

This has been written in response from someone asking advice on “Race Tactics” and it is aimed at club level paddlers (which goes all the way up to international paddlers) but as each paddler has different skill sets, experiences and physical and mental characteristics it has to be seen as a guide or starting point and not as a tick list. You’ll still have to find what works for you, and then keep finding what works for you as you get fitter, faster and stronger and race different people.

Race plans

Never do anything new in an important race, this goes for diet, drink and equipment as well as routine. Remember this is a **race** and not a time trial, do you react to events which are outside your plan? Should you? can you? “You have to be in it to win it” there is so much (conflicting) advice.

There are three types of racing: giving pressure, receiving pressure, and racing your own race. I’m going to say you can/should have a plan in “Sprint races” which is practised in training repeatedly, so you know it works for you individually and you can build confidence and the mental toughness to execute **your** plan. Simplistically you have two options (with more complexity tailored to your strengths and weaknesses). “Go ‘til you blow” living in the race for as long as you can as hard as you can.

Or a more measured plan, bumping along the pain barrier, strokes per distance/even pace etc. you must find what works for you and practice lots before the big race.

Never use a plan you haven’t tried before!

Marathon/5K, you **MUST** react to what is going on around you. You can have set plans for certain situations, “what I’d do in this situation” but it is a race and therefore it is fluid and constantly changing. Depending on what your chosen outcomes are, you must practice these scenarios. Racing to win can be very different to racing to stay with a faster group for as long as possible.

Race plans: Whatever anyone tells you, race plans should be individual to you, each of us is different with both physical and mental strengths and weaknesses, why would you follow someone else’s plan? Remember a Girls C 1000m may last a minute or two longer than a GB Men’s A 1000m race.

Plan 1: Go until you blow: Simple enough strategy – This is where you go as fast as you can for as long as you can and see where that gets you. This is what most people start out with in both marathon and sprint.

Advantages: Depending on circumstances, the expectation/burden of winning is removed, you actually get to compete at the front, and you have given it everything you could, it’s very simple and what most people would do naturally.

Disadvantages: It means you’ll probably never get to the end if you truly are going as hard as you can (although you should get closer and closer), if you truly “pop” or “blow” you may spend a long time going slowly and this can be mentally damaging, it might not be the most efficient way for you to get down the course (sprinting) or around the course (marathon).

As you get more proficient at sprinting or marathon this can slowly morph into a “controlled” go until you blow, with a maximal start, followed by a high “cruise speed” (or in a marathon staying with the fastest group) which you can hold for as long as you can manage and a more controlled metering out of your effort, when do I burn, hold this person off or concede a position etc.

This can then lead to:

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Sprinting - Race plan 2: Even splits – this as the name would suggest is when you split the race into segments and do them evenly or to a set plan. This takes **LOTS** of practice and even more mental strength.

You have to have the mental capacity to ignore others who might be paddling away from you and be able to catch them up later. You have to have discipline and faith in your plan, the start of the race would be within your capacity and later, whilst others are slowing down you keep the same speed (sub top speed) up for longer and gradually pull them back.

You must NOT FALL behind other paddlers washes. This takes a huge amount of mental strength and experience of paddle strokes per distance and therefore is not the work of a few sessions before a regatta. It involves knowing what time you think would win or medal, splitting that time over the distance and then from a standing start keep hitting those time/distance splits, all of which must be done by the paddler with no outside assistance or watches. This is highly skilled and takes lots of practice and isn't right for everyone.

Ironically this also works for some on races like DW and Watersides which are essentially time trials also (watches etc are allowed so you get updates).

Sprinting - Most people's plan 3: Big start (chosen number of strokes) to get the boat up and running, transition into high speed maintenance (concentrate on technique, breathing & where you are in relation to where you need to finish i.e. heats and semi) and at some pre planned point either up the effort (lots of people choose halfway or the red boys coming into the finish) or aim to maintain this speed for as long as possible before the inevitable slow down. Maintaining good technique when struggling is key to getting down and doing well.

Try these in training and see what work for you.

Race tactics - Longer races – Marathons

So much depends on your desired outcomes – finishing the race could be very different from winning the race.

So, some guidance (and its only guidance) –

Club racing: go with the fastest people you can stay with.

You will learn more, improve faster both physically and tactically racing with better athletes than winning against inferior competition. The end result isn't always as important as the “*doing*” bit of the race.

How? Again, this is so dependant on your individual factors. A good start usually makes life easier – A fast start can get you 10-15 minutes into a race for a lot less overall effort.

Starts:

NEVER be down on a start line

Give yourself enough space to paddle

Give others enough space to avoid you (no more).

A good start can come from lining up in the correct place (for you, in this particular race, not always the optimum place to start!).

Once moving don't change direction too suddenly as people might hit/spin you.

If you have speed you must use it wisely, there are no prizes for winning the start!

Go as hard as you need to (no harder) for as long as you need to, but you must know there are consequences for going fast (lactic build up), so only go fast enough to get to a good wash, to get to the lead or safely out of harm's way.

What if you are not a fast starter? – Practice! Get better.

If you genuinely don't have the turn of speed the others do, you need to mitigate this. Can you start beside someone who can get you to the front? Do you need to line up away from the fast starters to avoid their washes or falling behind them, allowing yourself enough space to not fall behind the fast starters wash (if you can't wash-hang them) i.e. not starting beside them on the inside bank.

Don't be too eager to get in the V! the group is going to change in the beginning, giving up a good position in the beginning may cost you dearly.

Accept when you have no choice but to concede a position (when it is inevitable you are going to lose it) and back out carefully, save energy, DON'T fight! Find the next best place ASAP.

Think and look – what is going to happen next? – who is going to lead next? Who is coming up?

Where are they going to join the group? Who do you have to worry about?

Racing can be about being smarter than the others.

Group racing: What are your strengths and weaknesses?

You might know your strengths and weaknesses, but the group may not, also these are relative to those you are racing, plan your race (as you go) around them.

I'm small and light – means it's hard to wash hang you, you get a bigger ride on the wash, work hard on your leads and rest a lot on the wash.

I'm big, everyone gets a lovely ride, but they might struggle to come off your wash and past you so lead into key points.

I can go on and on but don't have a turn of speed: grind them down, lead as hard as you can to break them when they are struggling. Lead into the turn/portage or finish and go early to mitigate their turn of speed.

I'm not fit enough to last the distance – do less work in the race and more in training!

Once you have worked out the group in terms of attributes and it's calmed down, decide who your competition is, either for the win or for staying with the group etc. Who can you pick on, who can you get to help you, who can you help?

Sometimes you might want to help a weaker paddler stay in the group to make life harder for a stronger one! **Always be thinking**, you know you can beat the weaker one, so they aren't the threat!

There are cultural differences to racing from club to club and what is and isn't acceptable, the higher up the quality of racing, usually the better the behaviour is because everyone knows the code of conduct, the unwritten rules.

- Don't crash – you lose too much time and risk the race
- Don't fight – why would you?
- Do your bit (don't get lead into doing too much) – expect abuse if you don't do your bit, you don't have to do more but there might be consequences to your actions!
- Just because you are willing to work, doesn't mean everyone is – don't get cross.
- Give people time to get out of the way- in changes and cross overs etc. people can't just disappear, and you'll lose more time than you've gained by a crash.
- Don't expect to wash hang on the inside upstream – if someone lets you it's a privilege not a right.

Burns - Changes of speed: These are needed but how you do them (like starts) is dependent on your skills and strengths. It's best not to do them if you don't have to, so think ahead and watch what is going on and what is likely to happen next (turns, portages, changes of washes, cross overs from bank to bank). **Everybody only has a limited resource; do you really need to spend it now?**

If you have to burn, then you do the shortest amount you can get away with! This means you test the situation, are they going to fold without resistance? If you do have to burn then you commit 100% and get it done as soon as possible for the least amount of cost (in terms of energy and pain), if they also fully commit to not letting you past you decide what **MUST** be done, do you HAVE to win this confrontation or is it more cost effective to back off?

Sometimes you might play with someone leading the group to make others in the group suffer, run down the wash as if you are going to attack knowing the leader is going to hold you off at all costs, when they go you relax onto the wash as the others struggle and when the leader slows you ride forward again on the wash which has built up again (see wash-hanging information guide) and go again, possibly with no intention of coming past and repeat! The change of speed not only tires the leaders but might take its toll on others in the group (this isn't clever if you're the weakest in the group!).

How long is a burn? 30-40 seconds is the max, longer than this and you've swapped into very hard effort or it's the finish (either the actual finish or the end of your race either way).

If it's a burn changing around a group you should try to do it in under 20 strokes (good paddlers are under 12) but if it's coming past someone, it's as long as needed, or to break away, then you have to transition from flat out to very hard, no one can keep flat out for long. If it's to the finish, then the simple answer is, it's as long as it takes!

Hopefully, you'll have won the race before the finish but don't stop (or dramatically slow) before the line without knowing where the others are, they could be burning down your wash as you slow down!

Using washes to do bigger burns: You can use anybody's wave to surf down and come past, but there is a huge skill to timing and where you do it. You need to think of the wave as a hill and you as a bicycle. It is going to be harder to accelerate past someone at the bottom of the hill rather than starting at the top and gaining momentum down this hill. Also starting from further back and wider means they are less likely to see you start and you've already gained speed by the time they have spotted you. You need to accelerate down the hill and toward the leader and then "break out" of the hole they are making. This is why when two people go head to head, side by side, the person with the slight lead usually wins, because the other paddler is climbing out of the hole or sliding back down into it. It needs to be done hard and fast.

If you don't have that sudden change then what? Move wider and go head to head!

Burns or changes in boat speed are just that, accelerating the boat, don't whizz the paddles around expecting to go faster, you need to connect with the water using your best technique.

Turns: Depending on the course, where you are in the race and the type of turn, you need (as in every aspect of racing) to be in the best/safest position.

Leading is often the safest option but is only available to one person! Is it worth expending lot's of energy to burn for a turn? Sometime yes and sometime not. Do you squeeze people on a turn?

Sometime yes and sometime no, where are you in the race, what would you gain vs stand to lose?

If you aren't leading do you want to be on the inside or outside? Do you have a choice? Can you turn as well as the other competitors?

All this needs to be thought about as you race, if you are a heavy paddler on a narrow course with a light paddler on your inside you probably won't get around as well as them. If you are on the outside of someone do you trust them to be able to turn?

Washes change position on turns (*see wash hanging advice document*) so be prepared to move.

Portages: (*see portaging advice document*) For some they are a necessary evil, for others a chance to do some damage (not literally) to the opposition and for some, something to survive.

You must know your own abilities

Your goals are as follows, in this order

1. Stay safe and above the water
2. Protect the rudder and the boat and you!
3. Stay with the group minimum – this includes being able to paddle once back in
4. Possibly make life hard for someone else
5. Never use too much energy (*see No.3*)

So why would you break away if you can't get around the course on your own? Maybe it's an opportunity to make someone else have to work hard to get back to you, but why run like crazy and then stop once on the water – always be thinking.

Positioning: If you have a choice, lead in – try to get the lead in a soft change (this counts for every key point in the race – turns, portages & the finish) rather than doing a costly burn. Don't lead for ages and relinquish the lead into the portage!

Personal choice – do you leave room for those on your wash? Go long or short, get in short or long?

All these depend on your situation at the time and the group around you. Run to the end of the portage is usually sensible (this stops others putting their boat in the water in front of you or over you), never box your boats nose inside another person's boat. Don't leap into the boat like you've seen on YouTube! You are always faster above the water than swimming in it!! Is the rudder still working? You have to think a lot more in K2.

Catching back up: So for whatever reason you've been dropped, if it's a burn, turn or portage you might be able to catch back up, if you couldn't stay with the groups flat speed, then possibly not. How to catch up? Best to do it in a pair or group sharing the load and making sure you aren't the weakest when you do catch up, either in terms of position or tiredness. If you are catching up on your own think carefully about being in no mans land between groups, if you catch up, are you going to be spat straight back out in a worse state than now? Could you rest until the next group gets to you and be stronger in that? You won't win but maybe you never were going to (as in you were racing in a faster class).

Catching a group: There is always a rolling wave behind a group, instead of just climbing these waves use them to catch the group, start wide and work along the wave and change to the next bigger wave and repeat until you get close enough to make the leap to the group, save enough energy to stay with the group if there isn't a good position for you to join in on. Alternatively ride these waves out of harms way whilst the group fights it out – this only works on big open races and is a dangerous tactic as the waves can change/disappear in big burns but it's a potential if you can't make it back quickly enough.

Catching a loan break away paddler: Think carefully! You need to catch them up to beat them but if you are in a comfortable group who can catch them easily why do the work? Or you can get close enough to strike but leave them just in front trying to hold the group off whilst you all share the load

so when you do strike the breakaway paddler is weaker than before (this only works if you **can** get back to them).

The finish: As I keep mentioning you must know your strengths and weaknesses. It's usually easier to win when leading! Getting given the lead without a big effort is the easiest way but not very common especially at the sharp end of racing. Know your opposition.

As mentioned you'll have to play to your strong points, either leaving it to the last minute, leading from a long way out and gradually increasing the pace, do the big burn to break away and float home, sit on the big wash and wait for your moment, let the others fight it out and then pick them off when tired, breakaway and just work until the end!

So, in summary racing is about lots of different aspects, you need to get good in all of them, possibly not the best in all of them but you can't have a really weak area in the top flight.

You are going to get it wrong – arguably you have to if you are trying to win and progress, log it in the brain, remember it and try something different next time.

If you want to get good at racing, go racing

It sounds obvious but the above is very true. You have people who are very good at training and you have people who are racers and the exceptional few do both.

If you want to get good at racing either sprint or marathon you must do those races as often as possible. Even if you think you are no good at regattas, they are very hard and good training.

Marathons are not steady state time trials, they are sprints, endurance efforts, technique sessions and mental training. Find what you enjoy in them and keep doing it.

Enjoy your racing

Lastly and most importantly you need to enjoy what you do. This isn't always easy when it means so much to you, all the hard work, hours put in and expectations of others... but you must enjoy your training and racing (you can feel nervous, scared etc. that's ok) but to do your very best you need to be in a happy state of mind and an athlete who isn't enjoying the racing or training is NOT going to perform as well as they could.

If you are struggling for enjoyment or motivation speak to people you trust or respect. Do some fun racing or reassess your goals, are they realistic and achievable or are you spoiling the sport you loved?

Other related learning materials:

Wash hanging

Race day

Training the brain.