



SELF IMPROVEMENT

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Published: May 2021

Hi everyone, hope you all managed to stay safe, healthy and sane during lockdown. If you did manage any one of those then you're doing well and have much to be thankful for. I thought it about time I posted another 'Gav's Top Tip,' or at least the first one to kick off the late starting 2021 season.

To kick off my top tips for 2021 I have chosen to move away from discussing go faster boat tweaks, settings, mods to make your sailing a little easier etc, and focus on what you can do to go faster even if you are unable to attend your club or sail your boat at the moment, to be honest even if you are able to sail or are already back on the water, this is still very much applicable for improving your sailing and racing.

Interesting as it maybe to spend hours fiddling with bits of rope, cleaning and polishing your trusty racing machine or working out if this block would be lighter than that one, or if you have your rig set up 1mm to much this way or that, this is probably going to make the biggest difference to your speed around the course than any of those things. If we spent as much time working on the items I am about to discuss as the time you would have spent racing on a Sunday, I can almost guarantee that your performance would improve.

These items are for people who really want to work at improving. There is nothing wrong with turning up each week and doing your best, enjoying your time on the water to unwind from the week and catch up with your mates, but if you really want to improve and you're willing to put some thought and effort behind it then here are some thoughts that may help.

So we all know the fastest boat does not always win, the helm with the best tactics does not always win and the fittest guy on the water does not always win. To win consistently you need to be good at all the following main skills:

- Boat Speed
- Strategic and Tactical Knowledge & Implementation
- Fitness
- Mental Toughness

Most top sailors are good at all these things but will generally be better at some than others, if you're not the fastest person but you're a strategic and tactical genius then you will still be able to compete. So, you need to really exploit your personality strong points and then work on the other aspects to get to an acceptable or excelling level.

To really improve you need to sit down with a cup of tea or a beer, a notebook, and a willingness to really think about what you are good at and what you are not so good at, this process is the key. I have some points for you to consider but you have to be really brutally honest with yourself. As you start to generate your list you can start to prioritise your areas of improvement and turn them into actions. Now, you can't improve everything at once so the aim here is to work out the areas that you



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most feel need improvement, rank them in order of importance to achieve your overall goal of getting around the course quicker, obtaining the most places and giving away the least number of places, or maybe to be able to get out in more challenging conditions, have better boat handling skills, generally feeling more confident or maybe just simply to increase your enjoyment when sailing. Whatever your goal this is where you consider your weakness and therefore areas of improvement.

Boat speed:

Boat speed is very important; you don't need to be the quickest, but if you're generally struggling to match the people around you, then finishing ahead or retaining the place you gained at the start will always be an uphill struggle. Most people don't have an issue around the course but generally along specific legs: upwind, reaching or downwind. So ask yourself:

- Do I have good speed around the whole course?
- Which legs of the course do I struggle with boat speed?
- Is it all the time or in certain conditions (Wind strength, wave state)?
- Is it a speed issue or am I struggling to point high enough upwind or low enough down wind?

Keep adding to these questions to try and pin point what exactly you need to work on, all too often we just say, "I am slow on the reach", or "struggling to point up wind" without really looking at the details around it.

Strategic and Tactical Knowledge & Implementation:

Strategy and tactics is important especially if you are not the quickest, sailing in the right direction at the right time to reduce your distance around the course will always keep you in the front pack. Having a plan from the start based on the course, wind direction, local features and tide if applicable will mean you can concentrate on other things after the starting gun. Formulating the strategy is all about upfront homework and condition checking on the day, you need to make sure you are at the right end of the start line and are able to sail to the side of the windward leg that you have determined to be favoured. Tactics is all about boat positioning as you move around the course, once you have a plan or strategy you can then concentrate on your tactics, either positioning to protect your position, positioning to get separation and generate some leverage, separation to clear your air and get to a clear lane, making sure you are inside boat at the next mark or that you are on starboard tack when you need to be, like the first rounding of the windward mark. There are so many videos and books on these topics I am not going to go into details here on how to learn more but again you need to identify your strong points and weak points. Ask some key questions:

- Do I start on time in the front row with clear air?
- Having started do I know what I am trying to achieve and which direction I want to go?
- Do I position myself so that I am able to go in the direction I have planned?
- Do I check the weather and understand how the wind might change during racing time?
- When I lose places which legs do I lose them on?
- Do people just pass me with speed or sail round me on shifts?
- Do I lose out at mark roundings due to poor positioning or boat handling?



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Keep asking yourself questions and identify the areas that are your biggest issue, then rather than just reading and watching coaching videos you can look for items specifically on your priority list so you can focus your efforts for improvement.

Fitness:

I don't think I need to say too much about fitness, it speaks for itself and is an obvious area we can put our time and effort to improve our performance. A couple of thoughts though worth keeping in mind.

- Fitness is more than just endurance and strength; yes, you need those things to keep driving the boat on a windy day and you need the flexibility to keep moving around in those fickle winds and contort yourself at the front of the boat in the light stuff, but
- Fitness also gives you confidence and helps you hold your concentration for longer as you spend less time physically hanging on.
- Fitness training also helps to build your determination and mental toughness; as you spend your time doing a run, pushing that extra burpee, press up or squat it's the same grit and determination you need at key moments in the race.
- Fitness training also allows you to repeat those tough moments when you're on your last legs and just need to keep going to hold your position, gain one a position or defend a position as you approach the finish line (or any other key race moment).

So yes physically fitness and the associated training really does improve your sailing and increases your enjoyment as you are able to really drive the boat, get your head out the boat and consider the other factors of the race.

Mental Toughness:

It was thinking about mental toughness that made me start this article. Over lockdown I have indeed sat down and thought about my sailing, not just how I perform and how I improve but also how I can make sure it's as enjoyable as possible. It seems to me that the bar has been raised pretty high in our class, as you get older you seem to have to spend more time considering other things, you don't get the same time to just sail, you do less racing and have more distractions. So you really have to think about how to get the most out of your sailing at whatever level you are or want to be at. As you improve and start "winning", after a while you can start to get disappointed with any results that are not at the front and start to focus on the position rather than the process that gets you there. I have done some reading and spent time thinking about this over the winter. Here are some notes I hope you find helpful:

- You can't control if you win, but you can control the process that gives you the best chance YOU have.



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- You can control getting fit, you can control getting your boat prepared, you can control learning and training, but on the day you can't control if you win.
- So focus on what you can control, let go of any incidents that may have occurred and allow your mind to focus on the plan to consider shifts, gains and positioning.
- Start measuring yourself on the things you can control, did I get a good position on the start line today, did I follow my plan, was my boat speed good, was my boat handling up to scratch etc, did I manage to plan ahead and position myself on the inside of mark roundings?
- If you focus on the things you can control, 1) you can appraise yourself on how you did regardless of the end position which allows you to walk away with positives which equals confidence, and 2) you can more easily identify areas for improvement that you are more able to focus on.

Mental toughness is the last area that most people would think about or spend any time on, but once you are sailing well enough to compete, it's the mental stuff that really pulls it together. The mental stuff can get you there even if you have some weaknesses in the other areas, as no one is perfect (well most of us aren't).

There is a lot of material on the subject, and in fact if you watched any of the RYA 2021 Dinghy Show videos you would have seen that the top sailors talk about mental toughness a lot. In fact, I would say that it's the main weapon in their toolbox that gets them from a good sailor to an Olympic level sailor. The interviews that Ian Walker hosted with the "Sailing Legends" such as Shirley Robertson, Sir Russell Coutts, Xu Lijia and Santiago Lange (still available on YouTube), are a great example.

So mental toughness is many things but if you have you have confidence, the ability to bounce back when it's going wrong and the mental strength to keep focused on the right things at the right time then you will excel around the course. This is a huge subject but if you think about your sailing how many times do you just lose focus at key moments and then kick yourself, have difficulties clearing your head from the week at work, issues at home, club committee issues on your mind as you push of the bank, or that pile up at the last mark. These all require a level of mental toughness to provide the ability to cut through them and focus. If this is an area you have never considered, then I urge you to take a look. It will improve your sailing, more importantly allow you to clear your mind and focus which whatever the end position will always make it more enjoyable.

So if you concentrate on the things you can control, pin point your efforts for improvement, tackle them one at a time, allow your mind to be focused, praise yourself for achieving controllable goals to build confidence, your sailing will improve, will become more enjoyable and your results will naturally improve

Hope this article was of some interest, I did say at the start it's not about the boat, it's all about the person in the boat!!!

Happy sailing, see you all soon.