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## Splitting Tacks on Tacking

By Carol Newman

**Have you ever considered turning backward through a tack? Crews who tack facing aft can key off their skippers' movements to synchronize the timing of their roll.**

**Developing the ability to change your tacking style can improve your dinghy boathandling.**

It was the 1993 Snipe Worlds in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Five U.S. teams had practiced hard and traveled far to be there, and the conditions were testing our rusty heavy-air skills. We were culture-shocked, wind-shocked and pollution-shocked. Still, in the locker room after sailing, Connie Commette and I found ourselves embroiled in an argument we just as easily could have had at home.

"Forward," I said for the third time, peeling off my sodden wetsuit.

"Backward," she replied, as unfazed by my conviction as I was by hers. We were debating our opposite tacking styles, knowing that neither would convince the other, but trying just the same. She feels so strongly about facing aft when she crosses the boat in a tack that she and her skipper/husband Peter custom-rigged all three of their Jibe Tech Snipes so that the jib cleats are behind where she sits on the rail. She is not alone.

But neither am I. The majority of Snipe sailors agree that crews need to be physically fit and a thinking part of the team. Many will tell you that boathandling must be practiced until it is automatic, but an informal survey of Snipe crews shows an almost even split between the forward tackers and backward tackers.

Like many biases, preference for tacking direction is affected by what you learn first. Commette grew up sailing Snipes that were rigged with the jib cleats aft of where she sat, so she learned to tack facing backward. Facing forward would have meant reaching around behind her back to trim the sheets. Conversely, the first Snipe I sailed had jib cleats installed forward of where I sat, and I would have hog-tied myself trying to face aft. We both quickly became set in our ways.

Most crews will adapt to the jib-lead location on their particular boat, and this will dictate the direction of their turn through the tacks. But what if you switch to a boat rigged another way? Do you stick with what you know, or adopt a new style? Many collegiate crews, for instance, tack forward in 420s (leads forward) and backward in FJs (leads aft), even though they may have to switch styles every weekend. Sometimes it may be effective to change styles in the same boat. In 470s, crews face aft in light air to get their weight as far forward as possible, but switch to face forward in the tacks as soon as they are trapezing. And what about those crews who can rig their boats as they choose? No matter how much we believe in one chosen method, it is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of both techniques and be able to adapt if necessary.

Forward tacking crews swear to the advantages of seeing conditions ahead out of a tack, especially in a puffy, shifty breeze, or in waves. I often adjust my level of hiking or weight placement fore and aft based on what I see when my head pops up on the new weather side. If an 18-knot "black" puff is blasting in our direction, I'll know I should be hiking out flat as soon as possible. If I see a lull, I'll remain in the middle of the boat (or down to leeward) after a tack. The only way I know what's coming is to look up the course, and facing forward allows me to look ahead sooner.

I also have a good view of the jib, so I can fine tune the trim according to the vagaries of steering and windshifts. Instinctively, I know roughly how much I need to pull in the sheet through the tack, but that's only the gross-tune; my eye is the fine-tune, and I like to perfect the trim as soon as possible. Also, when I switch boats or skippers, I have to adjust for changes in friction, lead angles, and, of course, personal taste.

Between tacks in light air, I crouch to leeward facing forward in what I call the "mouse" position: feet close together, balanced on the balls of my feet with my weight as low as possible, shoved in between the centerboard trunk and the leeward tank. Though hardly comfortable, this position reduces windage, puts my weight as far forward and to leeward as possible, and removes my body from the skipper's line of sight. I can't move around very easily, but since I face forward, I can anticipate any necessary changes in trim or weight. To cross the boat facing backward through a tack, I'd have to fit in a full 360-degree turn to end up on the new leeward side facing forward again.

I'm sure this is hard to visualize, so let's remove the boat for a moment. Find at least four square feet of open floor space and crouch down with your feet tight together. We're arbitrarily starting on port tack, so check out the area one foot to your left. You want to end up there in the same position, after rolling the boat through a tack. Forget about the roll for now and think about the easiest way to get to the new spot. Given the choice, you would step to your left, still facing forward. Now picture dealing with jib sheets that cleat behind you. That complicates the situation quite a bit, doesn't it?

When I am forced to tack backward in light air, I always seem to come out of tacks crouching aft. I prefer not to sail upwind looking backward, but making the extra movement to turn around at such a crucial time can be detrimental to boatspeed. Facing forward through the tacks means less time spent pirouetting, which gives me more time to complete the roll, adjust the jib and get comfortable in the new crouch.

Enough about me; what's Commette's view? She says she can cross the boat more quickly and easily by facing backward. When it's windy enough to sit on the rail, she trims the jib across her body through the tack with what will be her forward hand on the new windward side. As she turns, she can use the leverage of her twisting body movement as well as the power of her arms and legs to pull in the jib. Because I face forward, I trim straight from the lead to my body using what will be my aft hand on the new side. This requires more arm strength.

And in light air? "If it's really light and I'm sitting in the hole [crouched down to leeward], it is harder to see," Commette admits. She sits facing aft between tacks, which solves my pirouette problem, and relies on feel for heel angle and jib trim. And, she adds, "I've perfected looking over my shoulder."

Another benefit of tacking backward is the crew can dial into the skipper's timing in roll tacks. If you synchronize your roll with your skipper's, you will maximize its effect. You'll also know to hike harder if your helmsperson ends up wrapped in the mainsheet to leeward after a tack. Since I face forward, I have to assume that the skipper will cross the boat without incident and instead time my roll to the jib break. Some skippers adjust to my timing; others go their own way. Crews are usually less set in their ways, so facing aft might improve tacks.

Commette and I do now agree on one thing. If the jib-lead position made it possible, we would both tack forward in light air and backward in heavy air. But we still disagree on the changeover point. "In most conditions," Commette says, "tacking backward works better for me." It is only in very light air that she would prefer to tack forward, to see out of "the hole." I would only tack facing aft if it was blowing a gale, to have better leverage trimming the sheet. Even so, we've come a long way toward seeing each other's viewpoint since our locker room arguments in Brazil.

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