The Uphill Battle

Whether you’re an apprentice planer, pubescent wave-sailor or aspiring racer, the ability to cruise nonchalantly upwind should be at the top of your ‘to master’ list. Peter Hart has tips, techniques and strategies for all occasions.

I couldn’t have been more pumped up if I’d been on a diet of raw meat and steroids and been left conned to an art how all night. The occasion was the SW Funboard Cup in Cornwall – a major event with a hefty purse attracting a horde of European stars. It was my first proper wave contest and in round one I’d drawn the recently crowned Olympic champion, Stefan van den Berg. Thirty know of side-shore autumn breezes whipping the tops off a messy Gwithian swell. Conditions were perfect for an upset. Stefan may have been a global star but while he’d been trickling around the beauty of Los Angeles on a 4m Windslike, I had spent big chunks of the year in the West Country racing wave kit.

The hooter sounded. Off we launched. We hit the same wave and while I got a soaring third free, ‘tip dip’ jump, he was taken down by the white water and had to swim. downstairs. He was in the bag. I gybed onto a decent swell, kicked off downwind and did at least 3 wiggle turns (don’t expect too much from me yet) and had to swim. Yesssssssss! It was in the bag. I repeated the circuit two more times before coming in, ready to be mobbed.

At the nearest lee shore.

Continually struggling to stay upwind is like having a badly paid job, which you hate and which you’re not very good at. It’s a load of miserable effort just to get nowhere.

Upwind Sailing – The Natural Barometer

It’s not over-simplifying the point to say that you can gauge someone’s overall competence in a given situation by how easily they stay upwind. If they’re holding station effortlessly you know that:
• they’re making most of their tacks and gybes or at least are wassertracking quickly.
• they know where the wind is and which point of sailing they’re on.
• they’re reading the conditions, clocking the winds and waves to their advantage.
• they’re making tweaks to the set-up to produce the right kind of power and the right stance for different conditions.

During my wave heat I was like a student with his first credit card – spend, spend, spend but without any real concept of how or when I was going to pay it all back – never as it turned out.

The Downwind Debt

The salutary lesson from that fateful day was that upwind sailing is a mission in two parts. It’s only when you start to relax in your upwind stance, that you can lift your head and really take in the surroundings and get tactical.

So the first of the challenges is purely technical. It’s the skill of getting your chosen kit to sail higher than a beam reach. But before that, we shall look quickly at the crucial topic of upwind wastage.

Don’t Waste It!

I’m on the beach at Kilcummin in Kerry. There’s 20-25 knots of side shore wind, a head high swell and lots of white water. Ryan is rigged, booted and ready. He walks to the water’s edge. He launches, bears away to try to plane. Gets out, turns round, and comes back in. He hasn’t really done anything and yet I have to walk 400m downstream to meet him.

The major advantage of improving your general upwind skill is that you end up on the kit that you want to be on to do whatever it is you really want to do – and not be forced onto the over-sized barge with the heap of flin that you need to tow you from the nearest lee shore.

Upwind competence bestows a positive attitude to the session. The confident pointer, be it a top wave sailor or amateur free-rider, explores the whole area, is happy to bear away before his launch point and sails with literal and mental freedom.

Those who struggle to stay upwind, sail as if they have a two pence piece clenched between their buttocks. They’re tense, nervous, continually trying to point the nose higher than it’s able to go and speak back to their start point. It’s this constant low-level angst that wrenches the spring from their step and the adrenalin from their heart.

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He dropped the board in about knee-deep water, adjusted a harness line and then ‘faffed’ about for ages trying to beach start. The revolutionary way water produced a downwind rip, which caught the fin and dropped him back tail downwind. He then stood downwind trying to catch it up and got on – another 100m lost.

He bore away to get planing. It didn’t happen, not enough power. But rather than head up again, he just kept on sailing out of the stupidly strong 20–25 off front and wind. Say goodbye to another 100m.

Some way out and still off the plane, he tried to tack, fell in and took about 10 minutes to water start another 50m of downwind drift.

Coming back in, he kept bearing away to catch waves but rather than head up between them, he stayed on a broad reach to try and catch the 100m lost.

The four basic lessons to be gleaned from that are:

**Walk Upwind**

Put some money in the bank. It’s now time to face a 25° off front and try, but without dropping too far upwind. If you can.

**Beach start – drop and go.** If you need to adjust foot-plate, harness, etc., do it on the dry land in the knowledge that as soon as you drop kit in the water, waves or no waves, the kit will drift downwind.

Then when you do launch the board, give yourself 2 seconds to get on. Unless the wind has suddenly dropped, there is no reason to delay. If you do get knocked out of shape, don’t keep changing the sail downwind but hold the board up, hold your ground, wait for the right moment and then go again. Even if you’re waring, holding the kit, keep shuffling upwind.

**Bear Away**

But then don’t keep dribbling off wind. Bearing away to get planing is absolutely the right thing to do and not enough people do it …

At a certain point of sail, you’ll have that surge of power you generate from suddenly changing direction. As you steer upwind, you have a boatload of forward power and if you don’t change direction, you’ll stall the board.

On all points of sailing, planing is a power-sharing act between the rider’s control and the rig. How much power are you carrying and what do have at your disposal to use it? Let’s look at the options.

### The Upwind Stance Template – Off the rail

There are two distinctly planing technique variations. One is the classic cross-alpine, slalom, free-ride, spindrift pow- er-oriented stance. The other is the theory/let’s-sell-a-technique based around a manoeuvre-oriented set-up.

### Sailing Upwind – Technical and Physical

Sailing a board close to the wind is all about … wait for the right moment, it’s absolutely all about waiting and that’s what this ‘not-quite-waterstarting-downwind-drift’ position, he’s just standing on the tail. The hips are low and back. Bent arms show he’s lost commitment. Rather than driving the board, overloading the fin. In the not so good shot, the wake washing over the windward edge is not a good sign. The harness and the hook is lined up with the front foot, which means he’s driving forward and not upwind. 

Losing drive, crabbing sideways, dying on the tail all come under the common heading of ‘stalling.’

Too bad, he’s just standing on the tail.

As you make upwind and feel the forward pull deep, ease the hips forward, feel the front of the harness lead up and actively drive the power and your body- weight into the mast. At the same time the loon’s share of power transfers to the back foot.

It is primarily a back foot stance. But how hard you push on the fin, if it all … that’s the ‘feel’ bit and depends how fast your going and the site of that fin.

Railing.

A crucial aspect of this stance is the lowered/ windward trim angle. As you head onto your close reach close shank fin of all about running a flat board. But then with the feet in outboard straps, dip toes and lift hubs to experiment with that angle. Like a dinghy, some boards like to ‘rail’ a little and ride best with the windward edge slightly up. The fin has a better angle of attack and the lowered edge bites for extra resistance. In truth what feels like ‘windward edge up’ is actually flat. If you depress the windward and the big fin stops lifting and the board tends to rail off wind.

Under-powered – over-powered.

With free-ride kit you generally aim to be powered up. When you see, the sail will provide a lot of forward grunt so you don’t have to adjust your body position but need to go upwind. Just sail between the feet.

Looking as if he’s still powered up near the rail, it’s hard to tell from their body angle what point of sail they’re on.

But as the wind drops, that’s where fine skill is required. As you slow down, the fin produces less lift. If you keep pushing against it with the same gusto, you’ll drive through the water and rail. The first reaction is to bear away to a little to increase speed and let the rig pull you forwards and inhale, and take pressure off the rail.

Under-powered the back foot can feel far too far back and too far outward, so you can return trim and comfort by moving in inward and forward of the strap and with more equal weighting on both feet.

**DON’T STALL!**

Losing drive,耷拉着水线，呆在风平浪静的地区， continually heading over the tail and the rig trying to sail too close to the wind too slowly. That in turn may be down to a dodgy stance and losing drive, crabbing sideways, dying on the tail all come under the common heading of ‘stalling.’

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THE UPWIND STANCE – FREESTYLE AND WAVE BOARDS

You’re set up to manoeuvre. Wave and freestyle sails have a flat profile and don’t produce too much sideways force, which is just as well as tiny freestyle fins and wave fins offer minimal resistance and lift – their role is to add a little directional stability and, in the case of the latter, drive through banked turns. The trick to getting upwind on these boards is to pretend you haven’t got a fin. The tail is a no go zone for weight or pressure. Hold the rig upright (don’t take it back) and think of sailing 100% off the front foot. Use that front foot to depower the WINDWARD edge, which is your one source of resistance. Speed is absolutely your friend on this kit, so don’t try and stuff it up too much, too fast and low. When you do get up to full speed, the fin will offer a little lift, but still be gentle with it.

On big, rig free-ride kit, it’s rig back, hips forward, back foot pressure with the windward edge UP. On freestyle or wave kit, it’s rig forward, FRONT FOOT pressure, windward edge DOWN.

THE UPWIND JOURNEY

I recommend learning upwind sailing with a daggerboard. Not much gets past it, however subtle you are. It’s a bit of a blunt instrument but gets over (sometimes quite spectacularly) the concept that the foil doesn’t just resist the rig but also fights back and, in the case of the latter, drive through banked turns. The free-ride upwind technique is similar to an angle enough to direct your equipment.

Long board racers very quickly learn to adapt their style to sail small kit upwind because they’ve become especially good at generating and balancing lift.

From a dagger you move to a free-ride board and a big fin. The advantage of the big fin is that you feel its resistance and lift at slow speeds. When you’re starting out, you tend to sail more slowly and are very grateful for those lower gears. Fin size is something of a litmus test, in that the better you get and the faster you sail, the smaller the fin you can use. (It’s only true up to a certain point in that every freestyle board needs a minimum size fin to make it work at all, no matter how fast you’re going.)

FREESTYLE

EXPERIMENTING WITH ANGLES

To achieve perfection, you have to experiment rather than sail to a formula. It’s especially true of upwind board angles. Do you know what angle your board likes to be ridden upwind? There is no one answer. It all depends on the water state, the design of board, size of fin, how powered up you are. The answer is to experiment to find that position where the board bites and tracks. If the windward edge is too high, air can get under the board and cause spin out. If the windward edge is down on some boards, the footstraps catch and the fin stops working.

Sailing too slowly. A real problem if you’re on a small kit. When you’re actually slipping gradually sideways in a continuous 4 wheel skid, accompanied by lots of gargling and sucking noises. In extreme cases you lose the tail altogether and spin out. Basically the sideways forces are overpowering the resistance. Here, in order of likelihood, are the reasons – starting with pilot error.

Continually stalling... Sailing descries the moment when smooth flow is disrupted. It’s when the nose is pointing upwind, but you’re actually slipping gradually sideways in a continuous 4 wheel skid, accompanied by lots of gargling and sucking noises. In extreme cases you lose the tail altogether and spin out. Basically the sideways forces are overpowering the resistance. Here, in order of likelihood, are the reasons – starting with pilot error.

Sailing too close to the wind. Foot off a few degrees and release the board. There – that was easy. The free-ride upwind technique is similar to angling the rig back and driving through the boom to push the board forward through the shallows prior to a beach start.

No technique article would be complete without a mention of Roscoe. Ross Williams, as you might expect from the Formula World Champion, is pretty cute at making any board work. The fastest I’ve ever sailed upwind was on a 38...
By far the most common reason for ending up constantly downwind is being under-powered on too small kit. I hate to deflate my own race but it’s usually big blakes. Big blakes love to be powered and love even more that feeling of driving harder and harder against a powerful fin to get more and more lift. The problem is they grow over-reliant on the fin and the support of the sail. When the wind drops, rather than come inboard, stand upright, bear away a little and release those pressures, they stay committed and stall. ‘Downwind Dave’, a good friend of JC is one such blake who loves his windsurfing but doesn’t get his nickname for nothing. He’s a big blake. In the pic below he’s looking dandy and actually staying upwind but from the windward rake of the mast and the depressed windward edge, you can see he’s over-committed. Staying upwind in the lift will come from sailing more on the toes.

The angle your heels make contact with the board determines how much sideways pressure you can exert on the fin. Any aspect of your set-up that drops your hips and leaves your legs parallel to the wave, namely a low boom and/or very long lines, aggravates the stalls problem. As they approach the upwind leg, racers often shorten their lines to lift the hips and bring their weight more over the board, which also encourages the windward edge to lift. Using a small fin, therefore, it’s key to keep the hips high with a relatively high boom so your feet press down on the sail not straight against the fin.

Always sailing big kit can make you over-reliant on the fin. For many, it’s their first port of call when they want to get planing or stay upwind. Give it a hoof and, like a ‘torquay’ diesel engine, it grinds them upwind.

Over-shooting. I wish I had meant to highlight this paragraph with a pyrotechnic display because this is the COMMONEST mistake of all. As you try to climb higher insistently you may pull in harder on the back hand to power up. If you need to pinch up a round a mark, and if you have a monster fin or dagger, it can work. However under normal circumstances, if you over-shoot, you increase the lateral pull in the sail and over-power the fin even more. For example, the best way to climb higher is to twist the hips towards the nose and ‘feather’ the sail (de-power slightly). As the sails feather, the effort moves back a little and drives you upwind. Harness Line Position is crucial in this regard. If they’re too far back, you can’t sheet out. If you’ve always sheeted right in, the effort stays forward and wants to bear you away.

Always losing ground – never get a feeling of pointing. As soon as you heel upwind you stop. It sounds primarily like too much rig for the board and fin. (Perhaps you took those recommended sail sizes literally, went for the biggest but didn’t up the fin size?) For efficient pointing on freeride kit, because this is the WAY TO POINT – but only if that power is matched by the fin. That’s why leading a wave board up with a monster rig it doomed to failure because neither the fin nor the soft rails can take it.

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