

Winning the 2014 National Championship, and How We Got There

Earlier this year John McAllister and I had some lengthy discussions about genoa shapes and materials, and we agreed that we'd try to keep the discussion moving forward throughout this season. However, as I reflect back on all the time and effort spent this year in preparation for the National Championship, I honestly don't feel like there was any particular boat or sail items which were critical to our success at this year's National Championship. Admittedly, we spent a LOT of time on sail development with our sailmaker, Al Declercq of Doyle Sails Detroit, and we also employed a different backstay and genoa lead system than most of the boats in the fleet, but given the fact that this year's National Championship was sailed in 4-6 knots TWS, we rarely utilized much of the potential available to us with our unique backstay/lead systems, and instead we just focused on the following while we were on the water:

1. Get the cleanest start we can get.
2. Maintain the correct balance of sail trim at all times.
3. Be sure to balance staying in the best pressure, with tacking and gybing the boat as little as possible.
4. NEVER underestimate a layline into a mark.

There are however, a couple key points about how we set-up our team, and budgeted our time this season, that might be a bit different from how other boats do things, and so the following is a re-cap of what we chose to do differently, and why we chose to do it that way.

For starters, when it came time for Adam and I to plan out our 2014 season we agreed early that our goal wasn't going to be to simply DO the Nationals in Port Huron, but we wanted to WIN the Nationals. As such, we knew we needed a plan for how we were going to achieve our goal, which started with a thorough assessment of whether or not we felt we had the tools we would need to win a National Championship, and then from there we could determine what we were going to do differently from previous years. Fortunately, we had already ordered a new 150% genoa, as well as a new spinnaker that fall, and we felt that those 2 sails, when combined with our 2011 mainsail (which only had 3-4 regattas on it,) would be enough to start the season and assess what our strengths and weaknesses were relative to the fleet. Therefore, in order to achieve this early season assessment we agreed that we would compete in the Bayview One Design regatta held in late May on Lake St. Clair. This event is typically attended by the majority of the Detroit Cal 25 fleet, (as well as a few boats from the Port Huron fleet,) thereby giving us an excellent preview of what our competition would look like at the Nationals later this year. However, we also agreed this would be the ONLY regatta we would compete in this year other than the Nationals, and this is very important for several reasons.

First, since Adam and I both travel quite a bit for work, and we both have newborn children at home, the amount of time we have available for sailing is quite limited. Therefore, we both agreed that any additional time spent away from work or family would have to yield a maximum return on investment. As such, while sailing a bunch of weekday and/or weekend events certainly helps improve all the requisite skill sets, we've found that if you're in the middle of a race you're less inclined to stop in the middle of a maneuver that's going horribly wrong and talk with everyone about what's going wrong, why it's going wrong, and what needs to be done to avoid it going wrong in the future. To put it more simply, we felt that we could achieve greater results from several straight line sail testing and maneuvering practices than we could from a whole bunch of racing. This is an approach that I think may have been unique to our team this year, but one which I think each and every team could benefit from at least once or twice a year, if planned and structured appropriately.

The second reason I think our plan yielded such a good result this year, is because I feel it helped our team maintain a level of enthusiasm and ambition that we might not have achieved otherwise. To be more specific, here in Detroit there is weekday and weekend races every single week of the season and most teams want to compete as much as possible during that timeframe. However, as most one-design racers know, the results of all of these races begin to reveal certain trends: good teams frequently do well, and the more challenged teams often find themselves struggling to keep up with the good teams after just a few weeks. The point is simply that by competing in a lot of weekday/weekend events each month, certain expectations about performance begin to emerge, and we didn't want our team to have ANY expectations about how good or bad we might do at the Nationals, we just wanted everyone to be focused on achieving our MAX potential. Additionally, by not competing in too many other events this year we felt our team would be forced to continually be asking ourselves what we were going to have to do to find a way to do our jobs to the BEST of our abilities, without any expectations of what kind of results those efforts might yield. So as we mapped out how we were going to achieve our goal for this season, we also knew there were going to be some other key components that we needed to make sure we were focused on.

For our team, one of the things we felt was going to be critically important to winning a National Championship was everyone's ability to remain focused on their jobs, and be able to execute their responsibilities as quickly and efficiently as possible. So as many of you know, in a small boat like a Cal 25, there is typically only one person that makes the calls on where and when the boat tacks and gybes, and in the Cal fleet this is typically the driver. However, Adam and I both recognized that driving a Cal 25 in most conditions is tougher than performing brain surgery on a cocktail table in the middle of a bar brawl. Therefore, since Adam typically drives the boat, and that job was going to require 100% of his focus in order to drive it anywhere close to max potential, we knew we were going to need someone else to make the tactical and strategic decisions required to win a National Championship. So as we discussed things, we recognized that the mainsail trimmer's position was the one which afforded a person the greatest ability to see as many different sides of the race course as possible, while also requiring the minimum amount of movement to do so.

This discussion then led us to a further examination of what the responsibilities would be for each of the positions on the boat, and as we talked through each of those responsibilities, we realized that not only was the helmsman going to have to remain exceptionally focused on his own area of responsibility, but each and every member of the crew would as well. Therefore, we knew there would also need to be a very clear division of labor for each position, and this very clear division of labor and responsibility was something that I think enabled us to maintain the level of focus we needed in order to achieve both our individual and collective MAX potential.

As part of this process though, and as I stated previously, we recognized that we would need to compete in at least one event prior to the Nationals, in order to assess our strengths and weaknesses relative to our competitors. Then, once we felt we had a decent understanding of our strengths and weaknesses, we knew we needed some time on the water away from the fleet and outside of the racing mentality, in order to refine our strengths and improve on our weaknesses. Since neither Adam nor I had the kind of time available to devote to a full season practice schedule, we chose to allocate what little time we did have to some very structured sail and trim testing, (and less to maneuvering practice,) since we felt our straight line speed would play a bigger factor in determining the results at the Nationals than our maneuvers. Therefore, we went out several times between the BOD regatta and the Nationals, experimenting with different genoa lead set-ups, different amounts of backstay tension, and different

amounts of halyard tension, all in an effort to find the limits of what our boat and sails could do, and then taking notes on the settings we had for the shapes we liked in certain conditions. However, the next biggest difference between how our team approached the Nationals this year and how we'd approached the event previously, had nothing to do with sails or sail testing, and everything to do with how we approached each race.

Once we were out on the water each day, (and once the committee had a line set,) we got very aggressive with practicing our time-on-distance before and/or between races. Our team had done some of this during our practice sessions previously in the year, but there is absolutely no substitute for doing this on the actual starting line, in the exact same body of water you will be sailing for the event. The way we accomplished this drill successfully, was by estimating our time to the line from a point anywhere below the line, then making a full speed approach to the line and seeing how close our estimate came to the actual time it took to get to the line. Once we got pretty good at estimating our time-on-distance with a full speed, straight-line approach to the line, we began tossing in other variables such as a port tack approach with a tack, or a port tack approach with a gybe. We also began factoring in approaches that were too early and required us to "burn" time without going over the line (much easier to do without anyone on your lee-bow!). The point is simply this, there is absolutely no questions in my mind that this one drill, in that exact body of water, with those exact conditions helped us get some of the best starts we had all year, and as most of us know: having a front-row start makes holding your lane off the line a lot easier, and gives you a lot more options on where you choose to go from there.

So in summary, If I had to create a short list of the things I think our team did differently in how we approached and sailed the National Championship this year, and how those differences could translate into the rest of the fleet, it would be the following:

1. Take a good hard look at your team and ask yourselves what you need to do to get everyone working together as efficiently as possible, with the uniform goal of achieving the MAX potential from each individual person, as well as the boat, the sails, the team, and most importantly the TIME you have available as a team.
2. Don't just race your boat all season long, but schedule a few practice sessions, and work on refining your straight-line speed and sail shapes, as well as your maneuvers. We did it by ourselves, but if you've got another boat to do this with alongside your own, (and you discuss the differences between your two set-ups while you're doing it,) you'll likely achieve even better results than we did!
3. Make sure the person that is making the decisions about where to tack and gybe the boat is in a position to see as much of the race course and competition as possible, without having to move around the boat too much, or spend all of their time on something as absolutely critical to keeping a Cal 25 going fast as driving or trimming a headsail. Simply put, we believe each team's best tactical/strategic person should also be the mainsail trimmer for that boat.
4. Practice time-on-distance. You don't even need a starting line for this, you can just pick a nearby buoy or drop in an anchor with a lifejacket tied to it, then do some upwind approaches to the mark, estimating the time it will take you to get to it, and comparing that with the actual amount of time it took you to get there. Once you've got a good feel for your time-on-distance, try approaching the mark early and "burning" time without sailing past your mark, or adding a few tacks and/or gybes to your approach.

Adam and I have invested a reasonable portion of our time and money into Cal 25 sailing over the past few years, because we believe it is simultaneously the most competitive and reasonably priced keelboat

sailing available to us in our hometown. As such, now that we have achieved our goal of winning the 2014 National Championship, we know we need to do everything we can to share as much of how we did it as we can, in an effort to help everyone else achieve similar results, and thereby keep the racing as close and competitive as possible. After all, the reason Adam and I were both drawn to the class is because of how close and competitive the class is already, so if there is anything else anyone would like to know about any aspect of how our boat, our rig, our sails, or our team were set-up, feel free to send me a note at the following address: erikryan313@gmail.com.

I'll also be writing up some more info on how we set-up our rig, and our sail controls later this year, so stay tuned for that info and/or send me a note if you'd like to know something very specific right away. Meanwhile, thanks again to Tyson Connolly and the rest of the Port Huron crew for making the 2014 Nationals such a fun-filled and well run event. See you all on the water again soon!

-Erik Ryan-
Co-owner, "Target Practice"
Hull #632