

# The Leading Edge

By Hal Smith

*This is the seventh in a series of articles, "How to Begin Sailboat Racing for Fun and Personal Growth," by Hal Smith, a past Catalina 22 national champion.*

## Seventh Principle: The Final Leg

**I**t is the last leg. There are only two or three boats ahead of you, and you have a couple of boats tucked away astern. The view from here is great, isn't it? Now you are fired up to challenge the boats ahead of you with your newfound confidence. Be careful though, because this is the time to be conservative.

Aggressive sailing rarely gains anything on the last leg, but it often loses a great deal. On this leg, you are sailing to take advantage of the mistakes of others and to sail as mistake-free as possible yourself. On the first leg, even a modest gain in distance from a risky tactic could put you ahead of many boats. A loss could be made up over the course of the next legs. Reasonable risks are worth taking early in the race. The final leg, however, is just a sprint to the finish, where a modest gain may not improve your position at all and could cost you a trophy position. There will be no time remaining to make up for a blunder.

Sailing conservatively means forgetting the boats ahead (unless within a few boat lengths), tenaciously covering the boats behind you, working up the middle of the course, and maintaining optimum boatspeed. Just as on the last leg, sail relaxed, but remain keenly conscious of all things going on around you. There is a terrible tendency to get tense and oversteer and overtrim, which slows the boat down.

At the leeward mark rounding, you will either have boats just ahead, just behind, both or neither. Your strategy is to stay in clear air, maybe to give bad air to boats behind you, and to definitely stay between them and the finish line.

The traffic at the mark rounding determines what you do to achieve your strategy. If boats are just ahead, with or without boats behind you, you must get to clear air, which usually means tacking to starboard (boats normally harden up to a port tack). If boats are close behind you, give them dirty air as long as they will take it, unless you need to clear your own. If no boats are near, simply pick your fastest route and go, but do not vary too far from the middle of the course.

Most boats round the leeward mark, harden up on port tack, and head to the right. This also avoids crossing paths with downwind boats with a lot of ugly disturbed air. You will have the right-of-way over approaching downwind boats, but speed is more important here than rights. Do not forget the simple strategy: Put distance between you and the boats behind you and stay between them and the finish line.

If you are close behind a boat or two, you may have a chance to pass them by controlling their course. The boats ahead of you are just as con-

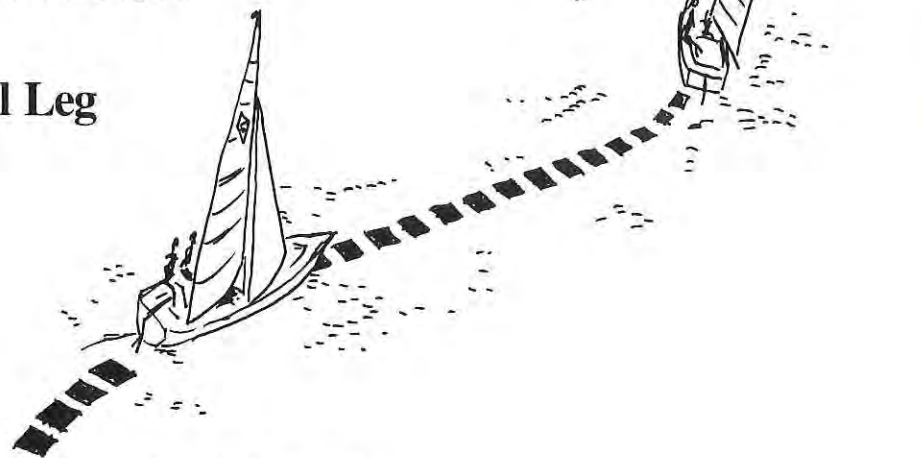
cerned with you as you are with the boats near your stern. If you tack, the boats ahead will probably tack also. If you are free to tack at will, without boats to cover close behind you, you can time your tacks with the windshifts, which usually cause the boat ahead to cover you out of phase. He will be tacking after the lift has passed and will be spending more time in headers. By doing this often, you can work your way up to him and maybe even get a starboard tack advantage at the finish to nip him out. Of course, this coin has two sides. The boats behind will be trying the same thing with you.

"Working up the middle" means going no more than half way to each layline before digging back in. Unless there is an obvious advantage to one extreme side, it is too risky to get to a layline too early on the last leg. Once on the layline, all of your maneuvering options are gone.

The last leg is the most important place to have boatspeed. The fleet has thinned to just a few boats, and everybody is sailing their fastest. Having the ability to point and go fast keeps a boat from inching by you in the last minutes, which can be most frustrating. The only way to acquire this skill is to sail next to other C-22s as often as possible and mark your lines, sheet and trim positions for future reference. If the skipper is confident that the boat is trimmed out properly and the crew is doing a good job of playing the genoa sheet, then the skipper can watch what is going on outside the boat and sail fast.

The finish line is often shorter than the starting line, and squareness to the wind is not a factor. If you plan your approach to the line by being on starboard tack and aiming at the left side marker (pin), you can force a port tack boat to make an extra tack (he may possibly even fail to lay the line now), and you should cross the line first even if he were slightly ahead before being required to miss you.

When the finish line is long or is the original starting line, it is rarely square to the wind. One end of the line will be closer. By sailing toward



the closer end, you may save more than a couple of boat lengths of distance over the course to the other end. If the pin end is further away and you cross with the above port tack boat (he ducks your stern), that boat may finish first by finishing at the closer committee boat end. Immediately tacking to port as the other boat goes under you will slow you down, will probably put you in his bad air, and will put you at risk for fouling him by tacking too close. You must plan to aim for the nearer end before you are in close quarters with other boats.

In any event, crossing the finish line at either end helps the committee judge the precise moment of crossing and will often give you a better finish by one or two seconds. In close finishes, the boat finishing at the committee boat or the pin is usually judged to finish first. This is only human and will remain so until we use photo finishes.

It feels great to finish the race first and get the gun, but it feels even better to win the regatta or the club series. This is done by consistently finishing in the top 3-5 (depending on the fleet size). The boat that finishes first in a race often has some other poor finishes to go with the first because he likes to take flyers and risks. Occasionally everything works for a victory, but more often he digs himself too big of a hole to overcome.

You did a fantastic job! A second, third, or even a fourth-place finish each time you go out will soon have everybody calling you Champ! A little review would not hurt to be sure you maintain your consistency. Next time we will do a little overall summary to be sure we have the total strategy just right. Keep practicing.

*Questions? Write Hal Smith, 101 Deerwood, Easley, SC 29640.*