

WHAT COULD GO WRONG? By Ken Legler (Tufts Sailing Coach)

Plenty. 275 pounds is the approximate optimum weight in college sailing. 290 is the practical limit with a chance of winning championships. Even at 290 the only way to win is to sail mistake free. There are plenty of examples of college sailors winning championships at a combined weight of 290 but they are almost always seniors. Why seniors? There are plenty of All-Americans among the juniors, even sophomores. Seniors have learned to avoid mistakes; the big mistakes, the ones that kill you since there are no drop races in college racing.

Here is a list of mistakes often made by college sailors. Many have automatic excuses, particularly the "getting fouled" mistake. Excuses do not win championships, only speed and mistake free sailing wins. These common mistakes are divided into four basic categories: fouling, capsizing, tactical disasters and boat problems. By listing these potential problems and ideas for avoiding them, perhaps the students of the sport can become mistake free sailors and master the game of college sailing sooner rather than later.

Fouling, getting fouled, hitting marks, and communication breakdowns within the boat are all in this first category. To avoid fouling, you must know the rules, recognize situations in advance and handle your boat out of trouble via a great deal of practice. Among my biggest pet peeves: mast collisions.

Avoiding getting fouled is a bit more sublime but again, recognizing what is about to happen with time to avoid is paramount. Communication (in a timely, polite but firm way) with the other boats is also key. Example: when an out-of-control boat is barging at mid-line, instead of yelling at them while holding your ground or forcing them up, try backing down so that they cross your bow and take out the next boat. You then accelerate and go with your next door neighbors to leeward now tangled in park.

Here is a formula to help you avoid hitting marks. Leave a cushion next to each mark equal to the size of the waves. You will often see freshmen hotshots trying to skim every mark with as little distance as possible. They are sometimes accused of hitting a mark even when they have not, which can be a big distraction. Marks are always in some motion (sailing is an imperfect sport, after all) so skimming them is a dangerous game.

With two sets of eyes in each boat, skippers should always know when a boat is coming at them, in theory anyway. When practicing, crews can try giving too much information as a way of learning what will be the best information to provide come race day. Quick tip: when both sets of eyes are staring at the same thing, other information is unseen.

Capsizing is great for spectators but not for competitors. It can be humiliating, chilling, exhausting, and painful but, it is almost always bad for your score. Avoiding them takes practice, of course, but by naming them here you might be able to avoid them sooner. There's the 420 tack with jib cleated, the FJ caught in cross wakes running, the auto tack, over rolling in

light air, FJ vang too loose when running, 420 vang too tight when reaching, and “whoops, I fell down.”

Tactical disasters come in many varieties; including bad starts which can be caused by many different things going wrong. Here are a few examples of bad starts. Over early, over early with I flag, OCS, second row, bow caught too high, stalled, too close to leeward boat, and less wind at your end of line. Without a long discussion on starts one trick is to not fully luff or back the sails since it will take too long to re-establish flow. Also, sudden jib trimming on the FJ can blow the bow down, thus causing over-trim and slippage into the leeward boat.

Taking a flyer is a good way to fall hopelessly behind; so in general don't do it. That said, in certain classes (420s) and in certain conditions (full hiking) tacking is slow. Also, once in awhile, you need to take a risk. But such risk taking should be calculated, rare, and based on real information that improves your odds, not just “I thought I saw a puff.”

Traffic is a common problem in short course racing. Textbooks on sailing the windward leg always talk about staying within the laylines. At some point on the way to the first mark you need to get outside of the layline to round the mark. Busting out to and through a starboard tack layline is tricky. Tacking in shy of a layline due to traffic is a recipe for disaster.

Not knowing the course is a rare but costly mistake. When winning a race it's a real buzz-kill. The most common “course” mistake is to not know the finish line especially with all the leeward gate marks around. It's usually (but not always) in the sailing instructions. Read them, including before home regattas and ask if it's not clear where you will be finishing.

Breakdown is the last category but it includes more than broken boats. If you breakdown, even if you are fortunate enough to get breakdown points, someone else wins the race. Almost every breakdown can be foreseen and remedied before the race. Meanwhile, some judges are less forgiving when it comes to awarding breakdown points. Examples of “breakdowns” that are usually not compensated include knots coming untied, sails falling down, pins falling out, etc. “My clevis pin broke.” “Really? Show me the broken pieces.”

Also in this “breakdown” category we'll put crew sick and can't perform, skipper dysfunctional due to an over focus on results, forgot my watch, bailer, pinnie or life jacket. Sportsmanship in college racing is such that when a sailor discovers they have sailed without a life jacket, they withdraw, rather than waiting for a protest. You still cannot throw that race out but with two sailors per boat, one can always be looking out for the other. With that sort of teamwork, skills sharpened from years of constant practice, and the wisdom from vast regatta experience, less goes wrong.