

Gib Charles
October 31, 2009

2009 Mutineer Nationals: A Winner's Retrospective

I was asked by Jerry Thompson to put down some thoughts regarding my victory at Mutineer Nationals. I'm sure this is more than he bargained for, but once I start talking sailing it's hard to stop.

(Warning: long. To be read when it's too cold to sail, and accompanied by the 750 photos on www.mutineer15.org!)

I've won the Mutineer Nationals a few times in the past, and I prepared as well as I could to try to win this year, but I didn't really enter the regatta filled with confidence. I felt and still feel there were better sailors and racers than me.

1000 Details:

In the past, I've been able to attribute a Nationals victory to some very tangible element: the compass, new sails, a boat that didn't fall apart, better boat tuning, tons of practice in ultra-light air, etc. I'll remember 2009 as the year of focusing on the 1000 details within the basics.

"It's you, stupid!"

It began 3 years ago. I wasn't pleased with my performance or finish the past 3 Nationals, coming in 3rd, then 2nd, then 4th. Something had to change. I realized it was primarily me. I had a new boat (which I love, thanks Nickels Boat Works!), new Schurr sails (which I love, thanks Hunter!), lots of practice time, good crew. It became apparent that I was the weak link. I spent the last 16 months re-reading the books I had read years ago. I took local regattas and club racing more seriously, looking for opportunities to improve all the skills that were "OK", but not great. I looked for opportunities to gain a half a boat length here and there. I attended some boat handling clinics that were offered at my club by sailing coach Jim Young. I asked Jim Daus (Buccaneer Nationals Champion 2007) to sail with me two weeks before Nationals (in cold, nasty wetsuit weather!) to coach and critique anything he saw me doing right or wrong. It all helped me take the little things seriously again.

Crew:

And then I teamed up with Mike Ruwitch as my crew whenever possible. If there was one thing that took my sailing to another level, it was Mike. He expected us to do everything correctly, and he was doing his job, so I better do mine. The more time we spent together, the more he did in the boat, and the less I did. He called our tactics and strategies upwind, and I just steered, freeing me up to steer a little bit better. He made the decisions on any rigging changes that affected him. He loves big air, speed, crash and bash, so I caught his enthusiasm. He was willing to do whatever it took to get us to do better, whether it was sit in an uncomfortable position for an hour, polish the hull in the rain in the parking lot, drive through the night so we could get to the regatta a day sooner to set up, etc. He was as involved in every start, every crossing, every duck, every mark rounding and every finish as I was. It made me rethink and refocus on the 1000 (maybe 10,000?) little things that go into a race that I could improve on. I paid more attention to every tack, every crossing, every start, my sail trim, the boat trim. We kept asking ourselves: "Can we do anything to go faster? Go higher upwind? Work lower downwind? Is someone else getting a lift or a header? Is there more pressure somewhere else?" Focus, Focus, Focus.

Dennis Connor wrote a book called "No Excuses". It's been awhile since I read it, but he goes into great detail regarding all the 10,000 little things he does to prepare for a major competition, so there is absolutely no excuse for not having sailed the best possible regatta at the end. I didn't sail any race perfectly, but I made fewer mistakes than I had made in the past. In reflecting on specific races, I know there are 3 or 4 races where we had the opportunity to finish a place higher. I also made a list of personal sailing skills that I know need to be improved. This is what will motivate me to sail better next year.

Strategy

Day 1:

Going into Day 1, Mike and I decided our strategy was to sail conservatively, not take any major risks. With only 1 or 2 throw-outs for the regatta, we didn't want to sail our TO in the first day, and we wanted to find out how our speed compared, how our upwind height compared, and who our immediate competition was. We wanted good starts, but definitely didn't want to get an OCS. We chose to stay in the middle of the course, not risk banging any corners. Plan on safe crossings, don't risk fouling anybody. The first day was good for us with a 1-2-2. At the end of the day we led by 2 points over Hunter, we had identified that the top 5 boats were extremely close in speed, height, and skill, and we hadn't sailed our throw-out. We could take more risks later if we had to, but since our strategy worked well for us on Day 1, we decided to stick with our conservative approach on Day 2.

Day 2:

With 5 boats swapping positions in each race, we could win the regatta if we got all 2nds from here on out, even a couple of 3rds. Day 2 belonged to Ernie and Carol with a 1-2-1-2 and they got to throw out a 4 from Day 1. We finished 2-3-3-1, throwing a 3, now leading Ernie by 1 point and Hunter by 4 points going into the last day. At this point we had the tie-breaker over Ernie. (We both had two 1sts, but we had more 2nds.) This was going to be tight.

Day 3:

With only two 3rds as the worst numbers in our score line, we essentially still hadn't sailed our throw-out, and could take a few more chances on the last day if we needed to. The important thing was to keep pace with Ernie, hopefully beat him in each race on the last day, but definitely don't let him get a 1st since that would give him the tie-breaker.

Race 1, W-L-W

First race of the day we're right where we want to be, leading Ernie to the upwind finish with about a 2-3 boat length lead, with him to our right and Hunter and Chadwick to our left. We decided not to cover Ernie too tightly because we didn't want to initiate a tacking duel that might let Hunter or Chadwick get ahead of us. Ernie got some lucky shift or pressure on the right side beat us anyway. How did that happen? Rats. Now he's winning the regatta, and we have to beat him in the next race. Our strategy has to change, time to take a risk or two.

Race 2, W-L-W-L

The wind is up a bit (15 – 20 mph?), the left end of the line is favored, we're all headed for the pin on a tight reach just below the line. Mike and I are a little above Ernie right on his hip. It looks like we can clear the pin on Starboard, then tack onto port. Hunter and Chadwick tack onto port, we let them go. Ernie and Carol try to make a quick tack but their jib sheet doesn't release from the cleat, and their boat gets spun around right into our path. We hit forestay-to-forestay, they capsize, we bear way below the line to avoid their boat, make sure they are OK, then start on port, the 3rd to last boat to leave the start line. We know this will become Ernie's new throw-out bringing a 4th from the first day back into his score line. We could absorb this race as our throw-out and still be ahead by 1 point, but if we can finish any better than 4th it will preserve our throw-out protection for another race. We sail hard with 4 long legs to work with, and get another 3rd.

Race 3, triangle, finish to windward

We lead Ernie by 1 point, Hunter by 5, and Chadwick by 6. We still have to finish ahead of Ernie, but stay close to the other 2 boats. We get a safe start with Hunter and Chadwick well below us at the pin, and Ernie above us. We work the middle of the first beat and round the windward mark in 3rd ahead of Ernie. Perfect. We sail the reaches as fast as possible trying to close some distance on Hunter and Chadwick, but more importantly keep our lead on Ernie. We round the leeward mark in 3rd and loosely cover Ernie up the last beat to finish. We get a 2nd, he gets a 4th, Hunter gets another 1st. This gives us a 2 point lead on Ernie, with nothing worse than a 3rd to throw-out.

Race 4, W-L-W-L, last race:

We do the math and realize we don't have to sail the last race. If we use this as our throw-out nobody can beat our score. I give Mike the choice whether to sail or go in, and of course he wants to sail. It's the strongest wind of the week. We get a safe start at the pin close to our competitors, round the top and bottom marks in 3rd place. I'm trying to focus, but honestly all I can think about is that we've already won the championship. My driving up the 2nd beat is sloppy and I frustrate Mike who always wants to win the race he's in, even if it doesn't have to count. We round the top mark in 4th, decide to be contrary to the 3 in front of us, and gybe-set. Bad decision on my part. They have more pressure and a better angle to the finish. They all finish ahead of us along with Tate in Pearl, and we take a 5th for our throw-out.

Having the opportunity to sail in the environment of friendly, good competition of 19 one-design boats this year was fantastic. It gave each of us the opportunity to compare all of the preparations we made and skills we have. Thank you all for coming to MNC 2009 so we could test ourselves boat on boat. I look forward to seeing all of you next year!

Gib
Mutineer 8002

