

# WIN IN TORBAY

Ahead of the J/70 worlds, **RUPERT HOLMES** looks at the local conditions in Torbay and what competitors need to know to achieve success

PHOTO: TIM WINGFIELD





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Torbay, which hosts the J/70 worlds from 28 August to 7 September, may appear to be a bay within a bay, tucked up inside the western end of Lyme Bay. However, tidal streams can still run strong, especially where a windward mark is laid offshore in deep water.

The bay is indented roughly two and a half miles and measures three miles from north to south. For the most part, depths are around 10 metres above chart datum but shoal closer to shore. On the line between Berry Head and the Ore Stone off the northern headland it drops to 25m – stronger tidal streams will be experienced here, as well as near the headlands.

Tides rarely reach one knot, with the flood tide running to the north, while the ebb is southerly, although both sweep somewhat into the bay. Eddies can form further inshore, especially towards the north and south coasts of the bay.

Torbay has its own micro-climate, partly thanks to its protection from prevailing winds. A couple of valleys in the southern part of the bay tend to funnel south-westerly breezes and can result in sudden windshifts as the breeze swaps between the two. In any westerly, breezes are likely to be shiftier than at other venues as the wind is coming off the high ground.

Sea breezes, particularly where there's rising air over the high ground of Dartmoor little more than 12 miles inland to the west northwest, have a significant effect in modifying the gradient wind. These generally start as a south-easterly that increases and swings to the south-west as the day progresses – this favours playing the shifts on the right side of the course. It's therefore worth watching for the formation of cumulous clouds well inshore.

Last year's Dragon Edinburgh Cup was held by the Royal Torbay YC and provided a masterclass in dealing with the intricacies of racing here, with weather varying from strong easterlies to light airs in high pressure. Graham and Julia Bailey won both the Corinthian division and the event overall amid hot competition that included Olympian and Whitbread veteran skipper Lawrie Smith, as well as Dragon-class builder Tim Tavinor.

At the end of the penultimate race the scoreboard could hardly have been closer, with just one point separating the top three teams. At the start of the final race, held in a light south-easterly breeze of only 4-7 knots, Bailey was so confident the right side would pay he held back from the scrum at the committee boat. He therefore started more than six lengths behind the leaders, but with the advantage of being 100 per cent certain to be able to tack immediately on to starboard after crossing the line.

By contrast, other leading boats – including Lawrie Smith – continued on starboard tack for several minutes after



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the start. On the approach to the first windward mark, Bailey had converted his initial deficit into a 1.5-minute lead. It was enough to stay ahead for the rest of the race and collect both overall titles.

This was not the first time in the championship that a boat took an initial hit to get to the right-hand corner and was rewarded with a good result. The day before, also in a light south-easterly, Peter Cunningham had ducked 20 boats after tacking onto port shortly after the start, but was first at the top mark.

"The game plan was to get to the right," Bailey said after the final race. "We wanted to be the first boat to go right and were prepared to sacrifice the start to achieve that. We had to queue a bit at the committee boat, but that didn't matter as long as we were fast dragging it out to the right. When you see Laurie Smith and Grant Gordon following a different strategy in a fleet like this, you have to be brave."

How did it feel to be hard out on the right of the fleet when the championship was at stake? "We were pretty confident," he said. "There's something going on with the current here – we were taking cross bearings on the fleet and could see quite early on that we were going the right way – we just wound round them all."

#### CHAMPIONSHIP PREP

There are important gains to be made off the water at any regatta that will help stack the odds in your favour. Championships in particular are busy weeks but an analytical approach is needed on returning to the dock. In particular, the boat should be thoroughly checked over while packing up and any issues dealt with immediately – before the beers.

A similar approach will pay in the mornings, when time is precious. When John Bertrand, Paul Blowers and Ben Lamb won the 2016 Etchells Worlds in Cowes, each had specific tasks in the morning. This approach saves time and frees up brain space to think about more strategic issues.

When observing racing I'm always amazed at how few boats properly check out the start line in advance. Yet it's quick to take transits from both ends and luff head to wind mid line to get the best possible handle on the amount of bias. And don't forget to watch for a last-minute repositioning of the pin just before the warning signal.

Equally, there's no excuse not to sail as much of the first beat as possible. This can be done as soon as the committee

boat is on station, while the course is being laid, which gives a better feel for both the wind and sea state on the day. This also gives a chance to pop the spinnaker up on the way back to the line, which will confirm whether or not it's properly rigged.

#### PRE PREP

Success is often less a function of how much time is spent in a class than how well that time is used. It's instructive to observe teams on the World Match Racing Tour, where boats are randomly assigned to different competitors. Immediately after leaving the dock, settings are marked for everything – halyards, sheet positions, kite pole, vang and so on. This enables instant calibration for trimming and manoeuvres, which translates to faster boat speed and smoother mark roundings. Yet many established keelboat and sportsboat crews don't do this.

Similarly, the new teams that do well at a championship are likely to spend time practising manoeuvres and two-boat tuning before arriving at the venue. A day or two spent doing this, particularly with a skilled observer in a RIB, can bring bigger performance benefits than half a season on the race course.

As ever, boat prep should be sorted well in advance, so that there's nothing left to do other than routine checks at the venue. Setting up the rig as per the tuning guide will ensure you have the best potential for boat speed, but don't forget to tweak settings depending on crew weight. A light team should move up to a tighter rig at a marginally lower wind speed than stated in the guide, while a heavy crew can hold on to softer settings for a little longer.



ALAMY

## THE EXPERT'S VIEW - WINNING IN TORBAY

As with similar venues such as Abersoch, the key is to identify the line between the relatively shallow depths of the bay and the deeper water further offshore, writes **Graham Bailey**. Once you know where the line is you need to see how it orientates against the course.

Typically in a south-westerly quadrant wind the left side of the beat will be in deeper water. So with an adverse tide you need to keep to the right of the line you have established – possibly going all the way right if you can hold a lane.

It's particularly important to establish where the weather mark is in relation to the deep water line. If the mark is in deep water and the lee mark in shallow, then while you may take shifts earlier in the beat, for the last 20 per cent there are fewer options – you have to work out to the starboard layline and judge it from quite a distance from the mark if possible.

In less than 10 knots of breeze this becomes critical, to the point that if you under lay the mark on starboard you can lose 10 boat lengths to those who lay or just over stand.

If the weather mark is further to the right of Brixham, the right-hand side of the beat still usually comes out ahead but it is not so extreme and with the offshore wind there are opportunities to take shifts all the way upwind, while still protecting the right-hand side.

In the last race of the 2018 Edinburgh Cup we started in about five knots of south westerly breeze and our entire game plan was to head all the way right immediately so we tacked at the committee boat and never looked back – it's probably the easiest condition to read in Torbay.

#### EBB (FAVOURABLE) TIDE

If the tide is ebbing, a south-westerly wind may open up the course a bit, but the left can be so disastrous at times wind-wise that I would leave that side to the braver/more knowledgeable locals.

Also, as with every race, whatever decision you make for the first beat, you will learn very quickly how things have worked out by the time you get to the weather mark – try to survive the first beat then you will be better informed for the run and subsequent beat. Learn every leg but remain

mindful that even one-sided beats can open up.

#### EASTERLY WINDS

The other wind direction we experienced in 2018 was a big easterly. As with the SW breeze, see how the course lines up with the deep-water line. The first consideration is then which side of the line to work, depending on whether the current is fair or adverse. Having said that, generally left seemed good irrespective of current.

There could be several reasons for that: first is that the fleet generally starts on starboard tack and the top boats will try to hold their lane unless there is a powerful reason to tack. This can lead to a perception that the left is good, but often a top boat will do just as well by holding a lane to the right on the second beat if they round the left gate. In addition the sea state is likely to be a little more forgiving on the left, which would be sufficient reason to hold lane and push left out of the start.

In a strong easterly the seas can be quite impressive, with long swells supplemented by shorter wind-driven seas. These swells are often not completely aligned with the wind direction, which is significant downwind as one gybe will be easier to surf and take depth than the other. So be prepared to work different downwind angles depending on whether you are on port or starboard. When there is such misalignment between the waves and the wind watch whether the wind is likely to shift in line with the swells.

Waves often arrive before any change in direction of the wind so the wave angle can herald a permanent windshift. We had this in race two of the 2018 Edinburgh Cup in a 24-plus knot easterly. The wave direction looking upwind was to the right of the wind for the first couple of laps, so starboard tack was easier and the fleet tended left. There was always a possibility that a right shift would follow and sure enough, while the flatter seas to the left had been favoured by all upwind, the wind did start to crank right on the last beat, opening up the right side. You generally know if one of these permanent shifts is happening when you see compass numbers out of the usual range. This is one example of how you need to be open-minded, even if the previous beats have been one-sided.