Etchells Midwinter Champ Jud Smith

In the Etchells class, it can be hard enough to win one regatta, never mind a four-event winter circuit in Miami. Thus, the three-month Jaguar Winter Series—the Piana Cup, South Atlantics, Florida States, and Midwinters—demands consistency, and competitors do everything possible to avoid burning their throwout early in the series. Jud Smith, of Marblehead, Mass., started his circuit on the wrong foot with a 17th in the Piana Cup. From then on, he needed a string of top finishes to hold any hope of winning the overall title. Along with his crew, which included Henry Frazier, Jim Porter, and Mike Craig, Smith then reeled off a third and two firsts in the remaining three events, winning the 64-boat series by 4.5 points.

What happened in that first event?

It was just bad from the start. The wind was unsettled for the entire event, but on the first day, especially, I really felt I was in the dark about the weather. It was so cloudy, and as the clouds moved over the racecourse, the wind was all over the place. The bottom line is, once the cloud goes through, the wind generally goes back to its gradient direction. But I was fooled into thinking we were getting a sea breeze effect. The clouds brought a little cell of wind that a bunch of us who went right never got, and there was no coming back from that race. Later on in that event, we had an OCS, and once that happens, it's all over.

How did that affect your plans from then on?

After that regatta, I made a decision that I was going to have a better understanding of what to expect from the gradient winds, which is what drives the winter weather in Florida and on most of the East Coast, except when it's really hot.

What'd you do to understand it better?

I used a weather service out of Newport, R.I., called Real Weather, run by Susan Genett (www.realwx.com). I've used it and other services, such as Ken Campbell's Commander's Weather (www.commandersweather.com) in the past. A lot of the pro racers use those sites. Another great one, and it's free, is the NOAA website (www.noaa.gov). It has great 3D graphics that show the wind forecast for every six hours. You don't need a for-hire service at smaller regattas with, say, 20 boats, because the course is smaller, the lines are smaller, and it's easier to switch sides of the course. But with more boats, bigger courses, and longer lines, you're committed when you come off the line so it pays to know what the weather might do. It's hard to undo mistakes in a big fleet.

Did that change your strategy?

At the beginning of the first race of the Midwinters, I remember being extremely concerned about the situation—looking upwind and not having any idea what to do. I got burned in the same situation in a race last year by going left. What I learned is, just because it didn't work before doesn't mean it won't work again. The default should've been, when I don't know, go to the middle. That's the way I sailed the rest of that regatta.

Your back was against the wall after that first event. How did you keep that from affecting your sailing?

I didn't worry about the fact that it was a series. How we ended up in the series overall was going to be what it was going to be. After the first event, I was too deep in the standings to concern myself with that, so I focused on the regatta at hand, knowing that whoever was going to win would probably do so with mostly top-three finishes. When we came out of the South Atlantics [the second event] with a third, I knew we had a keeper.

And your crew?

Other than getting a good night's sleep and preparing the same way every day for every race, there isn't anything I do other than be satisfied that everything's off our minds and that we're prepared.

Were you more conservative with your starts?

Having a terrible first regatta and not wanting to take myself out of the series, I

After 30 years of sailing Etchells, Jud Smith, above, skippering at the 2002 Etchells NAs in Alamitos Bay, Calif., knows how to muscle the narrow 30-footer around the racecourse.

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couldn't afford to be OCS. I'd rather finish 15th than get an OCS, and it cost me a couple of times because I had to hold back from the start a little. The least risky start is somewhere in the middle of the line, from the windward quarter to the leeward quarter. I will not start at the weather end of the line unless it's a small fleet, and I will not start at the leeward end unless there's nobody there or it's a small fleet. It's too risky.

That must've occasionally put you in less-than-optimum situations. What do you do when you discover you're in a bad position at the start?

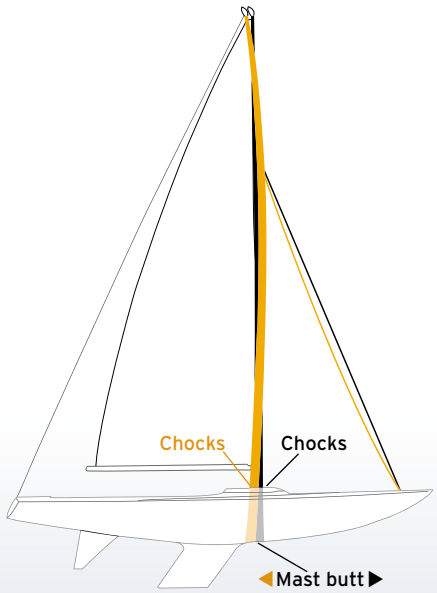
You have to be patient. I do two things. First, I try to hold my lane as long as I can, but I don't sit there going pathetically slow. There will be a time when I get so much bad air, when the boat in front of me or to leeward of me is affecting my wind, that I'll sail lower just to keep my speed up and wait for an opportunity to get a lane out of there. Second, when I commit to port tack I'd better be able to sail for a while. It's OK to duck some boats, but I don't want to make radical ducks, and I don't want to have to tack back onto starboard again if I can help it. I got pinged around in one race and I don't recommend it.

What's your crew doing to help you in those situations?

I always have my middle guy helping me with how I'm doing against the boats to weather of me, behind my back. I can see what's going on to leeward. I want to know about our speed, our height, if we can tack when we want to, and when a lane opens up.

When you end up in dirty air, such as can happen right after the start, are there things you try to avoid doing?

There are a couple of mistakes people tend to make. When they're in dirty air—



CHANGING PREBEND WITH CHOCKS

Prebend is the amount the mast bends before the headstay becomes taut.

Increase prebend by chocking behind the mast at deck level or by moving the mast butt aft at the step. Increasing prebend slackens the headstay for more sag without causing the main to be too full in light air when the mainsheet and backstay are eased. In light air, a looser headstay produces a fuller jib.

Reduce prebend by chocking in front of the mast at deck level or by moving the mast butt forward at the step. Reduced prebend keeps the headstay tighter (straighter) without causing the mainsail to invert when backstay and mainsheet tension are applied in higher winds. In heavy air, a straighter headstay produces a flatter jib.

and the boat in front of them bends the breeze—they try to sail too high. If you're going to hold that lane, you're going to be sailing a header relative to the boats in front. It's not that you're set up poorly, it's that they're affecting your breeze. If you just get used to that idea, and you're sailing three to four degrees lower but still keeping your boat going, it's way better than trying to pinch and go three-quarters throttle to hold that lane. You'll never catch up doing that. Also, if I'm in the back of the pack, I try not to get myself caught in a group of boats.

Do you set the boat up any differently in those situations?

If I feel like I'm underpowered, I might ease the backstay a little bit, but because the boats ahead are affecting my air, the basic thing I do is sail in the wind I have, as in I'm more headed than them, but I don't get hung up about it. I obviously look for an opportunity to clear my air, but if there's no opportunity, I keep sailing fast, and I think that's the difference between first and 10th—not slowing down, not giving up.

The Etchells is a boat with adjustability. Can you describe what you do?

Less than people think. I'll make some automatic changes if conditions change—take two turns off the lowers, or if it looks like the breeze is dropping a bit, put another chock behind the mast. I'll do the same thing while sailing down toward the leeward mark, trying to prepare myself for the next leg. Our boat is set up so that we can adjust it going upwind just as easily, with a mast adjuster that allows us to change the mast location at the partners without anyone coming off the rail. We spent a lot of time fitting a new step chock so that everything was working perfectly. There's minimal play, we can still get things in and out, and the step doesn't pop out on its own.

If you had to sum up trim on an Etchells, where would you start?

I'd say getting the headstay tension right. It's critical. That's a function of backstay tension, mainsheet tension, chocking, mast-step position, as well as wind speed. Obviously, the more the wind comes up, the more the headstay sags because of the force of the wind. To offset that you tension the backstay, but if you just do that the mast will bend too much and you're not really supporting the headstay any more. That's when you have to change the chocks—move all of them together. The goal is not just to power or depower the main, but to have the headstay set correctly for the windspeed and still have everything else set correctly. That's the one thing I'd key on, much as I would on a Mumm 30, Sonar, Yngling, or any other small keelboat. ✦

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On Etchells, forward mast blocks are removed downwind, allowing the mast to lean forward.