

2020 Summer of Sailing Laser Coaching Observations

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It was a great season for Laser sailing in Australia until COVID-19 arrived. I was lucky enough to see some top level Laser (and Finn) sailing up close and observe the local Laser fleet energised to compete and be involved. I also saw some special people take on a major volunteering effort and achieve a spectacular outcome. Thank you also to everyone who simply helped out and or gave time to make the events a great success.

I hope these coaching observations and ideas can keep you challenged and involved towards the next regatta.

Overview:

The first thing that instantly hit me with the local Laser coaching I was involved with last season was that everyone wants to set their boats up exactly the same as the very top sailors. I always felt that for most of the people I was observing, some simple things like larger diam ropes and more comfortable hiking positions would be of significant benefit and a more physically sustainable approach to the sailors technique would allow for more frequent adjustments (gear changing) and less pain, greater righting moment, provide more time on the water with a resulting outcome more enjoyable sailing experience.

Sailing the same setups and systems as the very top sailors requires equal strength, endurance and skill. This can be counterproductive if you cannot execute the associated technique properly because you are not on water enough, have not acquired the required physical strength to utilise the (full) advantage and most importantly, loose interest because you cannot repeat or achieve a high level skillset with a busy life outside the sport.

It's also important to remember that regattas are always a series of daily mental and physical efforts that require recovery. What I observed were people trying to do things that were the same as the top sailors in video's and as instructed from other coaches during a training session or camp that were never going to be repeatable over the timespan of a long and or windy regatta.

In short, alternative techniques and setups would be well worth considering for many Laser sailors who are not able to do – or have anymore – the strength, endurance and flexibility of elite athletes.

Here are a few things I have reflected on since the summer as key issues for the local fleet to consider.

Ropes:

Size and loops: Most of the sailors I saw had to pull their hardest (at the end of the pull) on very tiny ropes when the load was at its greatest. Have a look at setting your ropes and adjustments so that you have the loop as close to the cleat when off. This allows you the maximum use of the handle loop which is so much easier to use. You then also have the maximum range of adjustment available to you without running out of tension adjustment potential. Try less purchases to see if this helps as well as the loop offers considerable leverage potential (equivalent to a few purchases) over a rope held in the palm. There is a video on the web somewhere from Tom Burton who talks about this.

You will then be using the full advantage of the loop to use all of your available power when pulling controls on when they are hardest, whenever this is required.

Rope handling: You cannot sail a Laser effectively, upwind or down with the mainsheet wrapped (locked) around the hand. You should be able to hold and release it to the tiller hand for adjustment at all times. You can then have available at all times, the opportunity to adjust large amounts of sheet to best facilitate any and all steering and trim related activity – esp. in strong breezes. You might be able to sail with a Diameter 5 or 6 mm mainsheet for a short period of time, but I observed many people who could not hold it for any more than half an hour into a session and after wrapping it around their palm, lost the ability to fully adjust the sheet, which saw an immediate negative change to their technique, resulting in greater / harsher use of the tiller which then led to more heel variation and bigger course changes / directional heading as over compensation which both contribute significantly to a reduction in forward progress. The ability to trim at will, around the key objective of keeping the boat moving forward without interruption is the key element of this technique.

Please buy a cheap 16 plait Polypropylene Diameter 8mm mainsheet sheet (they are cheap) and try it in breezes above 15 knots. Take the time to observe the additional grip available and that in stronger breezes, there is no detrimental effect to the trimming of the sails or performance using a larger sheet diameter.

Hint: Polypropylene ropes (and tight construction ropes) sometimes use a detergent in the manufacturing process to make them. Shake and soak the rope in warm water for a few good rinses to get rid of any residue or your sheet might froth up around the ratchet block when you use it the first few times. It's a good idea to do this with all your ropes when you first use them and regularly as salt build up stiffens them and increases friction with the blocks over time.

Steering:

When you next go out sailing, if you try anything, try this simple exercise.

When sailing in a straight line upwind or down, focus your vision about 10 metres directly ahead of your existing course and wish you were there NOW! Wish completely, totally, mustering every cell of your body that you can to transport the boat to be in that imaginary place at every moment you are sailing.

3 things should happen when you do this.

The first is that you will unwittingly learn to AIM your boat. Your helm movement will reduce significantly as you look beyond the constraints of the physical boat and stop responding to minor and immediate issues like angle of heel and the next wave. You will experience new boat generated movements that may seem strange at first as you stop responding to the immediate environment, but that you can learn to live with as the boat seems to efficiently joggle along, forward and faster.

The third result is that you quickly realise and re-prioritise a new set of issues that no matter more and you will start to look strategically for any and all information that you need to get to the desired imaginary location.

What emerges is a 101-sailing lesson. Getting your head out of the boat, getting it across the ocean floor as quickly, efficiently and fast as possible. This is also a mental approach that will significantly help you get off the line in big fleets.

Develop two clear mindsets to switch on and off.

Think about it: The major non -boat specific issue for everyone I observed was the psychological development of 2 deliberate and quite specific mindsets when training and racing.

The first, Mindset 1 = PLAY - is required to experiment and try different things to see what works for your sailing style and will offer some potential to develop more or try it things over an extended period of time. This mindset lets you play with ideas of your own or those presented and compare the experience and findings to what you have done previously. It also allows you to listen to a coach and engage, not push back against ideas and suggestions from new sources. The potential for improvement is greatest when you learn from others and integrate or adapt new elements to you own needs or skillset.

Mindset 2 = EXECUTE – is your race mode. This is established quickly with simple routines and cues that are race led, generated and motivated. As soon as a race is on, in training or events, you need to repeat routines quickly that prepare you and acquire the knowledge needed to execute the best possible performance.

Many sailors I see at training camps train and race, in one or the other mindset. They do not differentiate between what is a learning exercise (MINDSET 1) when you are trying to see / test / trial and then what you have learnt by observation and as tested (MINDSET 2). As such they are either perpetually either training or racing with the resulting limitations of such an approach being a less than optimum / limited result potential in the future for any effort given.

Sailing has many, many variables and having clearly defined approaches that allow you to first experiment and then effectively test your effort(s) will allow the maximum potential to learn and develop as a fuller, more complete sailor in all aspects of the sport.

RACE FACE:

One of the (unusual) joys of coaching is watching sailors put on their race face when you come up in the RIB to watch them. Race Face is when a sailor tries to sail the way they think the coach wants them too or maybe how they think a world champion might look when they sail. It always involves trying too hard and often results in looking like a mess.

The issue for sailors when they are being coached and respond this way is that the coach does not see what they are really like or the level that they are at and as such, the information they can offer / convey is not as relevant or useful as it could be.

As a coach you know you have someone special when you watch the sailor from afar and they keep sailing the same way as you come up close to them. This attribute exhibits a focused and confident person who is actually trying to sail in a structured way – they are present in a continuum and are focused on sailing well at all times.

I used to talk about this a lot at YouthSails I ran, when I had a week to explain it fully to the groups and observe / reinforce a behavioural change attitude with individuals.

So, when being coached, stay relaxed and keep sailing normally and stay focused on what you were previously doing. It will certainly achieve a better outcome and get the best possible information and suggestions from any coach you are working with at any time.

Summary:

If you can try something new for a set period, you will see change. Then you can decide if its better and if you want to keep it. Look ahead of the boat to where you want to be, and the path and thew sailing technique required to be successful will become much clearer and simplified. Always present and stay the sailor that you are on the water, and the learning / feedback will be better. And, experiment with something small or large all the time to keep your training goal orientated and outcome orientated.

Measuring progress and development.

Try this simple program to see how adjusting to a new dynamic, observing & measuring change and testing outcomes can be experienced over a period of time at minimal cost.

- 1: Go to your training sail and cut off / remove ALL the tell-tales.
- 2: Then (now that you have committed fully) give some thought to how you believe this will change the way you sail (what will you now look for – what will you miss – where can you / do you need to compensate – how will it change your sailing)
- 3: Commit to sailing without tell-tales for 3 months or the next 20 sessions.
- 4: When you do sail. When training, think with Mindset 1 - how you will be impacted and how you can / do adjust – learn – experiment with planned and new emerging ideas that are required to accommodate or adjust to this trial. Then think with Mindset 2: as to how you can measure or observe any differences to your performance from the removal of the tell-tales.
- 5: Continually break the learnings and new ideas down into definable actions. Regularly trial and train with these specific ideas central to your focus – for set periods of time in any / each session. e.g. What indicators, boat movement, tiller are available to tell me the same information?
- 6: Determine how you might test in competition what the difference is to your sailing from doing this activity. Is having tell-tales simply beneficial, are they irrelevant or essential?
- 7: Continue to train with the ideas you developed and test them (and new ones) regularly in training and determine how you will observe and measure new activity in races .
- 9: After 3 months, decide if you actually need or simply want all or any of your tell-tales back? Has this process determined new locations for them that you now want them to be, do you only need a few? Are they as important as you thought they were before you took them off? What would you do to position them better, make them of something else or what brand would you buy?
- 10: Now, review the process you used, how you made decisions, the learnings gained and the outcomes that you can apply to other areas of you sailing needing attention.

Finally,

I hope you have been safe and well during the recent months and that the information presented will be something that you can think about and look forward to utilising when we emerge with the new horizons ahead of us, where getting out on the boat and simply enjoying ourselves will be a more special thing to you than it has ever been before. Who knows, maybe they will even bring back reaching to racing for an added bit of fun and technique!

And always.....Get a good start, get to the windward mark as quickly as possible and sail your best.

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