The challenge of sailing in strong wind is to focus on the positives – like the lightness of the small sail, not its force, give the horse its head, extend your limbs and stop fighting the rig, you know you're on a winner.

With winter storms being the main thread, it's fitting that Peter Hart should fall in line and examine the technical challenges of sailing in strong winds.

Those with a passing interest in pedagogy will be familiar with various teaching styles that coaches employ depending on the environment, the complexity of the move and who stands before them. For example there’s the intellectual approach involving detailed technical explanations for people who like words and won’t allow themselves to attempt anything remotely risky until they fully understand the mechanics. There’s the ‘monkey see, monkey do’ approach a.k.a. ‘mirror learning.’ It works for those who like to see the skill in its entirety and then just follow and imitate. It’s what kids do so naturally. And it’s what adults should do - and would do if they hadn’t got a mortgage.

A lesser known coaching approach but arguably the most effective in many advanced windsurfing situations where direct communication is difficult, is the FOF0 method. Developed probably in the back streets of Liverpool in less affluent times, it’s an acronym for: (I apologise for the vulgarity - but don’t shoot the messenger) … “F*** Off and Find Out.”

It’s not entirely a coaching cop-out but the premise is: “anything I tell you at this stage is totally irrelevant. The moment you launch into this screaming gale for the first time any tips and strategies dribble out your ears along with all logical thought and a lot of ear wax. So get out there, give it a go and see what happens.” Necessity being the mother of invention, a LOT happens, not of all it seemingly positive, but violent mistakes are all part of the process. Brave/foolish people do well in the upper stages of windsurfing because they throw themselves into the maelstrom and put their bodies on the line. Thanks to a lot of FOF0-ing, the scary unknown quickly becomes vaguely familiar. They bring their fears under control and are then free to loosen up and flourish... maybe.

Such is the plight of a lot of windsurfers as they confront strong winds. Gaps in their basic game make the sexy bits – the soaring jumps, the slashing rides and the screaming gybes – unattainable. Strong winds, like chop and gybes, expose technical flaws. Strong winds, like chop and gybes, expose technical flaws. They’re not afraid, they’re perfectly competent but, without naming names, they don’t so much as try ‘rip’ in strong winds as sail in and out. Too much FOF0-ing in conditions way above their head in the early days made them ‘rip’ in strong winds as sail in and out. Too much FOF0-ing in conditions way above their head in the early days made them ‘rip’ in strong winds as sail in and out. Too much FOF0-ing in conditions way above their head in the early days made them ‘rip’ in strong winds as sail in and out. They don’t read a host of new techniques, just make the basic ones better.

**WHAT IS A STRONG WIND**

We’re not talking tempests here. That’s a different game. Following the passage of Hurricane Jude some 18 months ago, I was driven to write a piece about the do’s and don’ts of storm riding. In that instance, I could have saved myself a lot of time and just written FOF0 across all five pages. Most of it is just about getting out there and developing fast, instinctive survival techniques. The ‘strong’ wind I’m talking about starts at about force 6. For many advanced windsurfers 22-30 knots (force 6-7) is the ideal strength. You’re up to full speed on your favourite light, squirrely board and small, flicky rig, but you’re not hanging on. You’ve got control. For the improving windsurfer force 6 represents something of a watershed. It doesn’t seem like a big leap from the dreamy 5 – but it produces twice as much pressure. Many things however, not of all it seemingly positive, but violent mistakes are all part of the process. Brave/foolish people do well in the upper stages of windsurfing because they throw themselves into the maelstrom and put their bodies on the line. Thanks to a lot of FOF0-ing, the scary unknown quickly becomes vaguely familiar. They bring their fears under control and are then free to loosen up and flourish... maybe.

There’s no board above 100 ltrs is ready at home. away from speed and slalom, most are on sails less than 5. Fantastico if you’re used to it – twitchy and ‘on off’ if you’re not. Wind speed differences in gusts and lulls are more severe. To sail at the speed of the wind so you enter moves with a light sail means you have to sail really fast usually over water which is anything but flat. There’s enough wind to support the board in the air – and to blow it out of the water.

It’s not survival wind but marks the point at which you have to hone and modify your technique in various ways.
The big rig has loads of leech twist and a wide shoeing angle. The power comes on gradually, so you don’t get defensive and overly concerned about controlling the board. You can deliver a constant power and control the rig. It’s generally more controllable than a narrow rig. On a narrow rig, you can get leech twist on the boat, which will make the board plane-early and you’ll notice that the good guys plane off the beach every time. You got a gust as you launched but did you look ahead? Guts can be very local. Lift the heel and check out your movements over 30 metres out. Time it so you’re sailing into wind.

High wind flight

Over the 10 days in Jims (and loops) improved at the same rate as the general sailing. The happier people got with the kit, the more they relaxed. You can’t help it, you can’t help the corners. Some seem to be cornering better, but if you approach a steady jumpy at full speed with a 4.2, every cell in your body is telling you to head up and wash off speed. But as you head up, you drop onto your heel, the wind then hits the deck of the board and shows it straight back down. You also fall onto your back foot making it impossible to pick the board up. By the time you hit across the wind, you can project forward, the tip, the line, the windward edge and maintain your outward stance with full view of the landing strip.

The Set-up and stance

Yes set-up is very personal but if ‘personal’ means sailing with too big a board with usually the result of planing too fast, then you’ve gotta want it! ‘You’ve gotta want it!’ is the direction for "The Pond." As Irish Brian kept reminding us: “You’ve gotta want it!”

The Set-up and stance

Yes, set-up is very personal but if “personal” means sailing with stupidly short lines, then this way, “hooking in-straight-away-to-plane-early’ lark will eternally elude you. On big kit, yes, you can get planing with short lines especially in a seat harness. As you hook in and sit down you automatically engage the back foot and the fin does the rest. But on little kit you don’t have a fin - well, not a real one. It’s rig power pulling you downward that gets you going. You need to hook in and lower take off pressure off the rig. The lines have to be long enough so you can leave the rig forward and upright as you move back into the straps. In no particular order these were other high wind stance and set-up issues that arose.

As you launch on small kit into surf, a little monkey on your shoulder may question if you really want to be hooning at full speed through this minefield. Hence you head up, step out of the strap and pretend it’s not windy enough. If such is the case, follow the directions for “The Pond.” As Irish Brian kept reminding us: “You’ve gotta want it!”

Freeriders and the front hand

The front hand had creeping forward on the boom is a curse to early planing and just about every other move. It chokes the power, slows the board down and makes you feel like you’re pushing a bucket. It also contradicts the whole purpose of planing. If you press it even a little, the tail sinks – and if it sinks much on take off or rig the guts out of it. Or they leave the beach under-powered and can trim the board with the lines much inboard so you you can rise to windward and soar. The instinct to quash here is that of pulling the rig forward and upright as you move back into the straps. In mid air you will exit the straps and you will be fully powered up. It’s easy mistake in strong winds. The defensive mindset persuades many to play safe and go too small with the sail size and/or rig the guts out of it. Or they leave the beach under-powered because they’ve already been out and were over-powered out to sea.

Back foot in first – the anchor point

If it works, it works, but this one rarely does. The habit of getting on and whacking the back foot in first come what may, reveals a bug o’ war, ‘resist-the-enemy-force-at-all-costs’ mentality brought on by a history of serial catastrophes. The problem is that under the back foot lies the area of least volume. If you press it even a little, the tail sinks – and it sinks just a centimeter you’re towing a bucket. It also contradicts the essential early planing effect. Going back on your toes, gaining power and letting it pull you along. If it feels as if you’re on the edge of a catapult, then you’re getting there.

Under-powered

On a small board that means you engage the nose rocker and stop. The creeping forward hand can also be a symptom of lines set too far back – a hangover of some big rig free-riders who set them for fully powered up blasting. Having them a nibble forward of the balance point is often preferable as this way it makes you sensitive to your back hand and helps avoid the dreaded over-heat – a common problem with the smaller sizes.
At a lot of places the wind is a force stronger beyond the break. But consider where you want to do most of your sailing. The right answer is surely near the shore in the fun lumps. If jumping is your game you must be powered as you leave the beach. Rig for the wind strength where you want to perform.

“Early planing, sailing upwind and waterstarting all potentially require less effort in strong winds – but only if you rig right and tweak your technique”

**Tweaking the Waterstart**

For waterstarting 10 knots is tricky as you have to minutely co-ordinate all your lift devices into an explosive moment in order to rise up. 18 knots is perfect. Lots of power to lift you but not so much as to blow you out of shape. By 25 knots it’s getting tricky again. There’s more than enough power to lift you but the strong winds produce chop and rolling swell. If you drop the rig it gets swamped in seconds. The wind has the strength to catch a protruding mast or clew and flip it over – and as it flips, it sinks. The wind at water level is all over the place. One minute nothing as you sink into a trough, the next loads as a swell lifts you into clean air. Power control and keeping the rig flying is harder. I draw your attention to tip ONE – go for it! Tish and Pish to that nonsense about waterstarting being effortless. For a moment you need to get brutal. Speed is once again your friend. The quicker you get to the rig after you’ve fallen, the lighter the task of releasing it.

With rig recovery in strong winds a lot suffer from ‘one-trick-pony-ism.’ That one trick being to use the back of the board to support the boom – great if the boom is lying conveniently downwind of the tail – but a swim of cross-Channel proportions if it isn’t.

You need another method. If the rig is upwind of the board, go for the mast tip. It’s the point from which you get most leverage and can push the rig highest. It takes a little practice (and it’s not the most fun thing you can do with your leisure hours), angling the rig so the wind just hits the mast, not the leech; timing your punch upwards as a swell lifts it; grabbing the end of the head batten with the other hand and lifting it as well to feed air under the cloth.

Do everything you normally do but more so. Swim upwind harder to stem the tide and give yourself more room to manoeuvre. Above all do NOT get caught under the sail. If you feel the clew catching (more of a risk in strong wind and chop) don’t just pull the mast into wind, hurl it into wind away from the clew. Boss the situation. And when you’ve freed the rig, what ARE you waiting for?! Get both feet on, bear away and go!

If it’s feeling all too wild and violent, what you probably need to help you motor up is a 12.2 just out of the screens pass you without a harness. Get on it and map the wave as it moves and sail it forward for 100 ltr board. You stop shoreline!

**Tweaking the Waterstart**

One minute nothing as you sink into a trough, the next loads as a swell lifts you into clean air. Power control and keeping the rig flying is harder. I draw your attention to tip ONE – go for it! Tish and Pish to that nonsense about waterstarting being effortless. For a moment you need to get brutal. Speed is once again your friend. The quicker you get to the rig after you’ve fallen, the lighter the task of releasing it.

With rig recovery in strong winds a lot suffer from ‘one-trick-pony-ism.’ That one trick being to use the back of the board to support the boom – great if the boom is lying conveniently downwind of the tail – but a swim of cross-Channel proportions if it isn’t. You need another method. If the rig is upwind of the board, go for the mast tip. It’s the point from which you get most leverage and can push the rig highest. It takes a little practice (and it’s not the most fun thing you can do with your leisure hours), angling the rig so the wind just hits the mast, not the leech; timing your punch upwards as a swell lifts it; grabbing the end of the head batten with the other hand and lifting it as well to feed air under the cloth.

Do everything you normally do but more so. Swim upwind harder to stem the tide and give yourself more room to manoeuvre. Above all do NOT get caught under the sail. If you feel the clew catching (more of a risk in strong wind and chop) don’t just pull the mast into wind, hurl it into wind away from the clew. Boss the situation. And when you’ve freed the rig, what ARE you waiting for?! Get both feet on, bear away and go!

The strong winds produce chop and rolling swell. If you drop the rig it gets swamped in seconds. The wind has the strength to catch a protruding mast or clew and flip it over – and as it flips, it sinks. The wind at water level is all over the place. One minute nothing as you sink into a trough, the next loads as a swell lifts you into clean air. Power control and keeping the rig flying is harder. I draw your attention to tip ONE – go for it! Tish and Pish to that nonsense about waterstarting being effortless. For a moment you need to get brutal. Speed is once again your friend. The quicker you get to the rig after you’ve fallen, the lighter the task of releasing it.

With rig recovery in strong winds a lot suffer from ‘one-trick-pony-ism.’ That one trick being to use the back of the board to support the boom – great if the boom is lying conveniently downwind of the tail – but a swim of cross-Channel proportions if it isn’t. You need another method. If the rig is upwind of the board, go for the mast tip. It’s the point from which you get most leverage and can push the rig highest. It takes a little practice (and it’s not the most fun thing you can do with your leisure hours), angling the rig so the wind just hits the mast, not the leech; timing your punch upwards as a swell lifts it; grabbing the end of the head batten with the other hand and lifting it as well to feed air under the cloth.

Do everything you normally do but more so. Swim upwind harder to stem the tide and give yourself more room to manoeuvre. Above all do NOT get caught under the sail. If you feel the clew catching (more of a risk in strong wind and chop) don’t just pull the mast into wind, hurl it into wind away from the clew. Boss the situation. And when you’ve freed the rig, what ARE you waiting for?! Get both feet on, bear away and go!

**HIGH WIND TRIM**

What article would be complete without a no hands mast mount GoPro shot – except it is a very good pose and angle from which to make some serious points about high wind trim and stance. Firstly you don’t need to jump – if 25 knots you can’t sail with at least one hand off, then check line tension and boom height and make sure the sail is releasing (downhaul) and has enough shape (outhaul). See how the harness track lines up with the front foot. On small boards with even smaller kites you’re looking to project forward the whole time and sail and even if the front foot is lost.

For a moment you need to get brutal. Speed is once again your friend. The quicker you get to the rig after you’ve fallen, the lighter the task of releasing it.

With rig recovery in strong winds a lot suffer from ‘one-trick-pony-ism.’ That one trick being to use the back of the board to support the boom – great if the boom is lying conveniently downwind of the tail – but a swim of cross-Channel proportions if it isn’t. You need another method. If the rig is upwind of the board, go for the mast tip. It’s the point from which you get most leverage and can push the rig highest. It takes a little practice (and it’s not the most fun thing you can do with your leisure hours), angling the rig so the wind just hits the mast, not the leech; timing your punch upwards as a swell lifts it; grabbing the end of the head batten with the other hand and lifting it as well to feed air under the cloth.

Do everything you normally do but more so. Swim upwind harder to stem the tide and give yourself more room to manoeuvre. Above all do NOT get caught under the sail. If you feel the clew catching (more of a risk in strong wind and chop) don’t just pull the mast into wind, hurl it into wind away from the clew. Boss the situation. And when you’ve freed the rig, what ARE you waiting for?! Get both feet on, bear away and go!

**THE MOVING HANDS**

Power control with little sails is a double edged sword. Yes they are twitchier and easier to oversheet – but that’s a good thing too as long as it’s deliberate. Over-sheeting is the best way to dump power in mid-move. The key is mobile hands. Just the move of the hands is enough to change the sail’s aspect without a load of pushing and pulling. In Jeri we also focused on a lot of one handed moves, jumps, 360s etc to show that the rig is happy to behave itself and play dead so long as you hold it in the right place.

Starting a gybe or bottom turn you control power by pushing the front shoulder towards the front hand and loading up the front foot.

Then to gouge the turn, you move the back hand all the way back, extend the front arm, drive the rail and enjoy the ride.

And by contrast, in the one handed top turn you sheet the sail out just by moving the front hand into the middle of the boom. Once again no need to reef!
COMMITTING TO THAT ARC

Gybing in strong winds and churning seas is a test of power control. The danger zone is broad reach to broad reach. The longer you linger in that zone, the more chance you have of being swallowed. There’s the tip – commit to the edge, tighten the arc and get through the quadrant of death as quickly as possible.

A week later and the angles and attitude could not be more different - board cranking through the wind and the back hand almost on the clew over-sheeting to dump the excess.

// A week later

The longer you wait, the greater the chance of a swell knocking the board off line or you being flattened by a gust.

THE DRIFTERS

Out beyond the break in Jeri I stopped a few times to offer rig recovery tips and what you notice immediately in a force 6 is how quickly you lose ground. In two minutes it was about a hundred metres. If you’re looking for the secret of life, the Universe and happier strong wind sailing, it’s right there. Sorting out the waterstarts (or better still, nailing a strong wind tack or gybe) can save you 100m every reach, which means you’re not spending the whole session trying to squeak upwind or walking the walk of you-know-what, but have freedom to bear away into the moves that bring the most joy.

Progress report

In Jeri to begin with, repetition and the FOFO factor brought improvement. The first day on a 4.0 always feels wild, the second day less so and so on. The first changes are psychological. You change your relationship with the kit. A 4.2 is no longer a storm sail with which to limp home. It’s a small sail that is perfect for the conditions. I knew the transformation was complete when I saw someone bagging out a small sail to create more power.

With time you dial into a different tempo. On day one, severe gusts (they’re not that severe, they just feel like it for a moment) encourage you to over-react, over-commit to the rig and over-sheet. You learn that although the force in the sail feels vicious when you first sheet in, if you go with it, stay on your toes and let the board level off and accelerate, that power softens in a second.

With every day forearms relaxed; hands released their death grips, blisters began to heal and as people trusted themselves to push back in the harness, boards rode flatter and faster. High noses and bouncing tails, are classic symptoms of someone lifting the elbows, heaving on the arms and delivering pulses of confused power to their feet and mastfoot.

With the mind embracing the upper Beaufort forces, the team were free to work on certain negative reflexes and really change certain techniques.

Speed.

It’s normal as you confront strong winds to constantly think about washing off speed. But if you’ve always got the brakes on, you’re always dealing with a powered up, unstable sail, which places you on the back foot. If you take off jumps slowly and on the back foot, you just rise and flop vertically and unspectacularly.

My constant cry in Jeri was ‘bear away.’ Bear away to get going; bear away approaching a wave, bear away down the wave. A lot has to do with board choice but if you have shed some litres, a smaller board feels ever more stable the faster it’s going. Smacked by an overpowering gust, it’s not wrong to head up a little to depower. But if your instinct on seeing a gust is to bear away, you’ll be having a lot more fun.

Push not pull.

We need an evolutionary biologist to tell us why that when threatened, our instinct seems to be to hunch up and pull everything in closer. Take a still of anyone struggling in strong winds in mid tack, gybe, or just sailing along, they’re wearing the rig, their nose millimetres from the boom. Holding the rig constantly at arms length and powering up the sail by pushing the front arm, rather than by pulling is life-changing. I get people to drop the front hand for a few seconds. It’s normal something they never dream of doing in strong winds. But as they do so the rig swings forward and powers up, and they automatically drop their shoulders and hips back and accelerate.

And with the wind whistling through the eaves and your smallest board dancing under your feet that is where we leave you this month.

Harty will be stuffing your technique larder with yet more of the tastiest titbits next month. In the meantime you may be lucky to grab one of the last places on his ever more popular clinic tour. Details on www.peter-hart.com or email for his monthly newsletter on harty@peter-hart.com