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How Little We Knew; What Will We Learn Next?

by John Burnham

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Eight years ago, for the first Worlds at Fishers, I wrote what I thought was an insightful article about the local racing conditions on Fishers Island Sound. When the regatta started, I discovered how little I really knew. There's one point that was on target that bears repeating: you can count on six hours of ebb current followed by six hours of flood. Fishers Island is at the eastern end of Long Island Sound, and while the water level only goes up and down a few feet on our shores, plenty of water goes sluicing by, usually eastbound on the ebb and westbound on the flood.

I suppose the most obvious reason I was clueless in '96 was because the Worlds were held in September, and our Fishers Island YC racing season typically ends the first or second weekend in September. That month, of course, is a transition season when frontal systems begin to chug across the continent and make a dent in the Bermuda high in which we sail for most of the summer. So just when you think you've got all those southerly wind patterns pegged, a gradient breeze drops in for a visit that will swing the sailing breeze into the north, or maybe the east. Basically, you have to play the small shifts like always, but keep the larger weather picture in mind and watch what's happening on the edges of the Sound.

Besides offering big shifts during an afternoon as a front approaches, September can bring a low pressure system with a cold northeasterly of 20 to 25 knots. That's exactly what happened during the last two days of the 1996 Worlds. We also had conditions like that during the '95 North Americans in early August, but that was courtesy of the remnants of a hurricane, which is a low-pressure system beyond the scope of this article—and prohibited during Worlds competitions. Anyway, the main thrust of this paragraph and the previous one is to point out that because September is a "shoulder" season weather-wise, we can have a lot more wind than we typically have during the summer, and the shifts can be big, persistent, and unpredictable. I should add, however, that sometimes the shifts oscillate just the way the magazine articles say, most commonly when we're enjoying a clear, bright day of sailing in a northwesterly wind of anywhere from 8 to 20 knots.

All that said, we could as easily encounter summer-like conditions and spend our time coaxing the boats along some of the time in 4 to 6 knots of breeze. Learning where the anchor is and untangling the rode beforehand is not a bad idea either. Now add in the wild card September factor of quite warm water (well, not by Bermuda standards) and you can have some very unusual days. One of the most fun is when the wind keeps lifting off the water and then touching back down from a different direction. These are days when places change fast, your heart rate never slows, and you never lose hope or gain too much confidence in your position.





Normally we counter the lightest-air days by sailing close to the north side of the island, which creates enough thermal turbulence to bring the stronger upper air flow of 6 to 14 knots down to the water. However, to run a Worlds-length course with long enough beats, we move away from the island to the west, essentially setting up to the south of the Thames River, which flows down into the Sound past New London. The good news there is that the island affects the breeze less; the bad news is that except in a south-southeasterly, that means less breeze to sail in.

By the way, island first timers will get their first view of the racing area aboard the ferry from New London, which will literally bisect our racing area. And I would suggest getting a chart and tide tables both for New London and the Race (the latter is found in a yellow book called Eldridge Tide and Pilot Book, published by Marion Jewett White in Boston). The times of high tide vary from the river to the Race (at the west end of Fishers Island) and in Fishers Island Sound itself. Having these in advance will help you get oriented on that ride across.

There's one other hard piece of information I passed along in 1996 that hasn't changed. When you sail west from the harbor toward the racing area, you'll pass between North Hill and South Dumpling. There's a green can by South Dumpling to leave to starboard and then a big red bell to leave to port. Don't cut these buoys, even though the bell is well offshore, or you may discover the piece of hard information I'm talking about. There are few members of our fleet who don't have first-hand knowledge of this set of boulders.

So, what's the bottom line on our conditions in September? It could be as hot as Bermuda or as cold as Scotland, as windy as San Francisco or as light as our neighboring fleets. Pack your water bottles, bathing suits, and suntan lotion, plus your foul weather gear and a thin layer of long underwear. And don't forget your checkbook so you can buy some fleece with 2004 Worlds logos once you arrive. Lastly, my favorite weapon for any Worlds, be it light air or heavy—a big bottle of ibuprofen. Welcome to Fishers Island sailing!

