

Helming the Flying Dutchman – a discussion on some aspects peculiar or more noteworthy to this class. By Norman Rydge AUS37

PERFORMANCE

One thing I remember as an FD novice was the erratic speed variations between the boats of an average fleet. It seemed that any day would see one boat or another have a marked advantage, and many others would have flashes of pace. The reason, of course, was due to crews of differing skill and experience sailing a very high performance dinghy. Here we have the first and most obvious peculiarity of the FD.

The performance of the FD comes via length, weight and rig. Of these the rig is by far the largest contributor to performance, and the modern FD rig is one of the most complex and variable dinghy setups about. Upwind, as an FD helmsman you are obliged to spend relatively more of your limited resources adjusting and monitoring the rig. During regattas my hands get sore not so much from handling the mainsheet or traveller, but from all the differently coloured 5mm lines controlling things like shrouds, lowers, forestay.

FEEL

The more intuitively adjustments are made, the less time spent with your head in the boat and the greater your attention to other aspects of racing. This is one of the chief gains to be made from sailing regularly. Don't leave the crew out; he should be getting a feel for when the boat is going nicely, and be telling you when it isn't. Train your crew to be aware of what adjustments you make while sailing upwind in all conditions: you might tell him you are easing the forestay, tightening lowers etc. Over time he will recognise a change in conditions that will require you to make a substantial alteration to trim. In our boat Richard will try to give me notice of such changes so I can react as they happen. FD's reward better gear changes more than most classes.

EMPHASIS

Different conditions require different emphasis. You will be able to setup more accurately with fewer adjustments on a day of steady wind – spend more time on tactics. Other days will demand almost constant large rig

adjustments, you've got a handful – this is when you need your crew to take greater responsibility for overall race management. Often the conditions are best met with compromise. If I think a gust will last for less than about a minute, I would generally not adjust the forestay or shrouds, even though this may be ideal. Instead, I would ease up the genoa cars (poppers we call them) and raise the centreboard. Because these are quicker adjustments to make and then to reverse once the gust has past, I spend less time with my head in the boat. Knowing how to best divide your concentration between rig, steering and race management is an essential art of FD sailing.

LENGTH and WEIGHT

The FD is a long and relatively heavy dinghy. The implication is that it is sometimes better steered more like a small yacht than a lightweight dinghy, especially in lighter breezes.

A common mistake while beating is to bear away too readily in the lulls. When the wind suddenly drops the FD's momentum will drag the apparent wind forward for a time before the boat slows, the genoa luff backs and at this point many skippers will bear away as they would in a heading windshift. It is often better, and always so if you want to hold height, to hold your line and wait for the boat to slow, the apparent to move aft and the genoa luff to fill as before.

Conversely, downwind in lighter airs it is important to respond to lulls and lifts before a heavy dingy like the FD slows. Sailing a little higher a little sooner as the wind drops in a lull will generally pay dividends. Compared to most other dinghies, the FD helmsman needs to be more reactive to pressure variations. In very light winds the crew is often the first to notice more or less through the spinnaker sheet and he should be constantly relaying this to the skipper.

In breezier conditions an FD should be sailed more like a skiff. Because of its size and speed, not many dinghies lose as much as an FD when tacking. Tactically, the obvious implication is that you'll want to avoid unnecessary or unprofitable tacks. You need a larger shift to warrant tacking than, say, a Laser. High performance dinghies such as the FD also have more to gain from pressure variations on the course than a Laser. If a 12 knot breeze freshens to 15 knots a Laser might increase its speed from 4.1 knots to 4.2, while the FD speeding past has gone from 6 to 7.5 knots. This

is why in moderate winds it will almost always pay the Laser sailor to tack on small shifts regardless of pressure differences on the course, while the smart FD sailors (especially the crews) are looking for signs on the water of more pressure.

SKIFFS

Since adopting the larger spinnaker, more FDs sailors are gybing through large angles and using the trapeze downwind like a skiff. I'd guess that many FD sailors, like me, have little experience in skiffs, but perhaps some have seen the huge gains and losses these boats make downwind.

Whereas skiffs always trapeze when there's enough wind, it's harder for the FD helmsman to know when it will pay off and when it's better to sail more conventional running angles. What combinations of wind and waves will reward a higher angle, and how high? Most importantly, what are the risks, especially when some of the fleet are trapezing off to different laylines and others sticking close to the rhumbline to the leeward mark?

When and how high are feel things only got with experience, but to assess the risk, one must be aware of some principles of skiff-like sailing. When sailing with the wind all conventional boats experience fewer windshifts and less variation in apparent windspeed that when sailing close hauled, due to the fact that the boat's own speed subtracts from its apparent wind. The faster the boat the more so. This has the effect of mitigating gains and losses on the run. On the other hand skiffs, sailing higher angles, drag their apparent wind forward to the extent that increases in their own speed can add to rather than decrease their apparent windspeed. Also a skiff sailing in better wind than its rivals stays in it longer and therefore gains more than would a boat sailing as part of a lower performance fleet. Hence the big gains and losses.

FDs trapeze sailing on the run are more like skiffs and the helmsman must accept the stakes are greater. In variable conditions bigger gains and losses are available.