

Making Heavy Weather of Comet Sailing

Alex Reeve. Perihelion 33

In the last issue of Perihelion, readers were urged to write in with their ideas for heavy weather survival downwind. I have decided to go the whole hog and write about strong wind racing general. Do treat this as a personal approach; In my experience things that work for one person often don't succeed for someone else.

If you want to sail your Comet faster in strong winds, ideally you will put on a couple of stone and grow a few inches. If you also develop the stamina of a marathon runner and the agility of a gymnast, it will help. However, since it is unlikely that any of the above are achievable, the only option is to fall back on good technique. Over my years of sailing almost every singlehander I have learned some tips which can be applied to Comets.

Setting up the Boat

The old rule about yanking everything tight in strong winds is only true up to a point. I pull the kicker and outhaul quite tight but not to the maximum. Pulling them in too much tends to “knife” the sail, which costs power (which you need to drive through tacks and waves) and, in shifty inland waters, increases the likelihood of capsizing to windward on the beat. Leave them with a little shape, so that when you are headed it is only the luff of the sail which backs, not the whole thing. I only have two positions for my downhaul - on and off. If I am overpowered, jam it on as hard as I can to de-power the sail, but if not then I release it completely. The creases in the sail look rather silly, but it does seem to go faster.

Make sure that you have a burgee for the runs and that your self-bailer works. I usually open it on the first downwind leg. Also, it can be helpful to tie a knot in the mainsheet which prevents the boom going out further than ninety degrees, hopefully avoiding that disconcerting lurch to windward on the runs. In seriously windy conditions I leave the controls well alone and concentrate on the racing, but if I have time I may release the kicker very slightly for speed on the offwind legs.



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Mental Attitude

This is the most important thing. I always know when I am going to capsize; it is when I stop driving the boat hard and start just sitting on it. No matter how strong the wind is, I tell myself, out loud if necessary, that I am in charge of the boat. I concentrate on sailing the boat as fast and as safely as I can. I do my utmost never to panic, no matter what. Sometimes I fail

The Start

Start lines are usually characterised by a whole load of boats shooting up and down before the start, barely in control. They make the water choppy and render navigation almost impossible. I avoid them I decide which end of the line to start, and then sail away from the fleet, sometimes having a go at the first beat or just finding a nice island to shelter behind. With two minutes to go, I check that the wind hasn't changed direction and then sit on starboard tack about ten boat lengths from the line, sails flapping. As the start gets nearer, I progressively pull in and then go. This is a technique long favoured in the Lasers and it is extremely effective, particularly in strong winds.

The Beat

I always try to sail the boat flat. There is simply no point in keeping the sail fully powered while the boat tips; it will slip sideways and the sail becomes inefficient anyway. The technique is simple: sit out hard and, as a gust hits, sheet out to keep the boat flat. Then pinch up into the wind and start to sheet in again. Pinch up as much as is necessary to get the sail right in with the boat still flat. It is a continuous process of sheeting in and pinching, and then reacting when the gusts arrive. I try to spot them coming - dark patches on the water - by keeping my eyes outside the boat instead of staring fixedly at the sail. If the boat lurches to windward, I don't leap in immediately, I bear away. It is disconcerting, but better than all that jumping about. If, after all this, I am still overpowered, I lift the daggerboard a few inches.

I try to keep my wind clear where possible and tack on the shifts, just like always. It is easier to sail on a lift than a header. When tacking, it is important to be positive and remember who is in charge. Ensure that the boat has good momentum, sheet out a little and roll gently into the tack, crossing the boat smartly and bringing it down on the other side and sheeting. Then carry on as before. If you do get caught head-to-wind lift the daggerboard and pull the

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boom towards you. As the boat swings out of the wind, slam down the board and pull in, hiking the boat slightly on top of you until you get forward movement.

At the end of the beat, you may have to bear away on a reach or run. The Comet, like most boats, will not bear away if it is being sailed on its ear. I keep the boat flat throughout the manoeuvre, if necessary sheeting out and bearing away while still sitting out. It is fast and safe and avoid the broach.

Downwind

If possible, I lift the dagger board a little. I sit out on closer reaches but keep my weight well back to keep the nose up. I usually bear away in the gusts and head up in the (relative) lulls, while always trying to stay flat. I also find it useful to maintain an upright stance, ready to move slightly if necessary rather than cowering in the bilge.

On a run, I keep the kicker and outhaul fairly tight and the sail at 85 degrees. I never lift the daggerboard more than fifteen inches. If the boat lurches to windward, I don't bother with all that leaping about, it won't do any good; I pull a good armful of mainsheet immediately, and then tighten the kicker and lower the daggerboard. That will work. A fast but technique for those with strong nerves is to sail with a looser kicker and by-the-lee. This will involve you keeping your weight to leeward and occasionally reacting quickly. It works on large waters and steady winds, but I wouldn't try it on my lake.

At the end of the reach or run, you will have to either head up or gybe. Either can cause problems. If, when heading up, you try to go round too quickly and with too much power in the sail you will knock the boat over through sheer momentum. Instead, take a nice smooth curve and stay flat, allowing the sail to flap a little if necessary as you go round, and then sheet in when you can.

The gybe is easier in a Comet than in many singlehanders. First, raise the daggerboard about fifteen inches and pull in the mainsheet just a little. Then I steer in a smooth curve, until the boom comes over, I never help it over with my hand. As it reaches the new side, I move smartly to balance it, keeping my weight back. I am convinced that it is a bad idea to change your mind half-way through a gybe, it will almost always cause a broach. If you do the gybe and then capsize, at least you have done the gybe, but if you bottle out and capsize before the

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gybe, you've got to right the boat and then have another go. Also, I personally find it more difficult to try to tack round than to face the gybe.

Conclusion

Everyone capsizes sometimes, particularly on inland lakes with shifty winds. However, I try to minimise the number of capsizes to the truly unavoidable by keeping the boat flat, my movements smooth and staying in charge. In strong weather many races are won simply by staying upright.

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