

Putting Together an Albacore Racing Program

A sailor will not become better simply by showing up and racing a few events each season. Wishing one could do better does not make it happen, you must take an active approach and carefully manage the time, fiscal, and other resources available to you. This article concerns how to approach the totality of ones sailing to do the best overall for the amount of time and energy you are willing to invest.

Begin with a reality check

First, frankly assess your commitment to sailboat racing and determine how much time, effort, and money you are willing to dedicate to improving. Set a reasonable objective which considers your current level and your ability and willingness to invest time and money. For example, if you are new to sailing, winning major national or world championship would be an unrealistic objective, unless you had several years to totally commit to sailing. Avoid specific numerical goals – instead key on things like not having a major strategic blunder, breakdown, or capsize, or finishing better than those with whom you normally compete.

Self Assess

Write down around ten strengths and weaknesses from areas related to your sailing. They could be items such as endurance, vision, starting, downwind speed, or composure under pressure or any other factor. The facets of sailboat racing could be viewed as the links in a chain. You can be very strong in most, but a few weak areas will continually send you to the back of the pack race after race. Often one can get the big gains right away by improving where one is weakest. Once your game is consistently devoid of major disaster, you must then begin raising your entire level across all fronts.

Plan Your Season

Set a schedule for the season with one or more events that could be considered peaks. For the 01 season we have an August World championship and fall US and Canadian national championships – two peaks. Plan what you will work on leading to one or both events. One must break each identified weakness down into its smallest sub components. These issues can be hardware or software related. Better finish line results will occur only after you have improved many or all of these sub components.

Hardware Issues

All wining racers have one thing in common: they are able to get and keep their focus out of the boat and onto the real issues that reside on the race course. It is natural to be concerned with the events in the boat – after all, you are sailing in a boat – and your attention is naturally drawn in to this most obvious thing in which you sit. However, anything that distracts the crew has a deleterious effect that go way beyond the inability to cleat the jib or adjust the outhaul. Imagine if every time you shifted gears in your car it required that you reach into the back seat to fix something? You would be lucky to make your daily commute without an accident. Having some nagging malfunction, no matter how seemingly insignificant, will serve as a distraction which will rip your consciousness from the big picture and allow it to fall into the bilge, from which it takes great effort to remove once lodged. Your mind can exist outside only when you have utter confidence in your boat's ability to function: the boat should not require your attention while sailing.

So...fix everything. Make the list-o-major thing to repair as the season progresses, order the parts, and learn what it will take to do the work. If the list is long, prioritize it, and make sure your hit the really major items. Time and money are limited for everyone – and you want the best bang from every bit you invest in your sailing. Its always best to perform major projects during the winter so that you do not interfere with your on the water portion of your program and to ensure that you have the time to learn the correct method of getting the work done, get the correct materials or parts, and not be pressured by an impending sailing date to kludge something together at the last minute.

Rigging

Set up rig and sail controls for minimum friction with appropriate purchases and throws which are convenient to operate while sailing. Sail controls simply should not break. The means to install fittings which will not fail under normal and abnormal sailing conditions are well known; fix any marginal area such that it will not fail or wear out. Use ball bearing blocks; use right sized lines and fittings;

Foils

Pull them out of the boat and look at them over at least once a year. Fill scratches and dings with epoxy with lightweight, easily sanded filler. Sand them as smooth and fair as your can – with no limit. I sand my foils to 2000 grit – and while I may lose a race, I know its not by foils that are slowing me down.

Every few seasons it's a good idea to do a full refinishing, sanding off most of the old paint, filling the scratches, and recoating with a high quality coating system. Be certain that the foils are sealed and that water cannot intrude on the core material whether it is foam or wood. If water has found its way in, you must remove it and any damaged core material. This is particularly important near the root. Be certain to inspect the foils after any encounter with the bottom. It is ok to perform a quick repair to restore the smoothness and watertight integrity with the intent on doing a proper repair later in the season.

Sails

The Albacore class limits new sail purchases to one main and one jib every year. I believe it is best to time the first use of new sails to coincide with your scheduled "peaking" events - so don't squander them early in the season.. I will keep three sets of sails in use – the newest set for a targeted major event – this year its worlds in the UK. Last years sails are for other championship events, and the sails bought the year before last season are for practice and general sailing around. My older sails, which are not all that bad, are either donated for the fleet boats or sold for cheap. This way, the brand new sails you pull out for your major event become the lightly used set all ready to tune up with at the beginning of the following season. Extend the useful life of one's sails by minimizing luffing, keeping them rolled and out of the sun when not in use.

Weight

At a minimum, know the weight of your boat –both hull only and all up sailing values. Be cognizant of how packing for a day's racing will affect the total sailing weight. Use line types that do not absorb water; fix the leaks; leave the giant cooler at home; and leave the anchor in the trunk of the car. Keep the boat covered, tipped up high, and dry when not sailing. It may not be possible to bring an older boat down to minimum weight, but you can avoid adding unnecessary weight.

The hull

Ensure that your buoyancy tanks do not leak. Ensure that the parts of the hull are rigidly connected to each other. This means the deck to hull, centerboard cap to trunk, and seat tank to hull joints are in good condition. If they are not, these should have the original adhesive ground out, re filled with an epoxy based filler, and then glass taped and painted.

Fill and fair any hull scratches. Check the centerboard gasket; replace if necessary. Inspect all blocks, lines, chain plates, mast step, and rudder fittings to ensure that they are rigidly connected with no room to wiggle. Tighten all fasteners. Replace chronically loosening non locking nuts with ones with nylon inserts, and re tighten them for the last time. If fasteners into the hull are stripped, fill the old holes with epoxy, re drill and refasten them. If the fitting holes are elongated, replace the fittings.

On the mast, ensure that the mast base is rigidly affixed to the base. Inspect the goose neck for wear and replace it if it deviates significantly from a new one. Inspect the shrouds, there should be no broken strands or kinks. Halyards eventually wear out, inspect and replace them if the main halyard is frayed or the wire rope part of the jib halyard exhibits "fish hooks." Check the mast for straightness by standing it vertically and sighting up the track. Straighten if necessary. If the mast is cracked or dimpled, replace it.

Set the boat up according to the tuning guide sold with your sails. All of them will say to have the centerboard at the maximum distance aft permitted by the class rules. Make this adjustment – just take the day and do it.

Software

Albacores require a crew of two which contrasts with the typical arrangement of a supposedly all knowing boat owner / driver and anyone who would go sailing that day. I would no more enter a major event with a pick up crew than play a game of tennis doubles with someone from the homeless shelter. The significance of crew capability becomes clearer to me every year I continue to race with David Byron in the front of the

boat. David is more than 180 pounds of meat on the rail, he is 50% of the operation, the eyes of the boat, and an equal partner in what we do every race. The consequences of sailing with such talent for the past 5 years have been dramatic: our routine has become honed to the point that operating the boat is almost an afterthought; our minds are completely freed up to concentrate on the bigger picture. I don't have to distract myself asking him to adjust the jib; it's already there. Likewise, David, when formulating our first leg upwind strategy, is not concerned with how fast the boat will go.

Find a regular crew you can deal with and who wants to build a program. Set a time period. Two years is a good start – get things working the first season and hone it to a razor's edge the following year. A financial involvement is good – it instills a sense of ownership and is the most tangible way to really convey a commitment to the program. Since we are talking about racing Albacores here and not a big boat, the costs are really minimal. Buying a jib or helping out with some boat preparation is a great way to build a team mentality.

Boat handling

What could tying your shoes, shifting from 2nd to 3rd gear in your car, brushing your teeth, and signing your name possibly have to do with sailboat racing? Each of these actions has the following things in common: all are things we do every day; once we initiate the task, there is not much forethought, no mid-course corrections, and little conscious effort. The same must be true for your boat handling. Anyone can get there using the following process: Begin by practicing with your crew on non-racing days. Go out and do several tacks, gybes, and mark roundings. Now, stop and talk about the specific things that each person does – particularly what each does in response to the other. For instance, how does the crew know when to pull the boom over in a gybe? What cues are they acting on? Now, methodically develop a choreographed procedure for each maneuver, refining the steps as necessary. Practice these slowly and deliberately at first, and build speed only after you have the pattern down. Now, arrange a couple practice sessions with your crew to permanently sear this information into your brains. It's not enough to talk about it – it's a timed motor pattern cued to spoken and unspoken events, and is more physical than intellectual. In fact, the more you keep your brain out of the picture the better – don't worry about how you are going to capsize on that next high wind gybe – just find a wave and carve the boat around and do it, and leave your brain to worry about trivia like what you are going to wear to the bar.

Rules

Obtain a copy of the current rules and read them. Then, focus on one sailing rule a month or so: spend an hour and carefully read a rule and the associated appeals. Read the class rules cover to cover. Knowing the rules cold is ok – but it does not end with knowing your rights on the course. The best sailors will rarely find themselves in a protest situation because they can see the situations developing and take appropriate action before things get into extremis. After every encounter on the race course in which you had to assert rights or give way, think about it afterwards and consider what tactical moves you could have made leading up to the event to avoid an altercation and come out ahead. Could you have claimed an overlap earlier? Not tacked quite so close? I often find that a close encounter will disrupt my whole train of thought for the race and while I may succeed in getting that last concession, I will lose in the long run.

Strategy and Tactics

Begin by becoming cognizant of the wind's direction all the time. Learn the effects of lifts and headers on the relative position of nearby boats, and how gains and losses occur during a race. Learn what being inside and outside a shift mean, and how to position one self to be on the inside relative to the competition. Get a real compass and install it permanently into the boat.

In the absence of some local knowledge or pattern, I will use the following priorities:

1. Sail to the area where the wind is strongest
2. Once in the better breeze, get onto the lifted tack
3. avoid corners: use every opportunity to get back to the middle of the course

Sail around before the start of the race and note the range of wind direction, any wind direction trends, and whether there is more wind on one side of the course or another. Determine the median wind direction. Discuss this with your crew and reach an agreement on the boat's heading and state of the wind. You may

figure out the favored side of the course or you may not, but making it a priority and a set part of your routine will contribute to getting and keeping your mind out of the boat and on the course

Starts

Vast amounts have been written on the underlying rules, tactics, and strategy during starting. Read as much as you can, practice basic skills such as starting / stopping and timing an approach. Become intimately familiar with how your boat responds. Get used to sailing in close proximity to other boats. Don't freak out; get in there and mix it up. Take out a big insurance policy and apologize in advance if you have to. Think ahead really made it click for me - where do I have to be at 45 seconds so that at 30 seconds I am in position in the front row of boats so that at 15 seconds I am approaching the line so I hit it at full speed at zero?

Speed

Setting the boat up on the numbers is a good start but there is more. The best drivers have an acute sense of when the boat is performing well and when it is not. This sensitivity is not inborn, but must be developed over years. Putting some process around it can accelerate acquiring the touch. First, get in a boat with a better sailor and watch them steer. Then, have them coach you as you steer your boat. Learn to be sensitive to the boat's state: is the power level right? Is it bound up or released? Can you point? How about the fore and aft trim? Are you ploughing or dragging? Do some two boat tuning and lots and lots of time sailing. Steer and sheet the boat as if your life depended on it; make every encounter with a wave perfect; cyclops your attention onto the boat, its trim, and strive to really feel what is going on with every sense. Your not solving math problems here, it's physical, and there is no way to get really good without becoming one with the boat.

Putting it all together

Some people would rather not apply a businesslike approach to something they do for fun in their spare time – but you can only achieve so much without some planning, organization, and work. You are going to spend some time sailing anyway, why not invest a little bit more time to plan and manage your sailing and begin your ascent? Climbing your way through the fleet is rewarding and fun. Make your plans, do some practice, and get the boat fixed up and tuned, build a team, set a few goals and go for it!

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SUGGESTED READING

Eric Twinnane - "Sail, Race, and Win."

Step by step process for self evaluating and improving one's sailing. A great book which really hammers on the "blamers" and how to teach one's self how to improve via a variety of methods.

Dave Perry - "Winning in One Designs"

Classic compilation of articles written during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Particularly valuable for demystifying upwind strategy in a shifting breeze.

W. Timothy Gallwey - "The Inner Game of Tennis."

Has nothing to do with sailing per se, but is a good sports psychology book which explains how the cognizant evaluating self meddles with and screws up the competent can do self. I HATE it when he does that!

Racing Rules of Sailing

A necessary evil. Read them, review them occasionally -- then focus your energy on avoiding circumstances where you might have to use them.

RYA - the Albacore Class Rules

A little dry – but not as dry as the yacht racing rules. Essential to have at least a nodding understanding.

Frank Bethwaite - High Performance Sailing

Neat book containing both anecdotal and hard data on the history, physics, and developments surrounding all facets of a sailing boat including weather and wind, foils, hull shape, and rigs and sails. References the Albacore as the archetypical classic dinghy type.