

Match Racing Explained

A Layman's Guide to Match Racing

Match race sailing is easy to follow. A match race consists of two identical boats racing against each other. With effective boat handling and prudent use of wind and currents, a trailing boat can escape the grasp of the leader and pass. The leader uses blocking techniques to hold the other boat back. This one-on-one duel is a game of strategy and tactics. There is only one winner.

THE COURSE: The boats sail upwind to mark # 1 (the 'windward mark') where they round and set their spinnakers for mark # 2, which is placed in close proximity to the starting line. The yachts will sail back upwind to mark #1, round, and begin the run to the finish line (start line) downwind. Legs # 3 and # 4 are a repeat of the first two legs. The four-leg course will take approximately 20 minutes to sail.

THE START: The race begins with a warning shot fired by the Race Committee Boat (flying a blue RC flag) ten minutes prior to the official start of the race. Another shot is fired at five minutes prior. The two boats (each flying either a blue or yellow flag) enter the start area from opposite ends of the starting line four minutes prior to the actual start. During the next four minutes, the boats will engage in a furious pre-start battle, in which each will try to gain an advantage over the other. The goal is to make the other boat cross the starting line early, which is a penalty, or to start legally ahead of the other boat.

LEG ONE: The yacht which crosses the starting line first has a decided advantage because it can hinder the other boat by 'covering' it (blocking its wind). The trailing yacht will counter by tacking (altering course from one tack to the other) to gain clear wind. This usually results in a 'tacking duel' between the contestants. If the boats were even at the start, each uses speed and wind shifts to try to pull ahead.

After sailing to the first mark upwind, the boats will round the mark to starboard (clockwise), then set colorful spinnakers and race downwind, in what is called 'the run' to the second or 'leeward' mark.

LEG TWO: In this leg, the trailing boat has the advantage because it is in a position to 'cover' the leader and slow it down by blocking the wind from the leader's sails. The leader must then work to keep its air clear while positioning itself between the trailing boat and the next mark.

UMPIRING: Each race is officiated by two umpires in a small power boat who follow each pair of boats and make on-course penalty decisions. When a foul is allegedly committed, the umpire boat will fly one of the following flags: blue - the blue boat is penalized, yellow - the yellow boat is penalized, or green/white - indicating there is no penalty. When a boat is penalized, it must complete a penalty turn. The penalized boat may complete its penalty turn at any time during the race prior to the finish line. If penalties are offsetting, penalty turns need not be completed. Cumulative penalties are indicated by blue and yellow flags displayed on the umpires' boat. If one boat receives three penalties, it is disqualified and the race is over.

RULES: There are two basic right-of-way rules. The boat with the wind coming across its right, or starboard, side has the right of way and the other boat must stay clear. Within two boat lengths of a mark, the inside boat has the right to pass inside and ahead. The races are typically very close. Often, the winner is determined within several boat lengths of the finish line.

(Guide courtesy of ISAF – www.sailing.org)