



Tactician

It's a dark art, but you can learn how to predict the breeze and control the fleet. **Harriet Prest** finds out how to call race-winning tactics.

'A's tactician, you are not necessarily always trying to pick a golden shift – you've just got to make sure that you avoid the shockers! It tends to be the person who minimises the mistakes that wins the race.' So says Ray Davies, a household name in New Zealand as strategist for Emirates Team New Zealand, winner of the 2001-02 Volvo Ocean Race on illbruck and skipper for the next edition, and tactician for the winning TP52 'Mean Machine' team. Ray is a professional sailor who's certainly gone a long way just minimising the 'shockers'!

Trust your instincts

It's not a role you can just walk into, so how do you become a good tactician? 'You need a lot of

experience as your instinct will always have to come into play.' Ray continues: 'You find that you've subconsciously seen certain situations before and you automatically know what you should do. Sometimes you can't come up with a reason as why we have to tack out, but you just call it. Something in the back of your brain has seen it before, that's where your gut instinct comes into play.'

Tacticians on big boats very often have a strong dinghy background where they have always been responsible for tactics and are often very in tune with the wind, tide and boat handling. Tactics is a different job to the others on board. Some would say that tacticians deal in fiction. Ray agrees: 'A lot of other roles on the boat are just mechanical, but being a tactician, it's a little bit airy-fairy and

you are dealing with mother nature so you can't just keep working on practicing the same move over and over.'

So what kind of person suits the role? 'There's not really a fixed personality type, but certainly you have to be able to make tough decisions in tough situations – with split-second efficiency.'

If you look around the various professional tacticians there are a vast array of personality types. Some are very ego-driven that dominate and there are other types that try and bring the best out of the whole crew. And both can work.

'If a team is a bit incoherent, someone on tactics could come along and control the whole situation. But it can be a little bit difficult long-term to keep working with that sort of tactician. There's the other tactician, that trusts the crew to do their job, and he just comes along and is the icing on the cake.'

Balance of power

All jobs need a job description and this is a hard one to define: 'The primary job of a tactician is to set out a strategy for the boat up the first beat. You need a good solid starting plan with a clear idea of where you want to be on the startline, and what side of the first beat you want to go up,' explains Ray.

How does the role vary for the different disciplines? 'Quite dramatically. Offshore tends to be much more of a navigator's race and the tactical input is more fleet management. A lot of the calls are based on the weather – the navigator has all that information worked out. He tends to pick a route and work to that. This is a vast contrast with match racing where you just have one boat you have to beat. It doesn't matter where you are heading as long as you beat your opponent. You could be on the wrong tack, you could be going past the mark. A tactician on the match racing circuit is really important – it's boat on boat. The in-between would be the fleet racing with a lot more dialogue. That's how it stacks up on the split with the navigator: match racing – 90 per cent tactician; fleet racing – 70 per cent and offshore – 40 per cent tactician.'

Why do tacticians come out at the top of the professional sailing food chain? 'Being a tactician is a pretty tough job, because it's so obvious when you make a mistake. You are so exposed to bad judgement.'

That's what he means by minimising the mistakes – but what can you do to come out the other end of a shocker? 'I try and just keep the same composure, as if you've not had the shocker! The worst thing you can do is get really pissed off when you are still racing. Never let it out on the crew, and try and encourage them that you will all fight back from here. On our boat we talk about "no history" – at every point in the race you are starting afresh. If you are first you always have the same mentality as when you are fifth or sixth, you've got to keep just chipping away.'

Afterguard loop

Like everyone on the boat, the tactician must be a good communicator – and for this job it's really stepped up a notch: 'Making sure that the whole team understands what's coming up next is vital. A good tactician will keep everyone in the loop

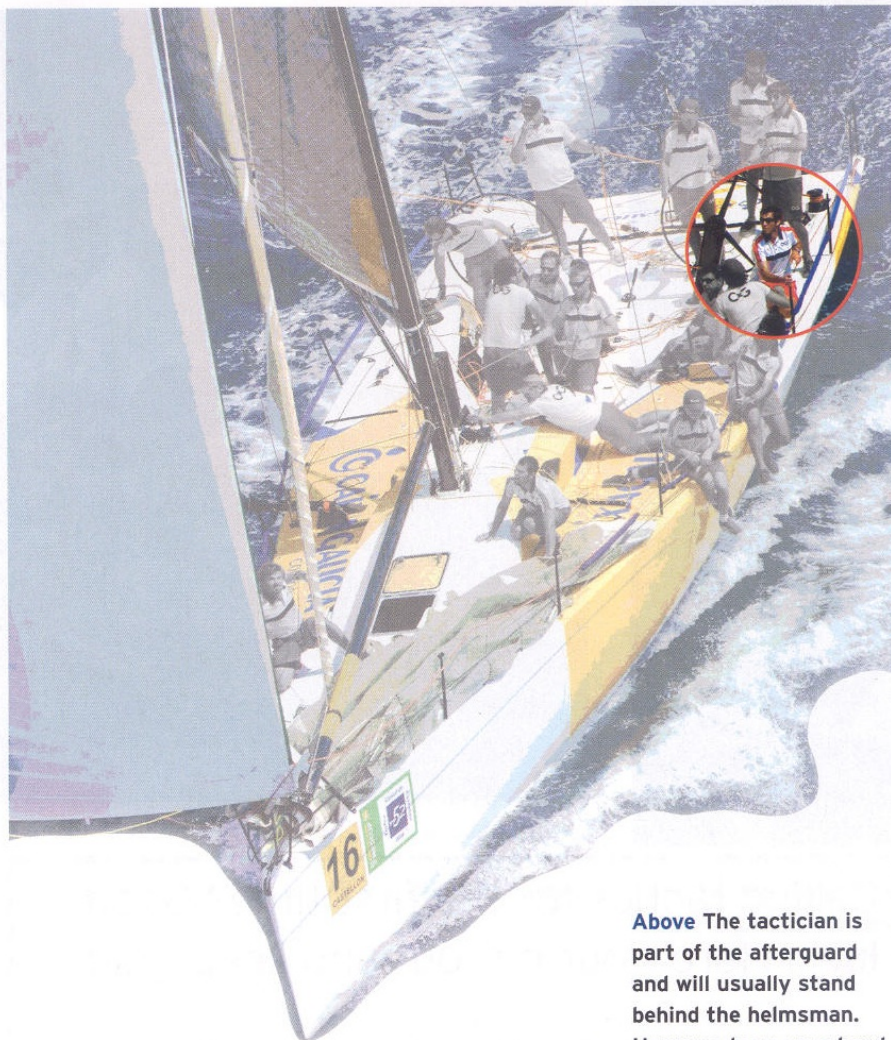


PHOTO RICH PAGE

Above The tactician is part of the afterguard and will usually stand behind the helmsman. However, keep your head out of the boat and move around if you need so you can see the whole fleet and incoming pressure.

and, for example, know that the guys up forward want to know about the type of rounding in advance. If they don't know what the plan is, the crew should be asking – but ideally I would say that they shouldn't have to ask.' And the information you give needs to be concise and to the point: 'You can certainly over-complicate it. There are so many elements that are happening on the racecourse – they are all important but it's a mistake to try and say too much. You want to just give very simple clear plans.'

Upwind, the tactician stands or sits right next to the helmsman and the mainsheet trimmer and downwind he or she should be communicating with the helmsman and the spinnaker trimmer. 'Upwind it's a bit finer what your options are, whereas downwind there can be more radical change and you are quite often sailing to keep clear air so you communicate with the trimmer on what pressure is coming and how to keep clear air.' Ray uses the example of how he is the eyes out of the boat on the startline giving the helmsman and the main trimmer information of what is going on – for example your boat's speed relative to others – so they can focus on the numbers onboard and the performance.

The tactician's relationship with the helmsman (often the owner) is vital: 'I'm quite fortunate with the owners I've sailed with but if they don't respect your role and what you're trying to do and trust you wholeheartedly, then it certainly is a battle. Always paint a picture of what you are thinking and what your plan is: You might say: "It looks like there's a bit more pressure in a couple of minutes and we could end up tacking in that

Right Upwind, the tactician stands or sits right next to the helmsman and the mainsheet trimmer and downwind he or she should be communicating with the helmsman and the spinnaker trimmer.



PHOTO: OCEAN IMAGES

Calling tactics for the first time? Good luck! Here's our cut-out and keep guide...

— Key points —

- **Personality:** there are two types of tactician. You can come onboard and take over the boat but this should be used sparingly! It's best to encourage everyone to stick to their roles, make sure you have a good crew boss and just be the icing on the cake!
- **Job description:** Set out a strategy for the start (where you want to be on the line) and the first beat (which side of the track is favoured).
- **Communication:** You need a tight communication circle within the afterguard. Feedback from the helmsman and main trimmer is vital for your understanding of the boats' performance and the conditions. In return, tell them what you can see on the racetrack and what your next move will be.
- **Preparation:** Think about the weather – get a good forecast and make sure you have a feel for the day – the wind direction and possible changes throughout the race.
- **Start:** Before the start sail up the beat and try and find another boat so you can both tack off and come back together to see which side is favoured. Sometimes a conservative start might be better than the number one spot.
- **Upwind:** Remember you may have to trade off between wind shifts and pressure, but make sure that you are always sailing in a clear lane.
- **Downwind:** Make sure that you have a strategy for the downwind leg in advance and that the whole crew is clear on it. Clear air and good pressure are your aims.
- **Tactics:** Protect your position! Covering a boat in a big fleet does not necessarily mean giving them dirt as this may mean you both tack off and let numerous boats in behind you.

one." This settles them a bit. They may feel there's a bit of a header but they have got a little heads-up on what you are thinking and it tends to calm them down and then they can just keep sailing the boat fast.'

This works both ways and Ray explains that he relies on information from the driver and the man on the main: 'I get a lot of feedback from the main trimmer about how the breeze feels – if it's heading at the top of the rig or lifting at the top which could be going to happen to the breeze on the surface.'

The tactician also relies on a good communication throughout the boat using the crew boss (often the pitman) as the central point. 'The pit is the link between the bow and the afterguard – I will always give him a heads-up on what we are doing next. It works both ways too, they communicate back from the bow.'

Watching the weather

Pre-race planning is made simpler by talking to the right people: 'I have a really good relationship with 'Clouds' – our meteorologist at Team New Zealand – at any big regatta I have a good chat. It's better rather than just having the forecast faxed through.'

If you don't have this kind of access to a meteorologist, and most of us don't, you need to try and interpret forecasts from the internet or the radio: 'Barebones you need: maximum windspeed; minimum windspeed and the trend of the breeze through the day. It may be going right all day because of a certain system that's passing over or the local geographical effects. Windspeed range, so that you can choose what type of sails you are going to take on board. And you need the trends and systems – whether there is going to be an offshore breeze or a local wind fighting the seabreeze so you need to know which one is going to win out and what time of day it will change – basically just an understanding of the day.'

When you get to the dock Ray recommends you

talk to the crew about the forecast, check with the race committee for any changes and then confirm your personal feel for the type of day it is. 'Keep having a look out to sea – what's happening out on the water and think how the day is developing.'

Stage by stage

Startline, upwind, downwind and boat-on-boat tactics; there's a bit on for the tactician. I asked Ray to run through some top tips:

Race start:

■ 'At least half an hour before the start, you want to do a beat up the course, and get a feel for the breeze – whether the puffs tend to be right-handed or headed – and for the average wind direction, plus if the right-handers are longer than the lefties.

■ 'Quite often you will find that one side of the course has more pressure. It's good if you have a buddy you can team up with – then you can both tack off and then come back together. A subtle difference in windspeed can end up being a huge gainer, and it can be quite hard to see on the water, especially if boats get separated by half a mile or so.

■ 'Line bias can be a bit of a trade off – okay, there might be 10 degrees bias and you know that most of the fleet are going to realise that – so you might as well head down that end of the line, it's whether you want to go for the glamour start or play a more conservative game and start to windward of that bunch. You decide.

■ 'Going into the start: at the five-minute gun you want to have a plan and decide your position on the line. You tend to just spend the last minute of the sequence trying to find a nice hole to start in and then the helmsman will take over.

■ 'All you want to do is get a good start, and look at the first couple of shifts and then you are in the top bunch, and then you can just sail a percentage race from there.'

Upwind:

■ 'Off the line it's important to get a feel for which side is paying – then you can count your losses early. And a mistake that you see happen time and time again, and I'm sure every tactician's made it, is you just hang on a bit too long, hoping that your side is going to come right. One five-degree shift – suddenly the whole fleet can be rotated around you. It's pretty intense – those first few minutes. You have to make that right decision, it's a 50:50 call but if you get that one wrong, then you tend to be set up in the back half of the fleet straight away.

■ 'Sometimes you have to eat a bit of dirt if you are heading the right way. You may have to just reach off until you get clear air – if you are going the right way then that is the most important thing.

■ 'You have to make a trade-off between pressure and windshifts. If there is more pressure on one side there is normally a geographical effect – or it could be current. You could have a bit of a headland that's curved around, and then the breeze curves around it too – so you want to head to shore and get the lift to tack out. You have to be open-minded and get a real feel for the type of day before the start.

■ 'If you are targeting to be in the top 10 then you have to be good at sailing in lanes – 90 per cent of the time you have to have clear air. It is

Crew like you... ...top amateurs share their secrets

■ 'You need to take in as much information about the conditions as you can – the weather and the tides are very important. Make a general strategy that you think will get you round the course the fastest and then be able to communicate that to your helmsman and trimmers. Also, be adaptable to new situations that may arise.'

Humphrey Carter, tactician, J/109

often a split-second decision that has to be made – a couple of boats tack and all of a sudden there is an opportunity to get a lane, and you have to be able to see that and make the call. Big fleet tactics are different to small fleet tactics here.'

Downwind:

■ 'At that end of the beat you have to come up with a plan for the downwind leg – so talk to the

Below Your head should be out of the boat 99 per cent of the time. A hand-bearing compass is useful for judging progress against other boats.



On our boat we talk about
'no history' – at every point in the
race you're starting afresh



PHOTO MAX RANCHI

Race it like a pro

It's tough at the top so race like a pro.

Ray Davies gives his seven steps for best performance at a top regatta:



Above Ray Davies, tactician and strategist for America's Cup and Volvo crews.

Above left Establishing trust amongst your afterguard is vital – communication is key.

1. Understand your competitors and their equipment: – keep abreast of what they are doing to their boats – a fast boat makes you look good!
2. Do your homework on the venue. For example, when we sailed the final regatta on the Breitling Med Cup the regatta was in Ibiza. There has never been a regatta of any consequence in Ibiza so I organised a weather study with our 'Mean Machine' meteorologists. We turned up an extra day early so had three sailing days before the regatta. We won the first race and the regatta.
3. Don't try and win a race in the first 200m but aim for always being in the top 20 per cent of the fleet at the windward mark.
4. You don't want to be the idiot on the racecourse as there will come a time when you will need favours from each of your competitors. When you can give a someone a break, knowing you are going to stay ahead, do it!
5. Remember your crew are trying their best, otherwise they wouldn't be there – so don't take your frustrations out on them, you're not going to pick every windshift!
6. Keep your head out of the boat, the weather can change quickly. If you can sail your boat by feel, you will be able to focus on where to go.
7. Make sure the systems onboard are all working perfectly so you can make quick adjustments and keep your head out of the boat.

crew in advance of what's happening or what you are thinking. It's no good getting to the mark and then deciding what sort of run you are going to do – you have got to have the set-up and a clear plan to help settle the boat.

■ 'Don't round the mark and then suddenly call for a gybe – it sends the whole crew into a bit of a flap. If you give everyone the heads-up – for example, that it's a bear-away set and looking to gybe straight-away – all that is really good information for the crew so that they can be mentally prepared and good at their job.

■ 'Downwind it is really important to sail in clear air. In some fleets (e.g. TP52s) you have to pick a side – as it's very difficult to gybe early at the top mark because there will be a wall of no wind and dirty air directly behind you from the mark. You tend to sail around the top mark and continue for a couple of minutes before you can really gybe.

■ 'In other classes, sailing downwind you are mainly heading for pressure as much as shifts – that makes a huge difference.'

Boat-on-boat tactics:



PHOTO MAX RANCHI

■ 'There comes a point where you are happy with the position you are in – obviously it's in the lead or it could be fifth place. So you keep between the finish and the opposition and try position yourself where you know they are not going to gain anymore.

■ 'You might not be giving the boats behind you dirty air but it's a nice holding pattern. As soon as you keep going out and tacking on someone, they will tack away and get clear air and then you get split from the rest of the fleet. Sometimes it can be good to give them clear air and sit up to windward of them – then you are both on the same tack and just killing time. You don't have to necessarily tack on somebody to keep them behind you, you just have to control them – that's the main thing.'

Final word

'Your head should be out of the boat 99 per cent per cent of the time. The one per cent is for complaining about something on the boat!' jokes Ray, 'You shouldn't really have your head in the boat at all – if you start getting involved in how the guys are sailing the boat, then there is a chance you are going to miss a wind shift. As soon as you get inside the boat, you are not doing your job.'

It's a difficult balancing act: 'You do get a lot of owners [on the helm] that like to think that they can call the shots, but as soon as they get their head out of the boat and start looking around, then they are not doing their job properly either.

'It's the sort of role that everyone has an opinion on how you should get to the top mark and there are many ways to skin a cat. You could pick a number of options and get to the top mark at the same time, but you can only choose one of them. Once you've got the respect of everyone – which can take a long time – you are in good shape.'

'You've got to accept that you are not going to get everything right, so you need to accept that other people will also make mistakes on the boat. Sometimes you just want to be able to hit 80 per cent of the shifts. You've got to accept that the wind is not always going to do what you think.' ■