

What Makes a Successful Team Racing Event

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Although team racing has been around for a few decades, it continues to develop into an up-and-coming sailing activity. When the concept of team racing came about it was essentially a group of boats fleet racing against each other. But as the courses, boats, racing rules and event formats have evolved, team racing has become a dynamic, fast-paced, true team sport. What used to be a NASCAR-like race of boats simply going around a course, it is now more similar to sports like football or basketball, in that each boat and person on the team is responsible for executing a play. The game is exciting for both sailors and spectators, and as a result, team racing is gaining popularity in junior high, high school, collegiate, and post-collegiate arenas. It is even trickling upwards into the masters category.

WHAT MAKES TEAM RACING SUCCESSFUL

When team racing is done right, even land-lubbers will take keen interest. For example, the annual Wilson Trophy at West Kirby Sailing Club (UK) attracts the whole community along the shoreline with waterfront action, flashy sails, bleacher seating and commentators! So what does it take to put on a successful team race event?



- First rule of thumb is that the fun is in the action on the water. So everything about the event should be geared towards promoting the visual team elements, physical sailing requirements, and the overall visceral impact of a close, hard-fought race. This relates to everything from equipment, event format and location, to the PRO.
- The critical first step to developing action-packed races is to pair equally-skilled teams and have them sail against each other. Since the fun is in the action, no one likes a blow out race. While events can have skill disparity across the teams, choose a format that attempts to keep the playing field level (or close to it) for all.
- By design, the course should keep the racing tight and help prevent blow-out races. For example, the starboard “Digital N” course that is now standard in team racing has features that can give the trailing team an advantage, such as starboard weather mark roundings and a long dead-downwind leg for covering. Also, with five distinct legs and turning marks, there are more opportunities for mark traps and other plays. Finally, races should be short (8-12 minutes). A well run format will yield 10-15 races per team per day.
- Now that the racing is running well, it’s time to add the extra elements that really make the racing “pop.” Nothing brings out the team element of team racing like colored sails and bibs. Brightly colored sails help competitors decipher who is on what team from across the course and also allow spectators to follow along. Finally, run races as close to shore as possible. Obstructions like piers or breakwaters add another element of excitement to the racing, and close access to shore means more efficient rotation of teams, and of course, easier access for spectators!

HOW TO RUN YOUR OWN TEAM RACING REGATTA

While all the frills of the biggest team race events in the world make those experiences quite special, they certainly aren’t required. Events like the ISAF Team Race Worlds and U.K. & U.S. National

Championships feature fleets of provided boats, a cadre of international umpires, banquets, an army of volunteers and a large budget. On the other end of the spectrum, a nice grassroots regatta can be run with one person in a 15-foot Whaler, four marks and a whistle. Here are a few basic requirements.

- Access to a fleet of boats: The boat itself need not matter, however they must be equal in speed, at least across a 12 minute race. The second rule of thumb in team racing is that you can pretty much team race anything! In my time, I've witnessed or team raced in Optimis, Lasers, 420s, FJs, V15s, Larks, Tech Dinghys, Harbor 20s, Sonars, J80s, J22s, Shields, and J105s. If you have at least four of the same class of boat in your area, and they're relatively equal, you can have a team race!
- A PRO or race organizer who understands what is important in team racing, for example, course length & orientation, rapid-fire racing format, etc.
- Back to the first rule of thumb, racing must be fun. Organize teams in such a way that they are as equal as possible. If your event does not have close action, sailors will not want to come back next time.
- If you build it, they will come: Creating a successful team race environment does not happen all in the first try. Start small to ensure you cover the basic requirements. As you get a handle on those, add more value to the event with every iteration.
- Finally, if you have questions contact people who have done it before. The US SAILING Team Race Committee is a group of sailors that volunteer to help grow the sport and develop the U.S. Team Racing Championship. Also, several yacht clubs and sailing organizations around the country have taken leadership roles in promoting team racing by hosting their own annual events.