

## How to Claw Back

December 15, 2000

By Scott Ikle

The difference between having a mid-fleet regatta and a great regatta is often the ability to come back after a big mistake. As much as you may try to sail flawlessly from the outset, if you're human, you're going to make a mistake at some point, in some race, somewhere in the regatta. Those who make the fewest mistakes win races. Those who can claw their way back from mistakes win regattas.

### RELATED ARTICLES

[A Real-Life Comback](#)

The most important skill may be attitude. If you can stay positive after a mistake, you'll be better off than a competitor who allows their anger to blind them to the realities of the racecourse. Once you've made the mistake, acknowledge it, and let it go. Begin your comeback by taking a few deep breaths to relax and then start attacking the fleet. It'll be important not to commit any more errors, so stay calm and alert.

After a poor start, your initial reaction may be to immediately tack for clean air. This will work well if the beat is square, giving you the ability to weave through the fleet and look for those all-important clear lanes. Tacking too soon after the start, however, may be dangerous; you may have a pack of boats on your hip that'll be nearly impossible to get through. You may have to crash tack or duck the entire fleet. Avoid these potential pitfalls by being patient and tacking into an open lane.

%image2%

Sometimes tacking is not the answer. If the first beat is heavily skewed, it may be better to stay put. In a major windshift, you may also want to stay on your original tack. Don't forget your pre-race prep, if you determined before the start that you wanted to be on this tack, stick to your guns. Try footing off to increase your speed, watching for lanes as the boats ahead are forced to tack away. If you have to tack off, but plan to tack back quickly, consider tacking to weather of a starboard-tack boat rather than on their lee bow. You will then have a blocker protecting your lane.

Once things have settled down and you're in a clear lane, start paying close attention to windshifts and the boats ahead. Once you've devised a windshift game plan, concentrate on sailing the beat well and out-sail the mid-fleet pack by sticking to basic tactics. Remember to be ahead and to leeward when leading boats to the next shift, and wave boats across when sailing on a lift. A common mistake that's made by the mid-fleet pack is losing track of the weather mark; often the pack gets to the layline too quickly, stacks up in the corner, and overstands the mark. Often you hear of someone passing 40 boats in a race when coming from behind. They've likely made that big move by passing packs of boats that have all made the same mistake, not by knocking them off one at a time. Capitalize on the pack's mistakes.

The best opportunity to pass the pack is at the weather mark. The pack will tend to stack

up on the starboard layline, with all but the leader going slow in bad air. Sail well to leeward of the starboard layline parade. As boats are forced to tack out farther to clear their air, you can expect a hole to open up, which will allow you to sneak around the mark ahead of the pack.

Working a hole to leeward of the port layline isn't the only way to pass boats at the weather mark. As much as we try to avoid overstanding, sometimes it can be advantageous. There could be a windshift at the mark, which slows the fleet as they approach. There could also be adverse current at the mark. Suddenly the fact that you're overstanding means that you're coming into the mark with pace, laying it, and looking smart as you pass the boats that had to tack twice or were pinching.

When clawing back on the first reach it's critical to make up distance on the leaders. This is purely a function of using boatspeed to minimize distance on the leaders before the reach mark. Avoid boat-to-boat battles. Before you close in on the opponent ahead, decide whether to go high over the top, or to dive low, breaking through their wind shadow. Decide early and set yourself up with some space in order to pass them. In some classes, when the first reach is tight, the passing lane is always high. Go high early, avoid luffing matches, and blast over the pack. Only when the reach is broad, or there's adverse current, should you consider sailing low on the first reach. And only go low if the pack is reaching high of the mark. This doesn't mean sailing below the mark, but instead, sailing the fastest course straight to the next mark, delaying any passing maneuvers until you can begin to fight for the inside overlap.

On the second reach leg the dynamics are a little different. The inside overlap position is going to be fought by going high. Avoid the pack that's fighting high and attack from the low road. The low-road move on the second reach is often an effective way to gain boats because you avoid the overlap battle and can sail faster on your own. As you approach the leeward mark, since you've sailed low at first, you'll be able to reach up and pass the boats sailing low and slow into the mark.

The run is always a good leg for catching boats. It's important to know how to round the weather mark. If you're headed when rounding the mark, bear away and set. If you're lifted, consider a jibe set. But there are other important considerations in determining which way to go on the run. It always comes back to what the wind is doing. If you believe that you'll get a favorable shift, it's often a good idea to sail away from the shift first so you can maximize your gain. However, if there's more pressure coming, always sail for the pressure. If you can stay in phase and in pressure, you'll always gain. As you near the leeward mark, always protect the inside position for the rounding. Remember, if you can't get an inside overlap, slow up and round behind the pack, not on the outside. Rounding outside of the pack will put you in dirty air and reduce the number of lanes available to you.

An awareness of how the breeze has shifted as you're rounding the leeward mark can be a key to making a comeback on the last beat. You want to get on the lifted tack right away and stay in phase. If you need to tack at the leeward mark, don't just go around the

mark and tack; sail for a few moments, and look for a lane. If you need to stay on the tack, pinch up around the mark, and almost shoot head to wind to get your bow above the centerline of the boat ahead, clear of their dirty air—the worst thing you can do is two quick clearing tacks. If you're coming out of a crowded leeward mark rounding and there are few lanes to be had, your only recourse is to sail in phase, go the right way. The only way you'll pass boats is to sail the shifts better than the next person, so let the others search endlessly for lanes, and let them gamble on the flyers. Just play the fleet, the wind, and make winning percentage moves.

Never give up on the last beat, and always finish at an end. You'll be surprised how easy it is to pass boats near the finish line. Race towards the favored end of the finish line, and don't sail any extra distance. If it's close, shoot the line. You'll be amazed how a properly executed shoot can win a finish.

Clawing back from a mistake means never making another mistake. The strategies and tactics don't change, only your perception of the situation at hand. There'll be dirty air, fewer lanes, and lots of traffic. Turn that into your advantage by waiting for other boats to make mistakes. Sail better than the rest of the fleet, stick to what works, and usually you'll get back in the hunt.

[© World Publications, LLC](#)