

Dan Van Kerchof - Down Wind

Dan is the 2009 4.9 Sloop Champion

Down Wind Sailing, The Art of Going Wild - Dan Van Kerckhof

This is one of the single biggest technique changes in my life time to performance cat sailing. It has changed the way we sail, not just intrinsically with our boat handling but the tactics we had to adopt with this technique as well. It is a must have skill in the modern day cat sailing scene, those that master it can reap the results rewards. Unfortunately it is a very difficult skill to learn and also difficult to explain.

The last time I wrote anything about this subject I was 18 years young and David 'Slimy' Elliot asked me a few informal questions which he published on the website. I have changed my techniques somewhat since then (10 years later), and the advent of the 'big head' has also changed the way I sail wild.

Important things to note:

1. Mastering this technique you will tip over more than you have ever before. Get over it; it is not failure but fun! (unless you live in Victoria and hyperthermia is an issue)
2. Watch the good guys, when they zoom past it is generally a technique skill why they are faster rather than an actual boat speed problem.
3. Bribe your crew to get low. I find beer and the promise to keep doing the dishes works for me.
4. Crew work is ultra important to go fast here. Both people working together is the difference.

Starting Off

The first thing to note about going wild is what wind range to start using this technique. I find the threshold is when you can comfortably 2 string. Once you can get 2 on the wire you seem to be able to generate the apparent breeze needed to go wild.

Setup

I generally have the luff of the main let right off unless it is really windy, then just firm. The out haul is cracked about 40-50mm. The rotation is fully out pointing nearly parallel with the beams. Both centreboards up (unless very marginal wild conditions the centreboard down then helps you generate more lift allowing you to go wild earlier).

Sheet Positioning (main)

In light conditions I find the main should be let off to the tow strap area. As the breeze increases I slowly let this out. (Sailing cat rigged I have the traveller slightly more inward in the marginal conditions and slightly further out as it freshens then a sloop set up)

Sheet positioning (jib)

My barber hauler has a bobble restricting the jib from getting any closer than 250mm from the beam.

Sheet Pressure (main)

The pressure on the mainsheet is one of the most crucial things here. Think about the amount of pressure in 7-10kts you generally need upwind to make your leech stand up and generate enough power for you to trap. Fairly tight right? Well in the marginal conditions going wild you need the leech to stand up as well. Pull the sheet on tight don't be afraid you will only tip over. As the breeze increase this loosens to increase the twist in the head helping you (hopefully) keep the bows out of the water. There is no 'set' and forget with this. The sheet pressure changes dramatically and every second whilst going wild as fast as you can. So throw away your cleat and get a decent main sheet system that you can pull on and let out quickly. I find the settings for sloop and cat are similar with this.

Sheet pressure (jib)

The crew should just watch three things here:

1. The tell tales
2. The bow
3. When the main is eased ease with it.

Keep the tell tales flowing and as the crew has the best view of the water coming over the bow (if their eyes are open), dump when this is imminent. The most important thing is though as the main is released let the jib go simultaneously to keep the slot open and help the boat accelerate, even if it means ignoring your tell tales for a minute.

Weight positioning

Skipper

8-10kts (marginal have a coffee whilst cruising) I sit middle of the tramp fore aft and port to starboard

10-15kts (great wild conditions) Sit three quarters of the way back 200-300mm aft of centreboard slightly to windward maybe around windward toe strap.

15-20kts (the best wild stuff really sink your teeth in) Sit on the back beam and hike. Get that six pack out and hang that fat arse over the side.

20-25kts (hectic and wet) Pray to god but remember not to tell crew you are scared!

Crew

The crew is very important in regards to weight. They are readily more mobile than the skipper and can move easily aft for a bad 'set' of waves or up the tramp during a puff. 8-10kts (not too wet) Just forward of centre board on the leeward hull. Moving aft to centre board during puffs.

10-15kts (getting a few splashes down wettie) Behind centre board to back beam on the leeward hull. 15-20kts (can only see glimpses of the maniac skippers smile through the water) On the back beam just in front of leeward toe strap.

20-25kts (really wishing you where on shore with a stubby or a glass of bubbly) On the back beam in the centre to windward of centre.

Steering

This is the difficult part to learn. Not so much the what to do but how this aspect combines with the sheeting aspect is what defines going fast wild. Remember the rudders are essentially a brake, to steer the boat they disrupt water flow slowing the boat. The smoother and smaller movements of helm are the quickest.

The general rule of thumb is as power fades head into the breeze more whilst sheeting on. As the hull lifts and the boat picks up pace bear away and release sheet.

As the hull starts to drop and power fades reach for the sheet and pull what you let off in the initial part of the puff back on. If the hull continues to drop and power fades start to arc smoothly back to windward.

As the boat picks up pace again and flies a hull ease the sheet and arc smoothly away again to leeward pulling the sheet back on as the boat settles.

Watch for waves as you do this as your steering and sheet co-ordination should also coincide with how the boat is travelling down the back of a wave and then 'running' in to the one in front. As the boat accelerates down the wave bear away and give the main a quick 'pump' to help it along. When you hit the wave in front dump a bit of sheet and crest it by arcing to windward slightly.

The trick to this part is not reading this but actual practice. Get out there in heavy chop and try to make the boat feel smooth going wild. Do this a few times and then when you finally get back on the flat stuff you will be trucking.

Tactics

Pressure is the key word to the above. When going wild the guy who has pressure is king. When rounding the top mark know where the pressure is and chase it. Don't just set up and follow, look for the next line of breeze coming and make sure you are well positioned to get it. By well positioned I usually use the basic rule of thumb that if pressure is at 90 degrees to me (and to windward of course) this is the next puff I will be sailing in to. As the boat goes faster or you sail a quicker boat these puffs come from more in front of the boat similar to up wind.

Watch the way the puff is travelling across the water. If it is travelling towards you from the aft of your boat it is likely to change the wind making it squarer. These are the puffs you want to gybe on. Wait till the puff is nearly on you and about to travel behind you and then gybe. This will put you in to direct contact with this new breeze and on a better heading for longer.

Don't be afraid to gybe. You need to practice your gybes and become quick at these to take full advantage of tactical downwind sailing. I will throw anytime I see one of the above mentioned puffs, even if it is my 8th gybe for the leg. Stay in pressure and do anything to stay with it.

Going wild I find is one of the most rewarding things about our class, it allows us to sail a complete tactical race. Unlike other classes who do one gybe legs off the breeze we are able to fully utilize everything around the course. There is no procession sailing making every leg possible to pass someone or loose someone. That is great sailing.

Essentially like most skills, practice is the key here. Team up with a partner and go out and train trying different things directly opposite to each other this is the best way to learn along with attending regattas. Good luck and enjoy the swimming