

By Dave Ellis (Has been Race officer since 1982 for dinghy regattas New England to Florida, Texas to California. Thirteen years Sailing Master and Regatta Coordinator at St. Petersburg Yacht Club as an employee.)

RANDOM SUGGESTIONS FOR RACE COMMITTEE VOLUNTEERS

Equipment: Pencils always work. A good whistle on the life jacket is a backup. (Air guns were tried at St. Pete Yacht Club; had an indeterminate lag, depending on temp and barometer.)

Two watches, one for start, set at countdown 6 minutes. One for elapsed time for Portsmouth from the start signal. If only one fleet, can set some watches to count up after countdown. But, have a backup of actual time of start!

One minute before the countdown sequence, drop either the “L” flag (Come Within Hail) or, if appropriate, the “AP”, with a sound signal. Gives the competitors an actual time, one minute, to start their 5-minute watches instead of having a finger on the wrist waiting for the first ‘gun.’

Since it is the FLAG, not the sound, that counts, whip that flag up with dispatch. Same with down. Stand clear of a motivated flag person!

For the final minute, have the “X” Over Early flag on its staff hanging down over the side of the boat below the orange start flag. Really helps to show the competitors that you are ready to call OCS. Ready with an additional sound signal, too. Remember that it is the Windward edge of the start pin that counts as the line.

With the large marks often used, it is convenient to have a line, or two, around the entire circumference to make it easier to grab. At SPYC we also had those lines attached to where the anchor rode attaches, to spread the load. Did this after a J-24 hit a mark and pulled it apart. Blown up marks should not be blown up ‘hard.’ It makes them jump around in waves and power boat wakes, sometimes hitting rounding boats that ordinarily would be OK.

Setting Marks: To SET, get the mark set boat downwind (or down current if appropriate) from the area where the mark is to go. For the Start Pin, DRAG the mark, with the full anchor rode behind the boat, the anchor in hand. (Mind the prop!) When the RC boat person sees the MARK at the correct spot, a signal is made to DROP THE MARK. Trust me, don’t depend on the VHF Radio. Simply, when close, RC raises an arm within view of the mark set person. When it is time, DROP THE ARM. Done. Please do not throw the anchor. At SPYC that would delegate one to sandwich duty if they continued to do so Often the anchor fouls and then does not hold. Just drop it. When working without a mark set boat, drop the pin and then “arm” (See later) when backing down on the RC Signal boat anchor.

Depending on the water depth, gather and tie up extra anchor line of marks. It is important to use a weight (kedgit/signal) about six feet below the mark on the anchor rode to keep the line away from keels. Those bar bell weights you used to use work well. Just be sure to not use too much weight on a small mark, such as the start pin. There is one somewhere on Lake Guntersville down there. I have the GPS coordinates. Sticking up maybe eight feet from the bottom.

When setting the windward mark without help, like at a Saturday club race, use the little ripples to know that you are going to windward. Flag on the RC boat only works if you are stopped. A trick is to set whichever is the closest to the RC boat slip first, be it the windward or leeward.

Then set the others around that base. If, say, it is the leeward mark, take a wind reading with a flag and take a shore bearing to windward. Opposite, of course, if it is the windward mark.

If an OFFSET mark is used on a Windward Leeward course, make it perpendicular to the wind from the windward mark. In shifty winds, fudge downwind a bit to make sure a wind shift does not require a tack to get around it. Set three or four boat lengths away from the mark.

If a REACH MARK is to be set, a quick way to tell where to put it is to motor to where you think it should be and hold both arms out to form a 90-degree angle with them. Each arm should be aiming at a mark, Windward and Leeward. Move the mark boat as appropriate to set.

“Arm Method”: STARTING MARK: Stand at the Orange Flag facing straight into the wind. Hold your LEFT arm out square to your body. A little upwind from that direction the start mark should be set. (For years at SPYC highly regarded Race Officers, including Pat Siedenspinner who literally wrote the book, would do all kinds of math to figure out where the start pin should go. Was in the same place as the arm thing.) About 1 ½ times the average boat length times the number of boats in line for length. Just guess. After the first start you will know! Some make the Pin end a little to weather. On a short line it really doesn't matter. Most newer racers will always start at the RC end anyhow.

Setting gate marks is difficult. Good sailors seem to know if one is to windward even a few feet. One trick is to set one mark. Then go at least SEVEN boat lengths away (ask about the Pan Am Trials protest in Lightnings.) Drag the mark behind the boat as usual. When the engine gets perpendicular to the wind from the other mark, gun the engine, making a plume of water. Continue forward upwind until the dragged mark is at that point and then Drop the anchor.

CHANGING THE COURSE: Some clubs write in their year's Sailing Instructions that the leeward mark and the finish line can be moved while boats are on the course, except for that leg. Often the wind on our lakes changes significantly. The usual "C" flag with sound is not practical, as there is not time to reset the new mark and dash up to the previous mark to signal. So, the ability to move the leeward mark and the finish line saves the race from being a series of reaches.

Legally, it may be the responsibility of the Race Officer to make sure the course is not going to impede barge traffic. If a sailor is well outside the course, that's on them. Some clubs require a VHF radio to a dedicated channel to be warned of impending barge traffic. Little boats can be hollered at by bigger boats.

Please make sure the one who records finish times has legible handwriting. Also, check to make sure the right boat is being recorded. Some look alike, so an experienced person aboard may want to call the sail number out loud. Oh, and hang on to the recording sheet. A 100+ boat Opti regatta day was lost due to a Whaler taking the recordings in to the club. Somewhere they flew out. Lost day. (Not SPYC!)

Sometimes mistakes are made. None of the sailors have perfect races either! Sometimes the competitors have suggestions. On a local level folks are usually polite. In larger events, assign a Designated Sailor to represent the class. They talk that that one, then the Designated Sailor, only, approaches you, the RC.