

# Moving Up

*A simple plan for improving your racing results*

*by Bill Symes*

If you're anything like me, you're always looking for a way to move up the leader board in your fleet. This is true for sailors of all levels, whether you're trying to beat everybody, or just trying to beat anybody. To newcomers it can seem like a big mystery ("why are those guys so fast and why am I so slow?"). To help demystify it, I've tried to develop a systematic approach. It's based on a concept used by sports psychologists, which is to focus on the process rather than the outcome. In the words of 2006 Laser World Champion Michael Blackburn, "Focus on the elements of completing the task and the outcome will take care of itself." With that in mind, here's a simple, three-step program you can follow to help improve your performance (which will improve your results!):

1. **Identify the success factors.** What skills are required to be a winner in your fleet? What are the top guys doing better, or differently, than you?
2. **Assess your skill levels.** How do your current skills measure up against the success factors you identified? Where do you need to make improvements?
3. **Make an action plan.** Now that you know what skills you need to work on, set goals for specific performance improvements and develop a plan for achieving them.

## Identify Success Factors

These will vary for each class, but there are a few fundamentals that are common to all. Boat handling skills, for instance. We all have a lot of room for improvement in things like tacking, jibing, mark rounding, and accelerating off the starting line. A little dedicated work on these basics usually pays off in immediate performance gains. Beyond that, when defining the relevant success factors for your class, a good place to start is with the three "T"s of boat speed:

1. **Tuning.** Your boat and rig must be set up correctly for maximum speed and ease of handling. This one's pretty easy; all you have to do is read the class tuning guides or look at the way the hot shots are setting up their boats, and then copy them.
2. **Trimming.** You need to learn how to trim both sails and hull to get them operating at maximum efficiency. You use your sheets to position the sails at the optimum angle to the wind. You use your sail controls to set optimum draft and leech tension for the conditions. You use your crew weight to balance the boat fore and aft and athwartships to maximize speed through the water. You can get a lot of this information from books, articles, clinics, and coaches, but it takes plenty of practice to master it.
3. **Turning.** You need to learn to steer the boat swiftly, accurately, and economically (i.e., as little as possible) as you guide it through waves and wind shifts, tacks and jibes, and around marks and other boats. The only way to check this one off is through many hours of tiller time.

## Assess Skill Levels

Now that you've determined what skills are required to be successful in your fleet, take a sober look at how your skills measure up. Most of us do some things well, and some things not so well. Recognize your strengths; you can build on them. But the primary focus of your improvement goals needs to be on your weaknesses. If you lose a boat length or two every time you tack, you need to work on tacking. If you are consistently in the second or third

row at the start, you need to work on starting skills. Pay close attention to what's going on around the course, figure out where you're giving up ground, and make a list of "needs improvement" skills. Once you've got the list, you're ready to

### **Make an Action Plan**

The key to an effective action plan is setting goals. Remember: these should be process, rather than outcome, goals. Focus on mastering individual skills; for example, a roll tack in light air, a leeward mark rounding in a breeze, or accelerating from a stop to full speed in under 10 seconds. These are specific, measurable, and achievable. If your goal is to win races (outcome goal), it's unlikely that your performance will improve, whereas if your goal is to improve your performance of specific and relevant skills (process goals), chances are you'll start winning races.

This doesn't mean you should abandon all outcome goals. By all means, set your sights on winning a race, or winning the class championship, or winning an Olympic gold in 2020. These long-term "dream" goals are good; they give us the motivation to keep working on our short-term process goals. Process goals are the building blocks to reaching our dream goals.

### **How to practice**

You will realize bigger gains, and spend less time on the water, if you use your practice time wisely. Here are three useful guidelines for practicing:

- 1. Practice with intensity.** Two hours of intense skills training (e.g., tacking, jibing, mark rounding, etc.) is worth far more than two weeks of reaching back and forth across the river.
- 2. Practice with a partner.** This will help you stick to the plan and gives you a yardstick to measure your speed against.
- 3. Keep it fun.** Notwithstanding guideline #1, you need to enjoy your time on the water. So include a little play time in your practice session (e.g., screaming reaches on a big wind day!), and don't go out if you don't feel like it.

Of course, if you don't feel like sailing and don't get out on the water very much, your results are unlikely to improve. At the end of the day, the ability to move up in the fleet is up to you. You have to want it. But if you want it, you can do it.

One final tip: be realistic. Most good sailors have spent years and countless hours on the water to get to where they are. So be patient, and give your action plan time to work. If you stick with it, you'll begin to see gains over the course of the season. By next year, you should be seeing a few less sails in front of you at the finish line.

*To see Bill's list of Success Factors for the Laser click [here](#).*