



## Helming a Keelboat

Steering a racing yacht is no doubt one of the most challenging aspects of yachting. The helmsperson is seen as the leader of the team, as when two boats sail past each other, most of the crew will look across at the skipper on the helm of the other yacht before checking out the rest of the crew.

However, rather than being an individual, he or she is very much the catalyst of a group of people working together to make their job easier. The helmsperson is very much a receiver of information, continually getting feedback from their tactician and trimmers. They should be constantly relaying information to him about the boat performance and changes in the setup.

### *Mainsheet*

The mainsheet hand is the primary conduit to and from the helm and should be monitoring the speed and targets as well as working with the jib and spinnaker trimmers to keep the boat moving at its optimum speed. Quiet asides from the trimmers and a bit of feedback from the helm on the way the boat feels should continually be going on.



### *Speed*

Speed is king, so keep the boat moving; you must have speed before you get height, so out of tacks, after a nasty wave or off the start line, work with your trimmers to get the speed up to target and then work on your height.

The tactician should be supplying further information on the other boats in the fleet to assist.

### *In Practice*

A typical scenario would go-

Tactician “boats on our hip appear to be lifting off us in same breeze”

Helm “give us a touch more height”

Mainsheet to helm and jib trim “coming up traveler”

Jib trimmer “going forward on car 30mm”

Tactician “now holding our own”



This sort of interaction is what makes boats go fast around the course: continuous adjustment to changing conditions and relative performance. Being one of a cohesive team is important for the driver but there are times when the helmsman has to take complete control. The most obvious of these is at the start; most times a starting position and strategy will be preordained but it can all go quickly out the window in the hustle and bustle in the last minute or so as the yachts around you alter course quickly and jostle for position.

Quick reflex decisions must be made and acted upon; there is no time for the usual joint discussion between helm and tactics. Two things are important here: a good feel for your boats manouvering ability and a solid grasp of the racing rules. The other comparable situation would be congested mark roundings.

The most important trait of a good driver is concentration - brain-numbing, determined concentration. It is of paramount importance to keep the boat going; every time the boat bounces on a wave, misses a small bite to weather in a gust or makes a less than perfect mark rounding, you are conceding distance to the opposition. Don't look around; your job is to steer, not to know what's happening to the competition - if it is important to your role you will be told about it .

You need to be able to concentrate completely on the boat through the water. If you find you mind wandering to the meat pies sitting in the warmer at the yacht club or the cold beer sitting in the esky on the dock, it's time for a break. Use the break to look around and even 10 minutes can refresh you for another stint. Sometimes the helmsperson needs to display a steely resolve.



When a starboard tacker is impending and you can hear the bow wave approaching, it takes a lot to concentrate solely on the speed without ducking down to take a look yourself. Trust your tactician in these cases, sometimes by jumping down for a look and losing focus, particularly in waves where the boat can stop suddenly you can make the cross a lot more perilous.

Don't be a "waggler", move the helm as little as possible, whenever you move the helm you create drag so keep it minimal. I see a lot of really top dinghy sailors fall into this trap; they come from a vessel which is much more dynamic so they jerk the helm around too much. So sail in gradual arcs and not quick jerks, steer to your telltales and headsail luff, don't be an instrument driver, they are easy to tell apart from each other.

The telltale sailors will lean outboard to see the headsail and sea state better; the instrument sailor will lean in toward the centre line to see the instrument panel. So get used to sailing by your telltales and jib luff, they are not delayed like the instruments, they are immediate. The instruments do play a major role in your performance but never should they be used as a snapshot, they should be analysed by the tactician and mainsheet trimmers for general feedback.



Sailing in waves is the most testing and the most tiring; you are forced to work the helm persistently up and over the waves, whilst being constantly braced, so regular breaks are the order of the day. I recently wrote that steering in waves is like drawing a small oval with your bow. Pinch up into the wave, fall away as it passes under your bow to minimise the slamming and then arc back up into the next wave.

But even in this case the same rules still apply, minimise the helm movement, and only do what is necessary. The trimmers will have to work a lot harder as well; you need to sail with a lot more twist in the sails for a much wider steering groove, don't pinch, as always speed is king.

It is also important to help your crew when you can, in heavy air on a spinnaker drop or hoist, bear off downwind to help take the load off. It can make their job a whole lot easier and minimise the risk, similiarly help out if you see the crew trying to sheet home a luffing spinnaker, just bear down until they can set it and then come back up.

The last point I would make regarding a good driver is they should be one of the quietest people on the boat, when I sometimes say this I get incredulous looks from the crew as most of us have been bawled out by an irate skipper venting his spleen. If a mistake or problem has occurred, the immediate concern is to minimise the loss that has already be made. If a spin is dragging in the water, slow down to help recovery; if a spinnaker has to be dropped to sort out a wineglass, then concentrate on positioning your boat in the best tactical position for the re-hoist. If you are screaming and yelling you are not doing your job. As Stuart Walker always said "the race is from here onwards". The time for discussion is back on the dock, not the racecourse. Leave the running of the boat to the crew, if you are spending time looking at what they are doing you are not concentrating on steering.

So at the end of a day steering a keelboat you end up with a nagging headache, a rick in the neck and you are unaware of a lot that went on during the race. It is not exactly the glamorous skipper role you envisaged. But you are the recipient of a handshake from everyone on the crew and remember when other boats sail past you are the one they first look at.

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