

# Technique by Guy Cribb

## INTUITION SPEED/SLALOM

You might be the fastest local windsurfer, or even a notable name from windsurfing, but put yourself on a race course and discover another world of challenges. A few decades of start line experience puts me a few hundred metres ahead within a few seconds of the start at Club Vass's local racing last year in this photo by Laura Slater. This month's INTuition feature shares some of this racing experience, most specifically, how to get such a head start.



OPENING SHOT BY: LAURA SLATER PHOTO MERGE IMAGES BY: MARK KASPROWICZ

# Hi5

## Professional Windsurfers Association

Since 2007 the main focus of PWA prize money, sponsorship and events has been the Slalom World Tour. This is natural as if there's three things every windsurfer in the world can relate to, it's being overtaken, sailing out of control and trying to gybe! Slalom racing is a perfect mix of these fine elements of windsurfing.

## WHAT IS SLALOM RACING?

Slalom racing is windsurfing races from a start line to a finish line around a course. The course is usually a series of 5 buoys that racers have to gybe around blasting on broad reaches between each one, known as a 'downwind slalom race.'

Races last approximately 5-10 minutes and you race in 'heats' usually of 8 or twelve competitors, where the top half of the finishers advance (top four in a heat of eight) and the bottom half are eliminated from each race.

The winners of one heat will meet the winners of another heat. The elimination rounds whittle down the racers until there is a final and a losers final, just like the elimination of a tennis tournament.

## GEAR.

Slalom is the fastest form of sailing racing with specialist equipment designed to be insanely quick off the wind, with awesome gybing characteristics, control and acceleration hitting speeds of 40 knots. Slalom racing gear is the highest evolved windsurfing equipment the developments of which filter down into freeride gear, just like how Formula One developments ultimately end up in our cars. This high end gear is in perpetual R&D.

Sails are incredibly powerful and stable, boards are designed to literally skim on the surface, and with every change of kit we leave a massive personal 100% carbon footprint.

## SCORING-

The final and losers finals are completed and competitors scored accordingly- the winner will get 0.7 points, 2nd gets 2 points, 3rd 3 points and so on. (Note the slight points advantage of actually winning the race.) If the heats have 8 competitors, the winner of the losers final will get 9 points, 2nd 10 points and so on.

At the end of an event the person with the lowest points wins. A windy event could easily have five or ten rounds of slalom. Minimum wind speeds to ensure high octane competition are around 10 knots/ Force 4.

Regional racing circuits tend to have larger fleets and staggered starts, for example at Poole Slalom we regularly have over 30 racers on the same course.

If you'd like to try windsurfing racing, email [guycribb.com](mailto:guycribb.com) for fun and regional competition info or to join the national championship circuit visit [www.ukwindsurfing.com](http://www.ukwindsurfing.com) Racing is a great way to develop your all round windsurfing skills and there's something for everyone; every age, every level, every wind speed. Watch some recent world cup racing videos at [www.pwawordtour.com](http://www.pwawordtour.com)

## WHAT IS A START LINE?

'On water' or 'line starts' are when a start line is between a buoy and a start boat. The length of the line is likely to be between 25-50m and with one end almost directly upwind of the other. So racers are blasting on a reach, or broad reach (slightly downwind) when they cross the line.

Competitors know when it's time to start because the race officer on the boat has prepared a flag sequence and a countdown, which in windsurfing is usually a 4 minutes-to-go warning flag (usually red.) When this is raised (in conjunction with a sound signal/ hooter) you have exactly four minutes before your start.

With exactly two minutes to go the red flag is lowered. With exactly one minute to go a yellow flag is raised, then the start is indicated when a green flag is raised. Note- different events use different coloured flags and timings, so ensure you check with the race officer what the routine is.

Each flag signal will have a sound signal too, however technically it's the flag signal that is made at the correct time (remember sounds travel slowly in wind or may not even be heard.)

We therefore have a number of opportunities to synchronise our watches with the flag signals, so we can know exactly when the start is. Most race officers keep their watch on a

rolling countdown and often set this during the race briefing, giving everyone a chance to get in sync for the whole day.

If you cross the line before the start you will be disqualified. If you are some seconds late, you can be sure you will be in someone's dirty wind and wake, and struggling to keep up.

So using your watch and noting the flag signals, your objective is to hit the line exactly on time, at full speed.

This is how the professional world tour and most national racing events work, unless the wind and conditions are perfectly suited to having 'Le Mans' style start lines on the beach.

It will take hours/ years to perfect your line starts, but here's the basics of how to time it.

## RACING STARTS- THE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW.

### The course shape-

There should be a diagram at the briefing, but make sure you have sailed it before your first race too. Note if some reaches are tighter or broader than others and plan your race accordingly.

### The finish line-

This may be simply passing a buoy in the water, but to which side?

### The Start Procedure-

This will be explained at the race briefing, but if in any doubt at all, ask the race officer specific questions at the briefing. Even after some decades of experience, a race briefing rarely goes by without me asking a question- as it's vital there's no doubt about anything. You need to be clear and positive to race effectively, so totally understanding how the race is going to work is crucial.

### Which race?

Even after decades of experience world cup racers are likely to still write heat numbers on their hands so you can see which heat you're in and which one you will advance to if you get through your first round.

### Watch.

You'll need a watch with a countdown on it. Ideally a dedicated sailing sports watch, that can be worn on the fore arm or bicep for clearer vision, or sound. Your Omega Seamaster will not cut it in a slalom race.

### Why?

Hitting the line on time at speed can take years to master, but nothing in your slalom race is as important as taking an early lead. Defending your lead is infinitely easier than trying to gain one.

Clearly great acceleration, high top speeds and gybing control are vital too, but the start in all forms of slalom racing is crucial, more significantly so than other racing forms, because trying to get past someone through their wake and turbulent winds is extremely difficult, even if you're faster. ☺

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1) Countdown - 1:20 secs

4) 0 secs to go - hitting the line on time at full tilt!

### HOW TO DO A LINE START

Cross the line going the wrong way/ away from the course, ideally just upwind of the line.

See what time it is, for example 1 min 20 seconds until the start.

**Halve that time = 40 seconds**

Estimating your gybe will take 10 seconds from the moment you think about it to the moment you are planing again (personal adjustment may be necessary!) then half that time = 5 seconds.

**Add 5 seconds to 40 seconds = 45.**

When your watch hits 45 seconds, make your 10 second gybe and blast back towards the line at exactly the same speed you sailed away from the line with.

In theory you should arrive back at the start line at exactly the right time - 0 seconds.

#### That's the theory.

This needs to be adjusted to suit individual needs, sea states and wind conditions.

#### Knowing You.

If you thought you were going to fall on your gybe, you need to time how long it's going to take you to gybe, fall off and get going again, let's say this was 30 seconds. To hit the line on time you'll need to take half your gybe time (15 seconds)

Then when you cross the line going the wrong way note that time, halve it, and add 15 seconds - this would be your cue to gybe.... Get it? Check the photomerge for more help.

#### Sea States.

When sailing away from the startline before you make your final turn, if you are sailing into the swell or wind chop, you're likely to be sailing slower than the route back to the startline. Bring this disparity of board speed into your calculation, for example knowing sailing back to the start will take you 4 seconds less than away from it, gybe 2 seconds later than you need to.

#### Transits.

If there are land marks on the approach to the start you can make some timed approaches using these as reference points.

For example starting from the beach you might know it takes exactly 40 seconds to reach the start line.

#### Practise makes perfect.

Even doing basic mental arithmetic just before a slalom race is a surprisingly tall order, so it needs loads of practise. What is half of 1.23 seconds, sailing into chop in gusty winds? Or half of 1.42? OK, easy to sit on the loo reading this, but try it at 30 knots totally out of control and overpowered!

Find a buoy or a boat in the water and keep buzzing it pretending it's a start. Not just developing your starts, but your arithmetic and gibo skills too...

#### Tactics.

On top of the technical aspect that needs to be developed to nail your starts, consider these tactics.

#### Coming from behind.

It is better to hit the line at full speed a split second late than arrive a split second early and have to put the brakes on. In this respect if you find yourself approaching the fleet from behind

on the run up to the start, this is often a good position to be in, as they slow down, you're still accelerating.

#### Sail your own race.

Stick to your starting procedure and ignore what the rest of the fleet are doing. At regional or even national level you can be sure half of them are going to be in a muddle and out of position.

#### Coming too early-

If you're too early, rather than sheeting out to slow down, see if you can sail upwind to slow down - keeping your board speed but increasing the time it will take to reach the line. Bear off to fully accelerate just before you get there.

#### Line Bias-

The race officer will usually set the start line so that the leeward / downwind end, is slightly closer to the first buoy, therefore if everyone's board speeds were equal it would be the preferred end to start at.

However if for example the first reach was across the wind, and not much of a broad reach, it may be too slow to sail from the leeward end of the

2) gybe at 45 seconds

3) Get planing on gybe exit with 35 seconds to go



For more info on fun racing, performance windsurfing technique, or intermediate skills, please email me directly - [guy@guycribb.com](mailto:guy@guycribb.com) I run lots of specialised slalom and speed coaching events in the UK in the summer, and of course all the legendary INTuition Clinics around the world.