smart and minimizing the effect of the bigger boats as they stream past. In the 2009 St. Barths Bucket, for example, I was racing a "little" Swan 100, and we had done well on a long beat because we were agile enough to tack on the shifts better than most of the fleet had. However, the next leg was a long port-tack fetch around the top of the island, and now the bigger boats had the advantage.

Sure enough, the 215-foot Mirabella V had gone to a far-offshore layline, and we were converging on port tack with us to leeward. For a long time it wasn't clear which boat would get its bow ahead, as the very different sailing characteristics of the boats were coming into play. We could point higher, but that no longer mattered because we were now fetching the island, sheets cracked, and Mirabella had more than twice our waterline length.

Just as Mirabella V rolled us, 50 meters to windward, the captain of our boat remarked that Mirabella V had the tallest mast in the world. Great, I thought. Enjoy your gilded gas mask. We sat in the worst bad air in the world until Mirabella finally rumbled clear ahead.

Veteran pro sailor Wally Henry says racing superyachts is like driving a school bus on a motocross track. It can be done, but the winner is usually the team that pushes its needle closer to the red line without blowing up anything.

Nearly all the top racing superyachts have a playbook of maneuvers, which are updated each regatta so everyone on the crew knows where to be positioned for hoists, sets and drops. On Marie we had a five--minute countdown to the kite drop that we rarely deviated from. The playbook kept us fast and safe. The trick was to leave space before the layline so we had room for a one-minute soak to get the kite behind the genoa and into the hands of the bow team for a clean drop.

On P2 (at 125 feet and with a more racing-oriented layout, with smaller gear), we have refined a three-minute, 30-second timeline for the same maneuver, and we can save another full minute by not using the snuffer system and doing a conventional spinnaker drop to the deck. Most superyachts will use the snuffer sock system on the kites, but we've started racing without the snuffer in less than 15 knots. The communications and the timing of the helmsman's bear-away had better be perfect. When it goes bad, it can be significant.

Pulling 1,600 square meters of spinnaker cloth from the water, with 40 of your friends on board, is not a winning move.

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