

Lessons from Kingston, J/22 style!

A conversation between J/22 World Champ Mike Marshall and class newcomer Zeke Horowitz

Photos Christopher Howell



What a pleasure it was to be a part of the J/22 World Championship in Kingston last week. As a newcomer to the class, it took no time at all to realize what an awesome group of people sail in this class, and how deep the talent pool is. I had a lot to learn about making the boat go fast and improving my boat handling so I was extremely grateful for the daily debriefs where the top performers of the day shared lots of tips. My team and I had a tremendous amount of fun, we learned a lot and made many new friends - all of whom I look forward to seeing at the next J/22 regatta! As a first time helmsman in the J/22, I had lots of opportunities to try different techniques and learn what worked best for me but I was very interested to compare what I thought was working to what the new World Champion, Mike Marshall, was doing to keep his boat speed up. Mike was kind enough to listen to my thoughts and help clear it all up for me in the interview below:

ZEKE: This was a pretty "breeze on" event with most of the races sailed in 16 to 20+. Early on, one thing I learned from all the experts in this class was that once the breeze is into the teens, it is fast to center the traveler and forget about it. This leaves you with the mainsheet and backstay to play along with the jib sheet. I found that I liked the main set so it was just about to the point of inverting. I noticed lots of the fast boats were maxing out the backstay to the point where the main was totally "washed out" and appeared to be luffing with big wrinkles pointing from the mast down towards the clew. I found it faster to get the main to this point, but then ease the backstay just a couple of inches to get rid of those inversion wrinkles. Though I don't think my pointing ability was particularly special... **Tell me your thoughts on this and, in particular, how hard should I have been trimming my mainsheet to match this "inverted" main look with the backstay maxed out?**

MIKE: *Interestingly, I was trimming the main in Kingston a bit differently than I would trim it for most other venues. Because the waves were pretty square, it was important to keep the boat moving at all times. So, while there are conditions when inverting the main is fast (big breeze and flatter water), these weren't the Kingston conditions. In Kingston, we found that the backstay had to be much looser than we normally would have it. I think the reason was that we needed the power and return in the leech of the main to keep the bow up and pointing and to keep the boat powered up. I generally consider the backstay a coarse adjustment for the boat's heel. Once we had that set properly, I'd trim the mainsheet so that the main's top telltale was stalled at max 50% of the time. Stalled more, the boat would stop in the waves; any less stalled, and we'd be giving up height. I think that may have been the reason we had a slight edge with pointing over some teams so, while it can work to "wash out" the main we tried hard to make sure we had some "kick" in the leech of the main.*



ZEKE: Well, that's the first thing we maybe weren't quite doing right and that makes a lot of sense as to why we didn't feel all that special in the pointing department. So, on our boat, we had a lot of discussions about jib lead positioning. We found that when the breeze was in the mid-teens, we liked the jib car 2 holes back from "base" because it would flatten the sail up top, but left a little bit of "punch" in the bottom of the jib to power through the waves. But once the breeze was up in the 20's, we felt better moving the car back to 4 or 5 holes back from "base." **What visuals can I use to know that my jib car is in the right place, and how much is based on the feel of the helm or "return" on the main?**

MIKE: *My easiest visual guideline for the jib car position is how the front of the jib's foot sits on the deck. I look for the "Big Foot" sticker area of the jib to be on or just inside the toe rail when the jib is trimmed correctly for the condition, the heel of the boat, and how much the main is eased. Our goal in trimming the jib was that it be in as tight as possible as long as the top jib telltale wasn't stalling and the main wasn't luffing when it was eased. If we eased the main to keep the boat upright, we'd ease the jib to match. When all of this is correct, the foot of the jib in the area around the "Big Foot" sticker should be on or just inside the toe rail. If it was trending outside the toe rail, we'd move the car back. If it was trending well inside the toe rail, we'd move the car forward. This is a pretty good rule of thumb for the jib car position in almost any condition. In addition, I also use the feel of the helm. If the boat wants to turn up and I want to trim the jib tighter to balance it out but the top jib leech telltale is stalling, I'll move the jib car back to be able to trim the sail tighter without the top telltale stalling. I try to sail with a pretty neutral helm in all conditions.*

ZEKE: That's a great tip and one I can easily remember. As you know, and as predicted, CORK gave us big wind and big waves. At times, we were sailing in 3-4 foot waves that were fairly square and close together. In other boats I race regularly, I would be steering aggressively through this type of wave condition to try to minimize the slamming of the bow and keep the boat moving through the water as smoothly as possible. But in the J/22, I found that when I moved the tiller too much, it was quite difficult to maintain a steady level of heel and a balanced helm. And isn't that what it's all about? **Tell me how you find the balance between maintaining steady heel and helm, and steering the boat through the waves as smoothly as possible.**

MIKE: *You are certainly right about the sailing conditions at CORK. It was breezy and wavy, so having a solid game plan for those conditions really helped our team. I*



was lucky enough to have Todd Hiller do the bow for me. As anyone who has sailed in the J/22 class the past 20+ years knows, Todd is an extraordinary sailor. His main job going upwind was to call the breeze and waves. He was spot on for the whole event and this was a game-changing asset for almost everything I had to do. When I heard there was a puff or a lull coming, I could preemptively adjust the controls to be set for it and keep the heel of the boat constant. Even more importantly, when Todd called the waves, he was descriptive, calling flat spots, waves, chop, and big waves. When I heard flat spot and I could see it in my field of view, I'd pinch to keep the boat flat. When I heard waves, I knew I had to drive normally to keep the boat at full speed. When I heard chop or big waves, I'd wait until I could see them and then make a split-second decision to either put the bow down and power through them or try to steer around them, working the sails in conjunction. If the waves looked organized, I'd try to steer around them, which at times required a lot of tiller movement to stop from slamming (remember: up the front, down the back). I'd also trim the main pretty aggressively to keep the heel constant. If the waves looked disorganized, I'd ease the main and jib a little to keep the heel constant and simply power through the waves. Of course, there's a lot going on in the back of the boat, and everything isn't going to be perfect all the time. The ultimate goal is to keep the boat flat and up to speed. For that, I mostly use a combination of tiller and main trim because I have only two hands.

ZEKE: That is a great point about how important teamwork and communication are in being successful in sailboat racing. It makes a lot of sense that having great information from your bow person (who is a top flight skipper in his own right) helps you keep the boat going fast. Certainly an important aspect for any team to work on is communication and it sounds like it really helped make your job a little bit easier.

So my next thoughts are on overall game plans and how you guys worked through your strategies. I think the fleet was very fortunate to have a top quality race management team, led by David Sprague, and they did an absolutely stellar job setting a course and a starting line totally square to the breeze. On such a long course with a very long starting line, it is very difficult to decide on the game plan for the first beat. My team was always focused on picking the side of the course where we thought had the most pressure and then starting at the end that would get us to that side of the course the fastest. We did NOT want to go in the middle, though we ended up there more often than we wanted. **How did your team decide which side of the course you wanted to go to and where to start? Did you ever change your game plan based on the start you ended up with?**

MIKE: *I don't think our overall process was much different from yours. Generally the decision of where to go rested on the shoulders of my trimmer, Luke Lawrence, and wow, did he impress! Luke really was dialed into what was going on around us which*

allowed me to focus on spending my time and energy making the boat go fast. Luke was correct about the side to go to almost every time, which really made the rest of the jobs easier. That said, it sounds like our strategy was very similar to yours. We'd look up the course at 4-5 minutes before the start and decide which side had more pressure. If we weren't expecting a shift, we'd plan to head that way. Knowing that it was important to stay out of the middle, we went to our chosen side as fast as we could for almost every one of our races. We were a bit less conservative at the start than you were depending on how confident we were about the side. If we were very confident, our goal was to win the same side of the line as the side of the course that we wanted to head to. If we were less confident, we'd start near the boat so that the option to tack was still open if we didn't like how things were unfolding.



I also have to reiterate what you said about the fantastic job that David Sprague and the Race Committee did. It was one of the best jobs I've seen in quite a while. They set very square lines, moved marks when needed, and had almost no downtime between races. There's not much more you can ask for.

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ZEKE: As important as it was to stay out of the middle of the beats, it seemed it was even more important to stay out of the middle on the downwind legs. My team learned that it was easy to get into trouble by doing an early jibe around the offset because you end up in the "cone of death." **With the fleet so tight at the weather mark, how did your team decide your exit strategy from the offset to set yourself up for success on the downwind?**

MIKE: *Downwind is pretty exciting for me because it's one of the few times that I'm actually allowed to look around! We'd always have a decision on whether we were gybing after the offset mark before we got halfway down the offset leg. From there, it became my job to execute the plan. If we were rounding and going straight, my job was to keep us in a clear lane while Todd and Luke had their heads in the boat. If we were gybing, my job was to gybe and keep the boat going fast as we sailed through the upwind boats. The only time we gybed in the "cone of death" was when we were already on layline to the next mark. Even if there were only 400 yards of starboard on the downwind, we'd sail them first to extend away from the cone of no wind under the mark. Otherwise, our strategy, much like yours, was to stay out of the middle on the downwind because there was always more breeze on the edges. Air doesn't like to flow between objects where there's lots of resistance, so when you go downwind with a large mass of boats, the air tends to flow around that mass, not through it. This is why the best wind is on the edges.*

ZEKE: Speaking of going downwindâ€¦ That was certainly exciting! I learned a lot about sailing downwind in big breeze and big waves and the biggest lesson was - do whatever you can to keep surfing! When the boat is surfing, the sails are much more unloaded which makes them easier to trim, and the boat is less likely to get "wobbly." I found myself using a lot of rudder to try to steer the boat down the waves while surfing, and to prevent it from crashing into the next wave in front of us. **I know it is slow to use lots of rudder. Tell me the secret to helping the boat stay on the waves downwind without using too much rudder.**

MIKE: *Yes, in big breeze, the J/22 can be quite a handful downwind, but you can use a few tricks to keep everything under control a bit better. I think that the time when things get the most "sketchy" is when you try to go too low or get caught in a bad wave and the boat heels to windward. But the J/22 is just an overgrown dinghy, so if Luke gave the sheet a quick pump when we heeled to windward and I gave the main a sharp pump, the boat would settle back out. Both pumps help to make the bow turn up, which aids in keeping the hull under the top of the mast and the boat from falling over. Beyond using the sails, Todd was always on his feet downwind, moving from side to side to keep the boat flat. Because he was facing aft already while calling the wind, he could just look at the end of the tiller, and whichever way it was pointing was the direction that I needed him to move. As far as the amount of rudder is concerned, you're going to have to move the tiller, but less is better as long as you accomplish the goal of keeping the hull under the top of the mast.*

ZEKE: So it sounds like at least we were doing that right! You mentioned pumping the main and spinnaker to help steer the boat. It had been a while since I'd raced a boat that was so rewarding to pump downwind. The boat seemed very responsive to a pump of the mainsheet to promote surfing. We thought that pumping the spinnaker

sheet and the guy together was OK too, but I wasn't sure it was totally necessary. **With so much load on the spinnaker, do you really need to pump it downwind when there is that much breeze? Or is a pump of the mainsheet enough? Maybe you can help me decide where that line is. Can you tell me how you decide when it is time to pump?**

MIKE: *Yes, the boat is very lively downwind and reacts very well to pumping. We've tried a lot of different ways to pump the kite, but we've found that the fastest is just to pump the kite sheet. Since you're already sailing such a low angle, trimming the guy further back seems only to pull the boat sideways and not down the wave. I think that in the bigger breeze conditions a pump of the mainsheet might be all that's needed but a kite pump too certainly doesn't seem to hurt. As it gets lighter, pumping the kite gets more and more important because there is less power in the main alone to get the boat on the wave. It seems that as long as you can pump and initiate a surf on a wave, it's important to be pumping. If the waves are small enough that you're not steering to be surfing on them, then pumping isn't needed.*



ZEKE: Mike, thanks and congratulations again on being the 2016 J/22 World Champion.

MIKE: *Thanks Zeke and congratulations to you and your team on a great regatta. Considering this was your 1st J/22 event ever, I think we are going to have to work even harder to keep you behind us at the next event!*

Lastly, before we wrap, I'd like to thank my team of Luke and Todd for all their skill and hard work as well as the PRO and Race Committee again for doing such an excellent job. Thanks are due as well to the entire staff in Kingston for putting on a wonderful event: the regatta chair and regatta team, the measurement team, and everyone else involved. Finally, I need to say once again how much fun and what a pleasure it is to sail in the J/22 class. Although I really love sailing these boats, it's the terrific people in the class who make the racing experience so awesome!

NORTH NOTES:

 North-powered boats finished 1,2,3,5,6,8,9,10 at the 2016 J/22 Worlds.

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