

Thursday Races- a short story



The Catalina 27 sailboat “Elizabeth” in its slip at Dana Point West

I bought my Catalina 27 standard rig from a young fellow in Long Beach in February of 2011 and got a slip in Dana Point West Marina. By coincidence I ended up next to Bill Taylor who talked me into entering the Thursday races. However, when Bill Taylor sold his boat and partnered with another sailor to sail a very fast J- 80 (a slick 28 foot sloop), I lost a great neighbor.



Bill Taylor & partner on a J-80 named “Hunu”

That is how I got started with the Thursday races, which is the object of this story. Typically on Thursdays, I have lunch with my wife Elizabeth and then I head over to the Dana Point Harbor; so that I am at the gate before 1:00 pm. There I meet my crew which is composed of Peter Tietz and Ron Meyer, both very experienced sailors from whom I have learned much about sailboat racing.



The Crew: Peter Tietz and Ron Meyer in white shirts

Even though I have been sailing since 1981 (then in a Pearson 26 sailboat in Northport, Long Island, New York), I discovered that sailboat racing is a much different sport compared to just cruising. Cruising is a very leisure sport, where reaching a given destination before nightfall and finding an anchorage is a great achievement. In racing, reaching a mark, or buoy ahead of other boats is what the game is about, especially the last mark.

The first order of business is to remove the covers that protect the mainsail and the sailboat cabin. This is closely followed by me opening the entry way into the cabin and putting the door section away and secure so that they will stay in place during the race. Then, I turn the electrical power on by rotating the red switch to the on position. The radio comes on and we know we have electrical power on. I then go outside in the cockpit and turn the venting fan to get rid of any fumes that may have accumulated in the engine compartment. I let this run for a minute and then I prime the engine and turn the ignition key. After a few turns the engine starts; and we get ready to leave the slip. This involves putting away the electrical power cord, bumpers and other canvas covers for the winches and tiller. I check to make sure we are set to go and signal the crew we are backing the sailboat from the slip.

Depending on the wind conditions, this can be a little tricky. We need engine power to move aft, but not too much, the sailboat slowly moves aft and clockwise clear of other boats behind us, then rudder has to be moved quickly in the opposite direction, and when the vessel bow is clear off the pier, I engage the engine link forward and let the sailboat slowly get under way.



Engine Controls and Displays- large lever is engine gear



The Atomic 4 Engine

Then, as soon as we come out of the waterways where many sailboats tied up to their docks, I turn left heading west and that allows Peter Teitz to raise the mainsail against the wind. Ron Meyer adjusts the boom tension and we head out of the docking area into the channel along the rocky jetty which brings us to the open channel that leads us to the racing area, which is just outside the protective entrance to Dana Point Harbor.



Peter Teitz hoisting the mainsail

We pass alongside the jetty we see many perched sea birds. There is a very fowl odor that is hard to avoid, but it quickly disappears just past the end of jetty. As we clear the jetty, we turn hard right and aim for the green buoy. That is the starting point of each Thursday race.

Regarding the start line: there are basically three starting lines, all leaving the green buoy **G** to starboard within 2 boat lengths:

- Harbor jetty entrance for starting to the east (towards buoy **C** or **B**)
- Headlands for starting to the south (towards buoy **A**)
- Two houses on the hill for starting to the west (Whistle buoy)

The race is not an official yacht club Race. It actually was originally known as the Farkles race which is not organized by DPYC, but started about 20 years ago by a sailor named Hilding Johnson. It just kept going without really anyone “organizing” it. It has continued to spread by word-of-mouth. We simply use DPYC’s bar for the get-together after the race, so many do associate the race with the DPYC.

We all know that and treat each participant with the respect that every yachtsman and vessel deserves. The course for the day is called over the radio on channel 68 by the winning skipper of the previous Thursday race. If that captain is not there, or available, the second place boat does the honors. The course is usually somewhat dependant on wind conditions, whereas on windy-days they tend to be longer and on low-wind days much shorter. We operate on established handicaps based on PHRF ratings, whereby smaller boats start before 2:00 PM, 30 foot sloops start at 2:00 PM and much faster boats, or larger boats start later, as late as 12 minutes after 2:00 PM. Spinnakers are not allowed during the race but we use the base PHRF without adding the non-spin offset. The 2pm start is for Catalina 30’s with a PHRF handicap of 192. We, being a 27 foot Catalina with a rating of 210 start a couple of minutes before 2:00 PM, or roughly at 1:58 PM, depending on the length of the course.



Ron Meyer and Peter Tietz get ready to race



Peter Tietz adjusts the head sail while I steer

Before the race we check the wind and current conditions. This may result in us deciding to reef the mainsail, or most likely reef the head sail by retrieving the roller furling device a few turns and making the head sail smaller when wind conditions are high. On a few occasions when there is very little wind we strategize on the use of the whisker pole on the downwind leg and how to position ourselves at the start of the race. Each race is different and the weather conditions are too. Southern California is a dry area and the sun shines most of the time. And as the saying goes “it never rains in Southern California”.

We encounter fog sometimes. It is part of what is referred as the “Marine Layer” that rolls in most days. We rely on GPS to guide us towards each mark, especially on foggy days.

The total sailboat count varies, but on a good day we have 20, or more sailboats participating. As we reach the starting green buoy we stop the engine and I turn the tiller to one of my crew members. I then go down below on the starboard side, open an access door, turn on an LED light and rotate the engine shaft until a white painted line shows up. This position indicates that the propeller is in a horizontal attitude such that as water flows past it, the propeller blades will close reducing its drag as we move through the water. If the propeller was in an off position, the blades could open due their weight (gravity) and increase the drag on the sailboat. Once the propeller is in its correct position, I instruct Ron to push the engine lever to forward. This engages the engine and prevents the propeller from turning, therefore staying in a stream line attitude for minimum drag during the race.

Once the propeller is set, I climb out of the cabin, join my crew, and get ready for the race. We listen to the radio on channel 68 for the course of the day, soon the course is defined and we write it on a piece of green tape placed on the boat’s cabin bulkhead as follows, for example: **G/As/W/B/C/Finish at Red Nun, 8.8 miles**. These obscure set of letters define the various buoys we will use that particular day. DPYC has produced a set of coordinates (longitude and latitude) that precisely define the geometric location of each named buoy.



The start of the race

We then strategize what our starting sail setting should be and the starting course we believe will enhance our chances of winning. There is a tidal current that tends to move from west to east depending on the location of the moon, as well as wind strength. So it is important to take that into consideration. Furthermore, we have found by experience that the current is stronger away from land and much weaker near the jetty. However, sometimes a wind change can invalidate this local knowledge. At least on one occasion, we ignored the alleged current, the wind direction changed and we reached the whistle (red) buoy first. We were lucky that day. There are other effects that must also be taken into account. For instance, the sun tends to heat up the land near the beaches and highlands. This creates a thermal current of rising air at the beach. The sea air in its vicinity rushes in to fill the void

created by the hot rising air and it in turn creates very favorable wind conditions for sailing parallel along the beach.

There is a countdown that the previous week winning skipper goes through: 10 minutes to 2:00 PM, five minutes; and go at 2:00 PM. Just before the start everyone is joking for best position and adjusting their sails accordingly. Most boats tend to have their mainsail up and only deploy the head sail a few minutes before the start. Once we start, all efforts are into best speed and best pointing towards the mark, which is the course that will get us closest to the next mark on any given tack. As the skipper, I watch the tell tales for smooth air flow on the head sails. Peter having a different perspective view point by being seated opposite from me, can see the head sail better and alerts me to veer right, or left as appropriate. Ron manages the mainsail and makes adjustment by looking at the sail shape and blue colored tell tails on the mainsail. We also keep an eye on other sailboats ahead, or behind us. The important thing is to try to be on the high side (the windward side) when passing, and to prevent an overtaking sailboat from passing on the high side by pushing them out. This is all legal and appropriate, but it must be done such that one can get to the mark in the shortest amount of time as possible.



Rounding the Whistle (red) buoy

We have found by experience that we can usually do quite well getting to the first mark. In fact we also do very well on the second and sometimes the third mark as well. Our dilemma is that the larger sailboats with longer waterline lengths are capable of moving much faster. This is controlled primarily by an engineering equation that says the maximum boat speed is controlled by the constant multiplied by the square root of the waterline length. Consider that a 36 foot long boat will move at 6x a constant, whereas a 25 foot long boat would move at 5x a constant. In this case the difference is 1 knot of speed. Over time this difference can mean that larger, faster boats will overtake the smaller, slower boats. That is precisely what happens to us most of the time. We manage to do quite well against boats our size, but the larger boats, or those that can plane (boats that instead of being displacement vessels can slide on top of the water when they reach a critical speed). We understand those effects and work hard to move our sailboat as fast and far as possible during the early portions of the race to give us the best chance to

beat the fast boats we know will be creeping up on us later. There is a boat and skipper who by far has won more Thursday races than anyone we know. He is Bob Van Pelt and his sailboat is "Reggae".

In all the races we participated in, we only once managed to overtake Reggae. By far this is the boat to beat, or better said to look up to in any race. We usually start together, but Bob finishes much sooner than we do. He is usually assisted by Willi Hugelshofer, Bill Yount, and Tony Musolino all excellent sailors. Each of these fellows have come and sailed with us from time to time and given us pointers on how to improve our own performance. We had several experienced sailors join us on a few occasion and we learned a great deal from their inputs and experience. My son and friends have on occasion joined us. The following pictures illustrate their participation.



Tony Musolino & Bob Van Pelt



Peter Tietz & Willi Hugelshofer

Our Catalina 27 has received many improvements over time to better its performance. These included some of the following items:

- Replaced a fixed two-blade propeller with a folding one.
- Removed an extra anchor to reduce the vessel's weight & moved the other anchor to the center of the sailboat for better balance,
- Replaced the mainsail with a new one made by Ullman Sails (U/S) and the 155 Genoa head sail with a new one with better shape and lighter construction, made by Elliot & Pattison.
- Added adjustable whisker pole and brackets on the mast for better head sail shape and larger exposed area, including lately a topping lift.
- Added a 3 to 1 out-haul system to improve the mainsail out-haul tensioning/shape.
- Added a secondary set of head sail tracks inside the outboard existing tracks to improve sailboat pointing when sailing against the wind.
- Added unique split blocks made by Garhaeur Marine Hardware of Upland, CA. These blocks allow quick changes in head sail tailing trims and improve sailboat pointing.
- Replaced an inoperable knot meter with new one to better ascertain boat speed with sail changes.

These improvements gave us confidence to enter the “**Wounded Warriors Regatta**” on June 9th and 10th, 2013; hosted by the **Dana West Yacht Club**. We finished fourth on Saturday and third on Sunday (out of 10 participating boats). This feat was completed in 01:29:04, just 10 seconds behind the winning boat “Cecilia” and we got third prize trophy. On August of 2013, the **Dana Point Yacht Club** together with the **Ocean Institute** organized the “**Richard Henry Dana Charity Regatta**”. Again we decided this would be a good way to see how well we had improved our sailing performance. I quickly got myself busy getting all the required documents submitted and approved. I also obtained both my PHRF numbers (**56819**) and membership into the Southern California Yacht Association, including a rating of **210** around buoys. We sailed “Elizabeth” on Saturday September 7th and we finished fourth on adjusted time. Then on Sunday we were joined by Jennifer Bopp, who had sailed with us before and again we finished fourth.



The Start of the Richard Henry Dana Regatta



Team “Elizabeth” finished 4th on adjusted time

Our competitors were fierce sailors and we held our own against them, but in spite of all our efforts, we finished fourth on adjusted time. We continue to sail every **Thursday race** with the objective to someday being the first to reach the finish mark. We will continue to strive for the ultimate goal; in the meantime, we will keep enjoying the Southern California weather and the wonderful fellowship from the Dana Point Yacht, the Lake Mission Viejo Yacht and other similar clubs that we encounter every week.

It has been said that: *“Man cannot change the direction of the wind,*

But he can adjust his sails”

Carl A. Paez

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