

J/24 Go Fast Clinic - Notes from Charles Hansen (edited and formatted)

On the weekend of May 10, 1996, I attended a J/24 Go FAST Clinic at the Royal Canadian Yacht Club in Toronto. I found this weekend to have been time well spent and a lot of fun. I want to share some of it with you in the same way as that the two guest speakers did for us.

Before we get into this, I want to emphasize that having fun is one of the primary goals here. . . going fast and winning is quite often fun.

We had two guest speakers who knew what they were talking about when it came to J/24s. They were Dave Crocker from Waterline boat works in Newport and Geoff Moore from Shore Sails, also of Newport.

The first session on Saturday morning had Dave (rocker) talking about the positions and duties on Mookie (everyone has seen Mookie in the J/24 winners circle, right?). You may not have the same levels of talent to choose from or the same options in terms of crew, but this is how Mookie's team sails, and wins. It works for them, it should be able to work for us.

Crew Positions

Starting at the bow as position #1

#1 Bow - in addition to agreed upon bow duties, hoists, pole, jibe, take down, the bow person is looking at the water, in waves they look for flat spots and avenues to maneuver in. They feed information to the Tactician.

#2 String Section - Dave calls this position the String Section and in addition to the agreed upon duties with the bow person, this second person is calling the breeze. They look up weather on all legs. What is the weather forecast for the next 100 metres, what is going to hit the boat in next 15-20 seconds, Puffs and lulls are called. This person has to be tuned into what the wind trends are. . . have they been shifting or are they oscillating. What is the frequency of the oscillations (you'll see later that the home work starts hours before the race ever does). All of this information is fed to the tactician.

#3 The Tactician... YOUR MIND IS OUTSIDE OF THE BOAT (try to stay on the race course though) this person should have an incredible depth and understanding of the chess game that is a sail boat race and subsequently a regatta or series. You must know the rules inside out, and you should be able to see situations developing LONG before anyone else on the boat becomes aware of them... and you should have figured out how to get your team through the situation or avoid it to best advantage. Always know where the clear air is.. . hopefully this location and your boat location should coincide. You should get most of the air information from the two people up forward. You have to be the problem solver of the boat. If something goes wrong with the equipment or the boat, you are the one who has the tool kit and you either do the repair or coordinate [it](#). .. everyone else should be sailing fast and not jumping around. Generally, on the down wind legs the tactician is standing inside the companionway getting a good view to the whole race course.

#4 Trimmer... strong like ox, smart like street car! If your trimmer can hoist a beer at the end of good day of sailing, they weren't trying hard enough. Seriously, the Trimmer does the genoa and the spinnaker sheet and spinnaker guy ("brace" for you Kiwis). While sailing up wind the genoa trimmer is also checking the MAIN sail shape and working with the driver in the puffs. The objective is to keep the boat FLAT. During a puff, in club racing, often it is only the main that gets eased... think of the slot size... the big boys ease both sails in puffs and bring them back in as speed increase or the wind eases. All this helps keep the boat flat... remember there is only 4 feet of draft in the tiny keel (when the boat is upright) preventing sideslip (try sailing behind a J/24 that has 5 degrees of heel while yours is flat. you may never want to sail with heel ever again)... I digress. Off the wind, your big trimmer should be able to pump both the sheet and guy in winds up to about 20 knots (blade weather) to promote planing. In lighter air, the trimmer is constantly trimming properly and giving feed back on pressure in the chute. (if the tactician is talking enough {about the race} then the trimmer should be able to follow the other boats without taking eyes off to the spinnaker., which would immediately collapse)

5 **Driver** - eyes on the ticklers, in consultation with the tactician, work out a strategy for the race. eyes on the ticklers, the driver should NOT be looking up the course. trust the ticklers. the driver has to establish a level of comfort with the tactician with respect to how much information needs to pass between them. eyes on the ticklers. Concentrate on driving fast. Did I mention keeping eyes on the ticklers? Main sail trim is important and keeping the boat flat should be near the top of the priority list. The driver grinds the genoa sheets with that 3rd hand, so that the huge trimmer doesn't have to lean inboard. (cleats on the tow rail help)

N.B. When sitting on the rail, you are either IN or OUT, there is no middle ground, because the driver will not be able to keep the eyes on the ticklers through your fat race ready head!

#6 If you sail with a sixth person, use them to best advantage, give them an important job, for example boat heel control... keep the boat flat, extra weight in the roll tacks and jibes, fore and aft trim. Emphasize the consequences of not getting it right or what happens to boat performance if concentration slips.

Boat layout - Dave then went on a bit about boat layout and really the bottom line is SIMPLE IS BETTER. It is less hardware, less weight and cheaper. He suggests two sets of Spinnaker Ratchet blocks and ratchet blocks on the genoa cars (make sure the sheets and the blocks are compatible size wise or it doesn't work very well)

Geoff Moore came on stage after coffee break and talked a bit about the boat. He lead with the story of why the J/24 is the size that it is something to do with the size of the Johnson's garage where the prototype was built it was funny when he told the story. I didn't take notes on that bit sorry.

Keel - the J/24 has a short fat keel which has high drag and high lift. Many of you may have experienced lee helm, the keel is too far aft so the boat wants to head down. Move (fair) your keel as far forward as the rules will allow and fair it smooth to minimum size. Sails - to take away some of the lee helm, you have to move the sail plan as far aft as you can. To do this, use the maximum head stay length, and get your 3 measurement as big and as far aft as the rules will allow. (apparently, mast butt placement isn't too important at this point... Geoff wasn't too excited about it as I recall). Also, you want to go with the shortest mast height... allows the extra head stay length to have more effect on moving the sail plan aft.

A couple of notes here that don't seem to be related to the subject, but anyway...

Tacks - You have to get your tacks down so that about 85% of them are good (that is rolling and trimming and steering and coming out fast). [my note: if everyone on the boat is at the race, then you should be able to see and feel when the tacks are going to occur... tactics, wind and traffic all add up to the decision to tack.. . it is usually pretty obvious and easy to anticipate]

Sail selection.. you should know your capabilities and weights and rig tune and how well you can make the boat go, so sail selection should be obvious for your team, but when in doubt at the change over velocities, go with the majority. Doing a sail change in 3 (three) minutes is good, so practice. If you capsize with the chute up, release the halyard... The boat comes back up REALLY fast and is pointing in the right direction unless the driver lets go of the tiller. [my note: I have used this on a few occasions and have lost 1 - 2 boat lengths where others have lost 10 - 20 boat lengths with their chutes wrapped around the spreaders and through the upper triangle] There is sometimes a problem when the spinnaker gets blown back into the cockpit and the skipper can't see, but a good driver should be able to keep track of down wind and have the boat up to speed in the right direction in no time.

Dave (rocker back on stage to talk about preparations on race day!

Preflight check..

- unload all spare gear before (and after) regattas
- check the weather before you get to the venue..., the earlier the better. Start looking for trends and patterns in the weather (clouds that look like elephants is not the kinds of patterns to look for)

- Understanding the weather helps you select the gear to wear for the day notice I said wear and not bring!
- Preflight also gets the crew focused on the fact that the race has already started for your team and you are getting mentally prepared. Morning jobs:
- Make sure that the team knows that these jobs have to be done and assign them to various people. Get everyone involved!
- Check the official notice board and the unofficial message board.
- Make sure that there is a set of sailing instructions on board ***** (very important)
- Check the standings, note the points, who is the competition
- Check the sail inventory, any sail repairs, check the battens in the jib
- Rig the jib sheet blocks before the race, make sure the lock nuts are free
- Check the Interior of the boat
- Make sure that there is no moisture inside, lazarettes and everywhere
- Food and drink for the day is stowed
- Motor fuel
- water
- Are we CLASS LEGAL?
- no extra gear
- no crew bags... unless you wear the bag!
- every extra pound/kg is slowing the boat
- Do one last weather check before departure. Share the information with everyone, you might even find out something that you hadn't thought of. Sharing the info will increase our collective knowledge and make us better sailors and racers.

" To help in the refinements of this prerace routine, get everyone to do the same jobs every time so that they get better at them.

(Dave didn't mention this, but I have seen all of the big boys swim the boat each morning of a regatta and clean the bottom how keen are YOU?)

DEPARTING THE DOCK

Some information shared by Dave on how they win on Mookie.

- Mookie doesn't use a spinnaker bag... the spinnaker just sits on the floor... they don't want to carry the extra weight up high.
- Tape the halyard knots and shackles (all three)
- On the way out to the course, start sailing as soon as possible so that the team gets into tune sooner and can start getting psyched.

- Have your team meeting on the way out to the course, talk about weather, strategies, focus on goals, make the expectations clear.
- on the way out to the course, take wind shots every few minutes, looking for oscillations, trends, changes in speed. Have 5 - 10 golf pencils in the companionway hatch grooves and write down all of the weather observations.
- decide on sail selection
- Check in with the race committee
- Check for information ON the race committee boat, courses, course headings, distance to weather mark.
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GET INTO RACE MODE EARLY

- get a buddy and sail up wind checking boat speed. Compare car position, sail trim and rig tune.. . share your information.. . we learn faster as a group
- again with a buddy, sail up wind on opposite tacks for 2-1/2 mm. tack back and see where you cross after 5 mm does this show a favored side? will it be better than heading for the beach?
- Check currents and tides and then head for the beach anyways!* some notes on this at the end.
- set the spinnaker and do a few jibes... in the lighter airs, you are P going to have to become good at roll jibing.
- In a big regatta it is not unusual to be out on the course 1.5 2 hours before the start of the race and practice maneuvers and testing and tuning rig and trim settings.
- look for wind, the higher up the better.
- look at any marks that have already been laid... especially if there is a leeward pair of gate marks... is one side favored? In the big regattas there will be leeward gates.

AT 10 MINUTES Start watches

- one person calls the time (LOUD). agree with the driver and the tactician at what intervals the time will be called, get into a rhythm.
- look for tide, float an orange peel and see what it does. Look for flocking seagulls to indicate tide lines or rips
- get an idea of what sort of SET there is going to be.
- Did other boats/classes start ahead of you? Who scored? left or right or middle?
- Talk Strategy... what you will do in the absence of all other boats
- Talk Tactics.. . what you will do when encountering other boats
- Where is your competition in the points race?... what are you going to do with them? What is the Start plan?

AT 5 MINUTES Genoa up!

- you are racing, the racing rules apply, stay focused.

- Sail on the start line
- look for course flags and any other signal flags
- look for changes in conditions (if you have predicted the 5 minute conditions, see how close your prediction is to actual conditions) - adjust to the new forecast)
- check the line for transits

you should have finalized your start strategy - keep the competition in view #1 person (Bow) clears the hole to weather (lots of yelling at weather side hole stealers)(helps the skipper to know when the weather hole is threatened) #1 person (Bow) calls the "over early"... the pressure is on!

RACING

- talk tactics - wind up-dates - what is going on up the course - what is relative boat speed and point to the boats above and below - look for avenues of clear air - call puffs and soft spots, lifts and headers, waves and flat spots, boat trim

Geoff Moore talked about changes in wind strength that produce a change in wind direction. In the northern hemisphere, accelerating wind will shift to the right and decelerating wind will shift to the left.. . does that tell you anything useful?

Most of the big boys will sail with their spinnaker pole on the lower ring either Dave didn't explain why, or I wasn't paying attention sorry. It might have something to do with asymmetrical spinnaker mentality, but I don't know????

You should be able to feel weeds and plastic garbage, but check regularly anyway. Most crew can clear the rudder with a good stretch of the leg running the foot down the leading edge and off the bottom t' (remember to hang on to the pushpit rail and get out fast... see if you can do it without getting wet... tape your splash suit at the ankle)

There really wasn't much more in the way of class room stuff. We had a dozen or so races and 30-40 practice starts on really short lines and even some mandatory port take starts... some people just can't get out of the STBD tack start no matter what ugggly!

Geoff presented some interesting puzzles for us in terms of strategic moves in a split current situation and changing wind situation. It turns out that we should do a bit of mental gymnastics and view the wind from the surface of the water rather than the surface of the ground. Think about apparent wind shifts due to current. Draw some vector diagrams of the true wind and effects of current. What happens to the apparent wind when you cross from no current to a left hand set? Geoff also went on about how wind slows as it passes over land masses and how this produces a left hand shift as the wind slows. I am not so sure that I understand what he was getting at, but it certainly fits the lift (on port tack) to the mark after hitting the beach on the westerly. This may take a few more beers to figure out.

We had a great time at this clinic. I learned a lot. Met many super people who happened to sail J/24. I had fun too. We also found out that two people can pull into a parking lot with a 3 in tow and SAIL (in the same boat) out of the slip in less than an hour... there are some dinghies that take longer than this to rig. .. go figure?

Good luck.

Charles