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Covering & Controlling the Opposition

I have seen many racing articles over the years, but very little on how to cover. I think it's because it's seen as such a complicated topic. However you'll probably agree that in any race at some point you're going to be called upon to keep someone behind you i.e. cover them.

Pic 1 Allianz Cup



You can be second from last and still try and cover the next boat. Therefore I would say covering is not such an elitist subject and should be discussed. That's what we will do.

Many articles can be written about the details of covering as each situation may be different. Here though we will have a

general discussion and show examples that will give you an idea of a game plan you might develop.

To get a flavor of covering strategies we'll discuss the next upwind leg and answer the following questions.

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What is the Definition of Covering

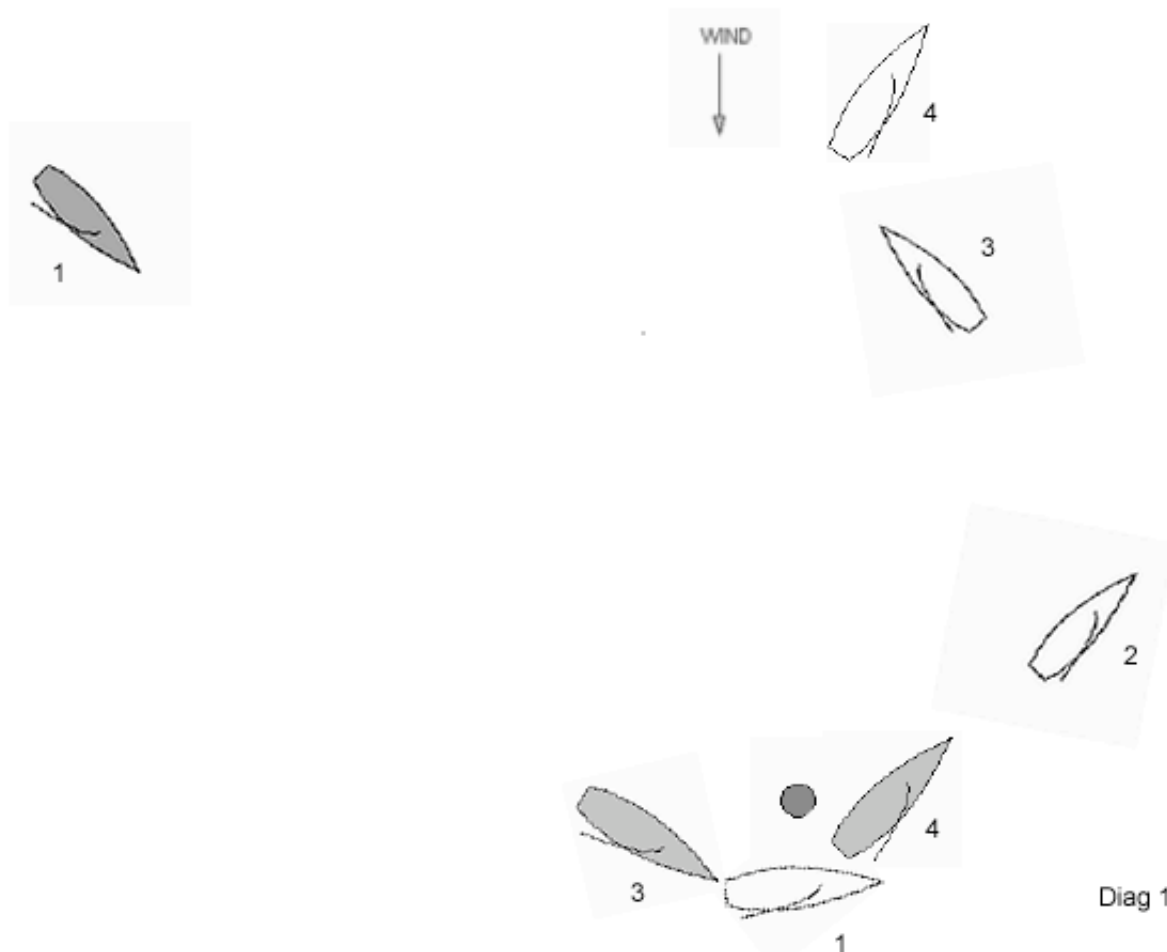
Covering is said to be staying between your opponent and the next mark.

Let's see how this works with the following two Scenarios.

A

You (white) have a big lead. The wind is steady a perfect 12 knots, and the sea is flat. Standard covering techniques tells you to take note of the distance you are in front of the following boat (grey) boat, position 1.

Diag 1



After you (white) round the leeward mark Position 1, sail half your lead and then tack in position 2. On the new tack sail the other half of your lead and tack in position 3 as grey approaches the leeward mark.

You should (white 4) now be directly upwind of the competition when they round the mark (grey 4). You are bow out or forward on either tack, (explained later) which means they do not have any leverage on you.

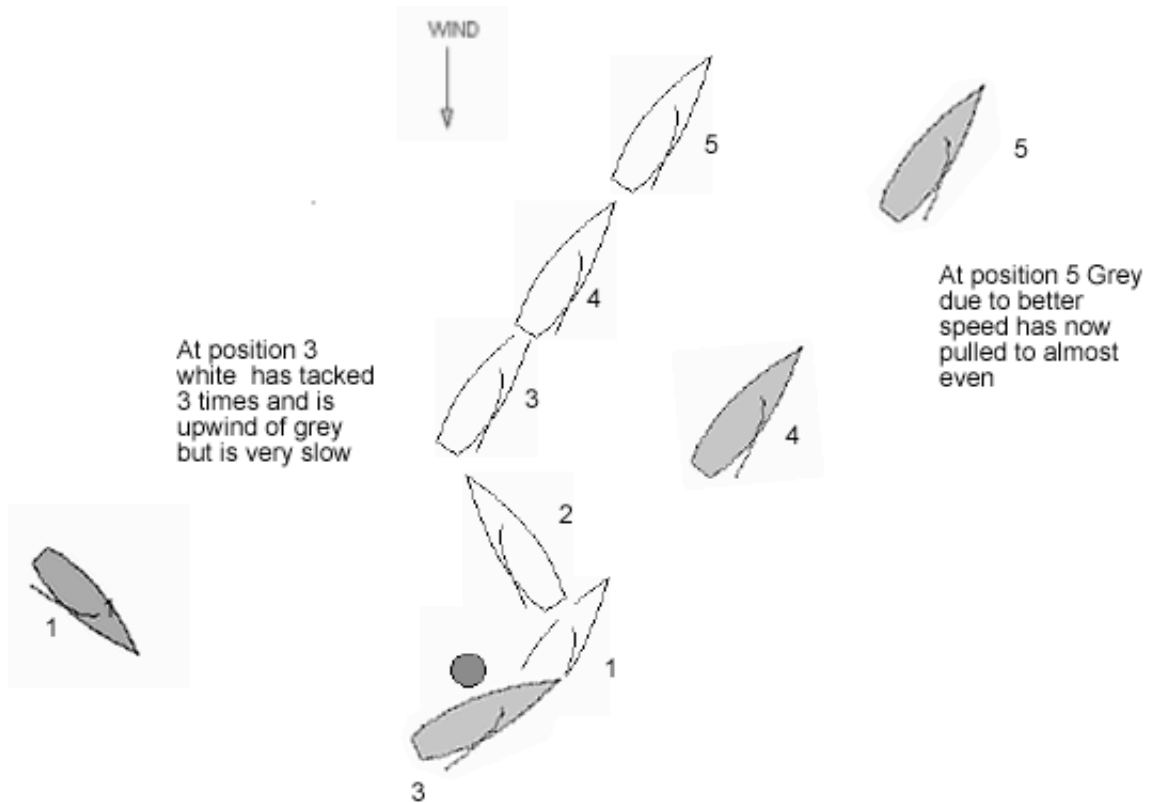
B

Now let's see what happens when you only have a small lead of 3-lengths (diag 1b) or even less. If we tack three times we are going to lose valuable distance and lose all our speed because we have not enough time between tacks to get back to speed. White between position 3 and 5 has only moved 2 boat lengths, compared to grey who has moved 4 + boat lengths.

TIP,

Try tacking 3 times in a short space and then look at your speed and then see how long it takes to get back to speed. These manouvers help you understand what you can do and what you cannot.

Diag 1b



Diag 1B

Therefore, we can see that in this second situation it's not always possible to stay between your opponent and the next mark.

So what is covering? It's attempting to stay between the competition and the next mark but more than that it is stopping them from getting an advantage, like getting to the favored side before you. So stay between your competitor and the favored side.

The upcoming Americas Cup will give us some Clues. Listen in to the after guard during the Pre Start and watch as they discuss what they see upwind. During the pre Start and up to the final approach the Tactician will tell the Helmsman **which side he wants**.



Pic 2 Allianz Cup

Gavin Brady BMW Oracle looking upwind to determine strategy

Allianz Cup J105's



For example if the After guard calculate the right side is favored, they will tell the helmsman to start to the right of the competition. That does not mean they need to start at the committee boat but to the right of the other boat.

Exploring Strategies

Back to our covering situation. Rounding the leeward mark with a small lead requires us to make a decision, on which way to go, and pick a side.

TIP;

First thing to remember is just because there is a boat close behind; you must not get too focused on them. You must do your homework and look upwind and figure out the best course to the windward mark. If you plan properly you can make them do what you want and so stay in control. If you don't do your homework they will try and force you into making mistakes.

To decide on your strategy for the upcoming windward leg it will help if you decide which of the following conditions you are in. There are 3 scenarios in my opinion in dealing tactically with an upwind leg.

1 Favored side

The favored side could be a general wind trend, a geographical or tidal concern but all mean one thing, one side of the course is favored.

2 Oscillating winds

If you are in oscillating winds you could round the mark in a lifted phase or headed phase or anywhere in between. You must before the start sail on both tacks and get compass readings. That way rounding the leeward mark your compass will tell you which phase you are in.

3 Unpredictable conditions

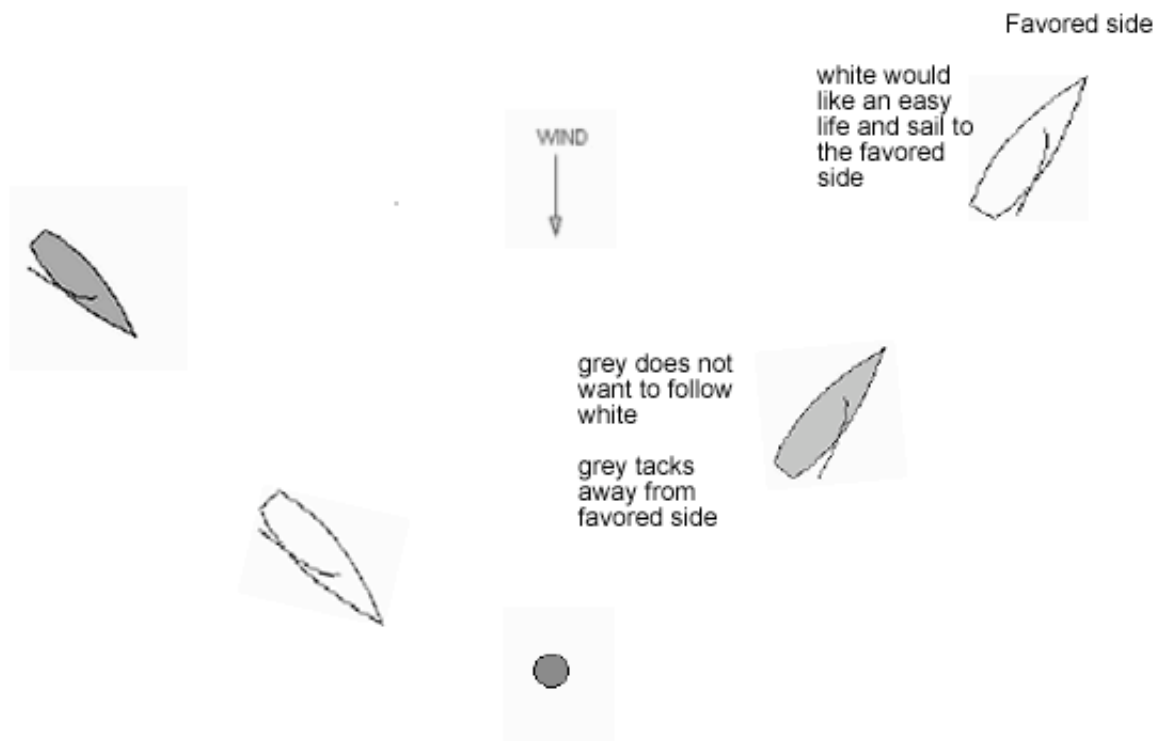
Rounding the mark in unpredictable conditions means you cannot guarantee what the wind is going to do. You are going to have to operate on the fly. In the first two examples we know that one side would be favored or you were lifted.

Lets see what happens after rounding the Leeward Mark for the next upwind leg

1 Favored side

So if you the leading boat (white) round the mark and the right side is favored, your plan is to protect that side. You do not want grey to get to the favored side, if they do make sure you get there first. The diagram below shows white leading grey to the right side.

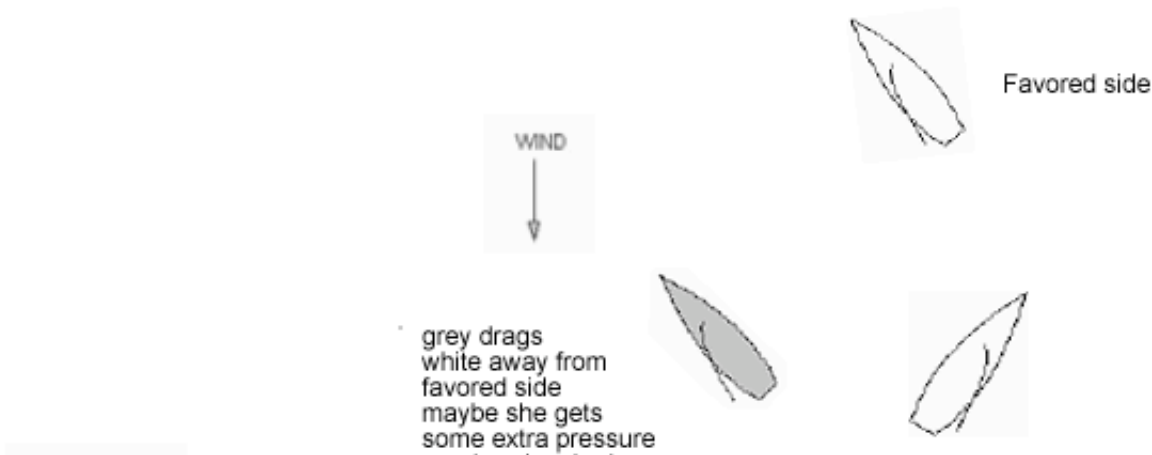
Diag 3



Diag 3

Grey needs to stop white getting to the favored side and extending her lead so Grey tacks to starboard. By tacking grey will make white tack away (covering) from the favored side and make her nervous. Grey by tacking and going the wrong way is making the race take longer i.e. stretching it out. This can only help and grey waits for an opportunity, that she would not have if she just followed white.

Diag 3 b show grey going away from the favored side and waiting for an opportunity. White puts in a loose cover.



or a header she nopes



Diag 3b

Pic 3 Allianz Cup

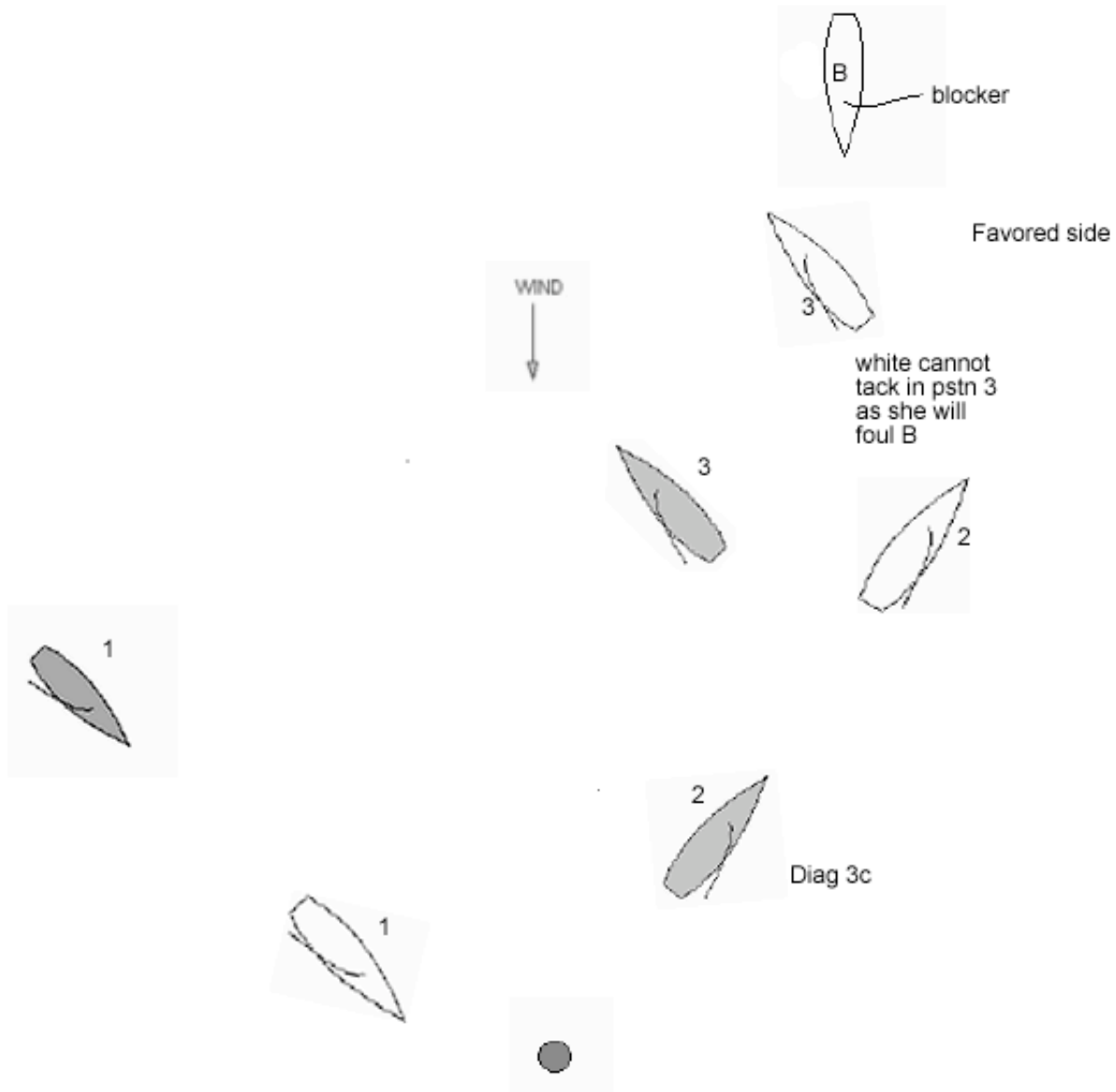


You can see the classic position of diagram 3b in the picture above of the Allianz Cup in San Francisco. Here J105 #2 is loose covering #6. If grey or #6 in the photo tacks to try and get toward the favored side, white or #2 will put a tight cover on grey. That means grey would be taking the full force of white's bad air. This is how the lead boat controls and stops grey getting to the favored side.

Diag 3c shows grey sailing toward the left and white loose covering as in the picture of the Allianz Cup.

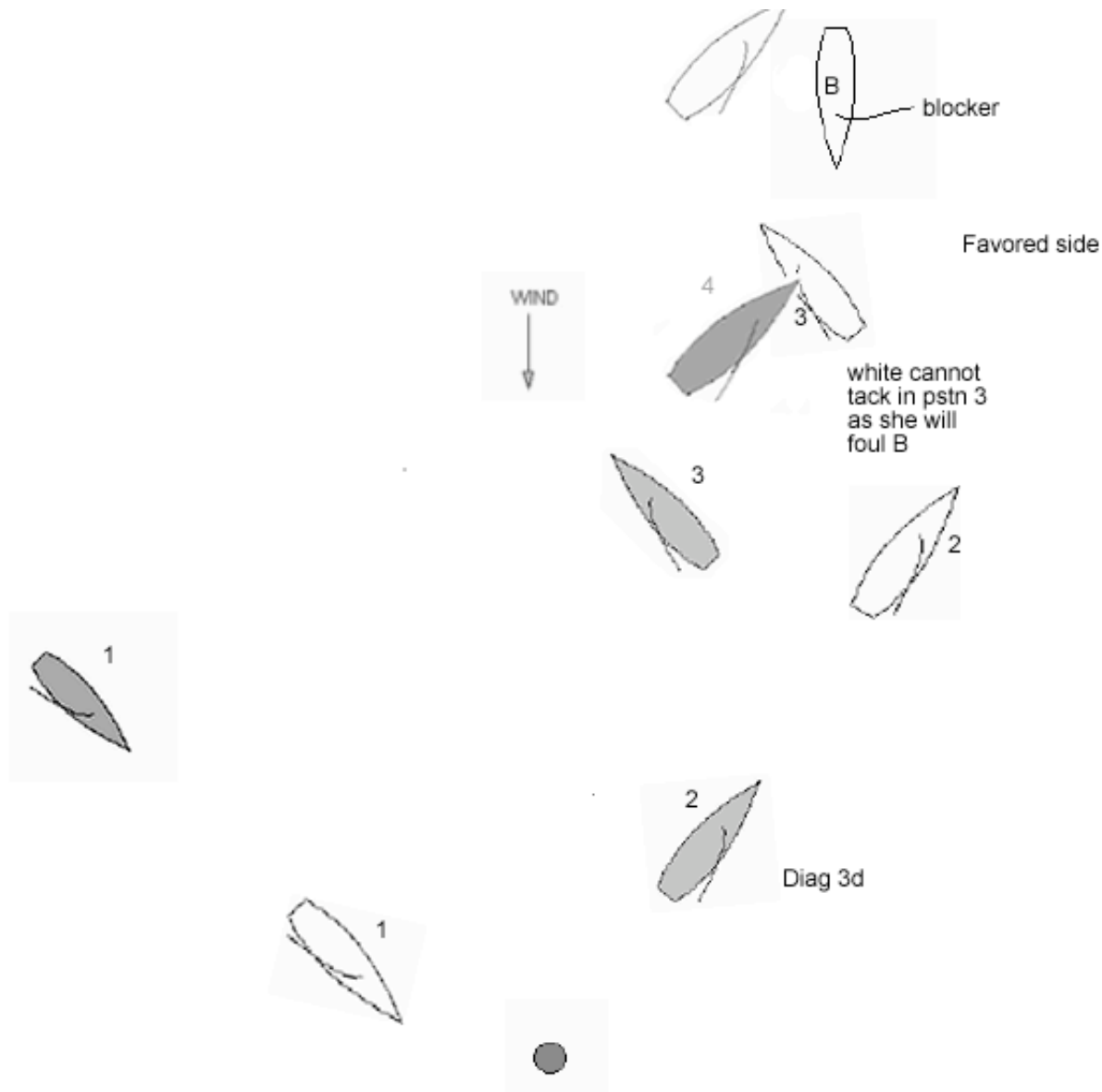
By carrying on grey is looking for better pressure, good speed, or a left shift. She is taking white

away from the favored side which is good. This makes the race longer, stretches things out. One of the opportunities for grey is a blocker (B).



Diag 3c shows a blocker. Let say another boat coming down the course from another race is to windward of white. If the blocker gets into position B relative to white, then white cannot tack until she clears B. Grey can tack here and get to the right.

Diag 3D



Diag 3d shows in position 3 that white cannot tack due to blocker or pick. Grey takes this opportunity and throws in a quick tack and bears off for speed to cross ahead of B. White has to wait until she clears B and tacks into position 4. Grey has not gained any distance but is now free to head toward the favored side without bad air. These are opportunities you as the trailing boat need to look for. There are many examples of blockers so keep your eyes open.

Conclusion favored side

The boat behind, i.e. Grey needs to go the wrong way. This does several things, it mixes things up and makes life more difficult for white. It also makes the race longer which can only help grey as there will be more opportunities. Blockers are a classic example of opportunities.

If you are white and leading your plan is to tight cover the favored side, loose cover away from the favored side. Look out for blockers and make sure you don't fall into a trap.

2 Oscillating Winds

You round the leeward mark and your compass tells you that you are lifted compared to the readings you had recorded practicing or on the first beat. As white leading and on a lifted phase then you will want to keep going until you get headed.

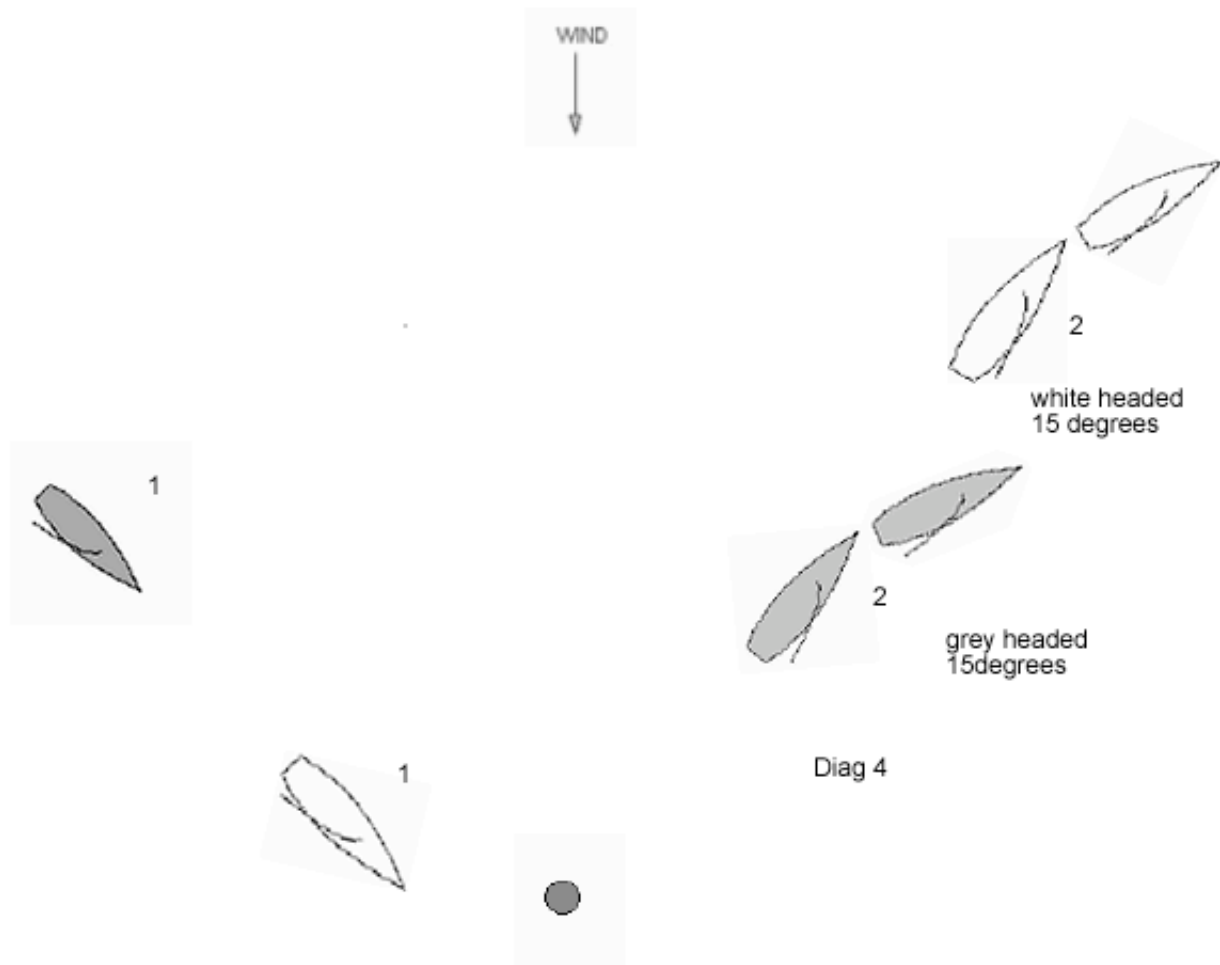
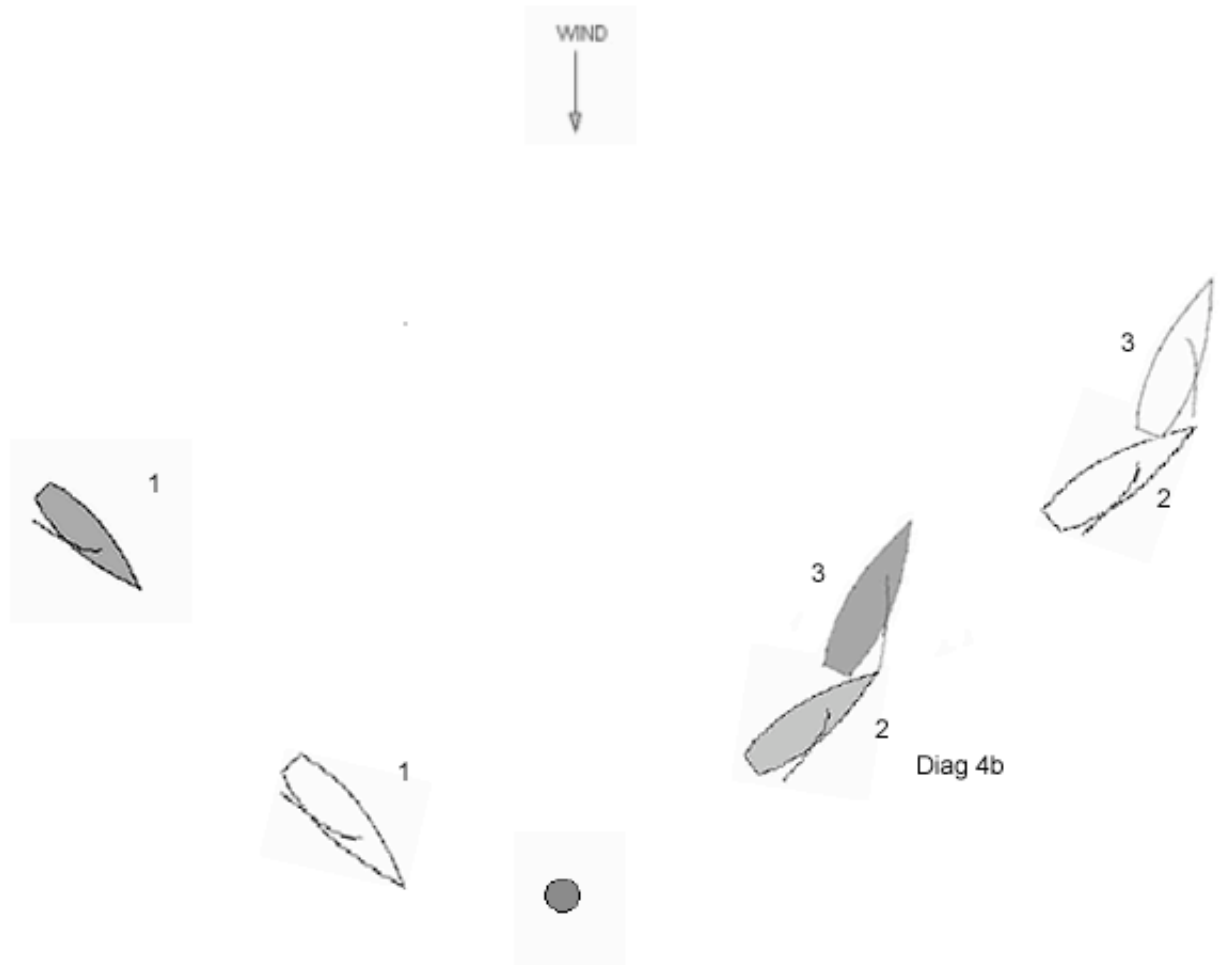


Diagram 4 above shows what happens when white and grey get headed 15 degrees shortly after rounding the leeward mark. This is not good for grey as she is in bad air and further behind. So if your grey and behind and on a lift tack, you want to tack off the lift and make white do the same. This is the same principle as we saw in the favored side situation. You do not want to let the lead boat get an advantage.



Diag 4b show what happens if both boats round in a header. The next phase is a lift as you can see in position 3 and you can see grey is lifted on the inside. White has lost much of her lead.

Conclusion If you have oscillating conditions.

For the boat behind Grey needs to go the wrong way just as in the favored side example. This does several things, it mixes things up and makes life more difficult for white. It also makes the race longer which can only help grey as there will be more opportunities. Blockers are a classic example of opportunities.

If you are white and leading your plan is to stay in phase, tacking on headers. The boat behind will try and make you go out of phase. For example in the situation above 4b. You white lead around in a headed phase. You should tack so you get on the lifted tack. Grey will more than likely do the same.

3 Unpredictable Conditions

If you are leading in unpredictable conditions the best bet may to herd grey out to one side of the course. Once you get your competitor to the layline he will not have any passing opportunities.

Another tactic is to forget the guy behind. The conditions are unpredictable and you decide to concentrate on getting to the next mark ASAP but without giving anything away.

Covering Tools

We have seen above loose covering situation (pic 3) and what it looks like. Below is a tight covering situation.



Pic Swedish Match

Upwind, tacking on someone's air is one of the biggest tools you have at your disposal. The wind shadow from the windward boat above is right on the trailing boat. The trailing boat has two options stay in the bad air or tack. Most of the time she will tack so she does not lose distance. In the above picture the trailing boat must want to keep going badly. It could be they are on the layline.

TIP,

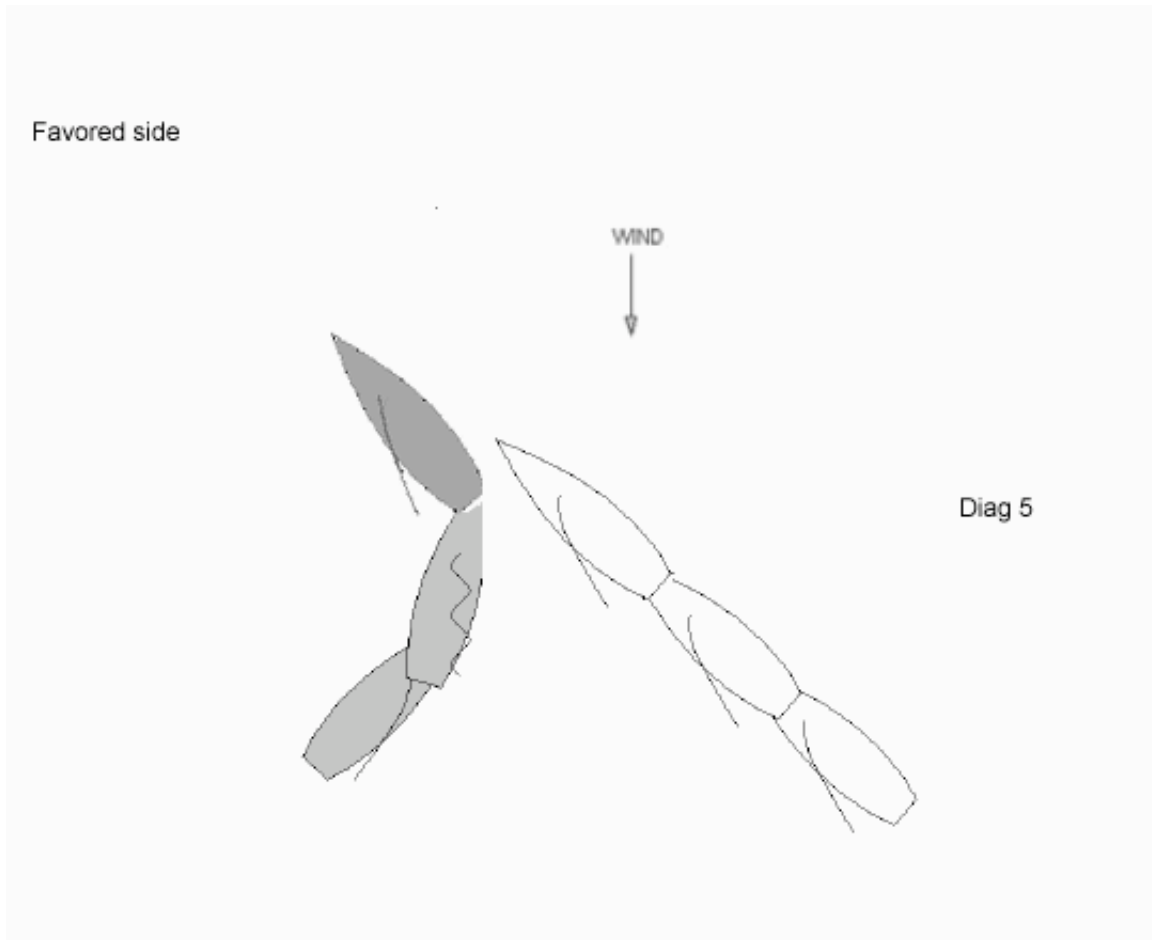
Note tacking uses approximately one-boat length every time you tack, as you lose speed and need to rebuild it. So covering implies that you are spending some of your lead. Make sure that you ONLY tack on someone's wind when you WANT them to tack away as it's possible that you just bounced him off to the side of the course with more pressure.

Covering with a small lead of about 1 length or less.

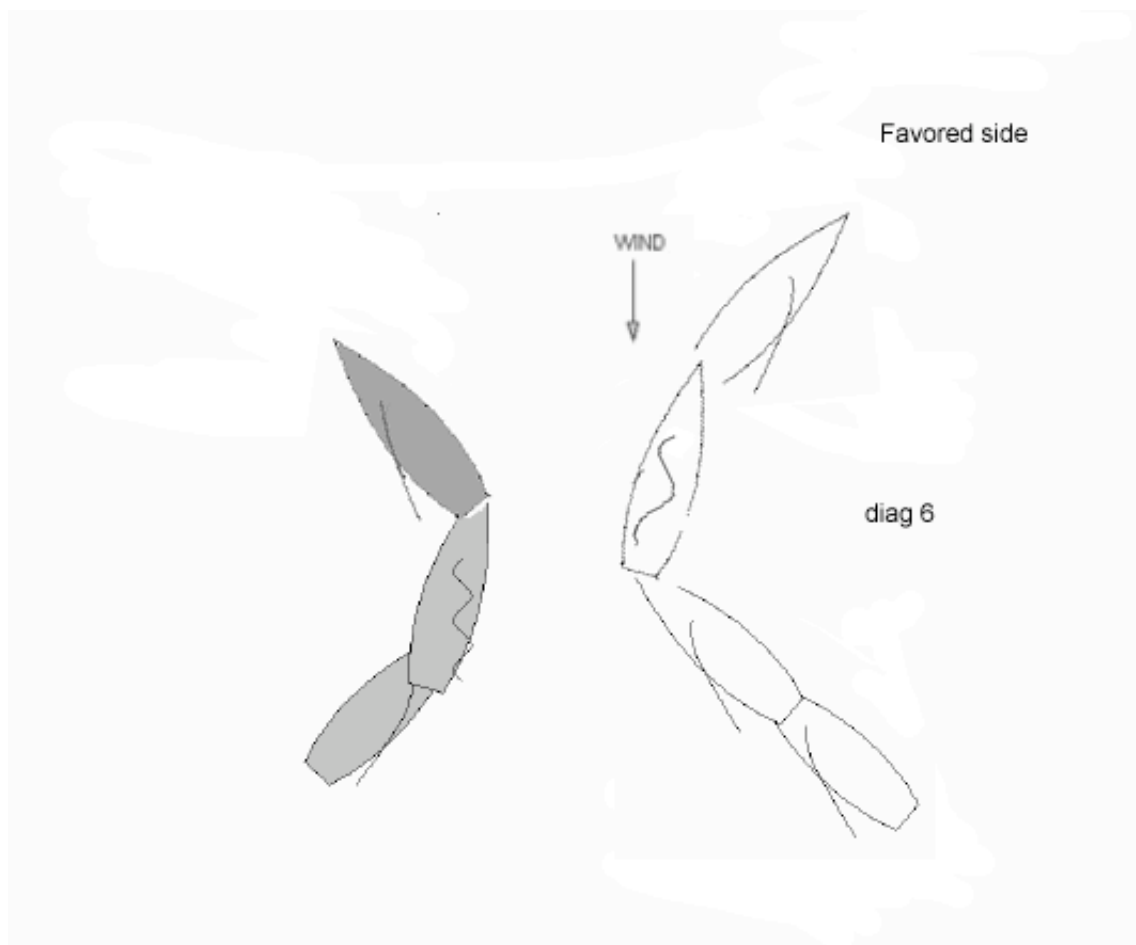
Here we see how even though we are almost even, we can still control the other boat in the 2 examples below.

Diag 5 shows left is the favored side of the course. The left hand boat grey is approaching white and uses a lee bow tack to force white away from the favored side. A lee bow tack when executed properly ends with your backwind slowing the other boat. White has two options; to continue and lose speed, but at least she is going toward the favored side or tack away. The best bet is for white to tack before she loses speed and go few lengths and tack back left again.

Grey has done two good things here as she is protecting the favored side and she has slowed down white. One tack and good gains made.

**TIP,**

Its important to practice a lee bow tack as timing is essential. During your next race try a lee bow on a competitor to see if you can force her to tack or slow down.



Above in Diag 6 the right hand side is favored. White on starboard tack wants to protect the favored side so she lee bows grey. Here grey knows she will be slowed down so immediately tacks away for clear air. This is the opposite of diag 5.

The other maneuver white can make is the slam-dunk however this is an expert maneuver, and requires perfect timing. You would use it when the port tacker goes to duck you, and you tack on their air. Its easy to foul in this situation so practice it when its not an important race or find partner boat to practice with.

Fleet V Match Racing

We have been discussing covering in a one on one situation, as you will see during the upcoming Americas Cup. In this situation is OK to follow your competitor to the un-favored side of the course or to tack off a lift.

However in Fleet racing you cannot do this. In fleet racing you must encourage (herd) all your competitors the right way. If the boat behind tacks away from the favored side you have a tough choice. The normal tactic here is to herd the competition. Tight cover them away from the favored side and loose cover them to the favored side, so you encourage them to go the right way. This is the opposite of a match race.

Conclusion

As we can see Covering is not just staying between your competitor and the mark but a combination of that premise and protecting the favored side or pushing the trailing boat out to a layline i.e. to cut down any passing lanes. With a small lead let the conditions determine which sides you are covering and control the trailing boat away from any advantage he might get. So it really comes down to who can read the wind the best and knows how to control the boat behind with their wind shadow.

On a final note, be confident and don't go looking for that lottery ticket wind shift. Study the covering techniques and apply them. Stronger teams will apply covering techniques, while the weaker team (mentally) starts looking for shifts and split away. Back in the day Brad Butterworth & Russell Coutts have been described as the most dangerous after guard in the world of sailing. When asked about this Brad had this to say. "We try to keep the races close when we are behind. If we're leading, we don't want to take too many chances unless its obvious we can make a gain. When we're behind we try to limit the loss and keep it close up to the mark Rounding".

This quote is a display in total confidence. They are content to be ahead however small that's all, they are not looking to build a big lead. If behind they stay close also and put pressure on the other guy to make a mistake, this is the tactics of a confident sailing team.

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