At one time it was widely believed that world class tennis players had paranormal reflexes, which allowed them to return opponents’ ferociously fast serves. Yet when measured, their reflexes were normal. Super slow-motion cameras revealed the best players began moving to where the ball would land prior to the server’s racquet hitting the ball. They did this by observing the way their opponent was standing, the placement of her shoulders, and her backswing. Their ability to predict was the secret, not any innate physical advantage.

For decades, academics believed chess players had genetically different memories from the rest of us. Through a series of clever experiments, cognitive scientists discovered that chess players had normal memories; they remembered more because of the special way they organized their thoughts during games.

Both examples reveal a series of “scripts” running through the heads of experts when engaged in their specialized tasks. The same is true of firefighters, pilots, professors, and plumbers. It’s true of sailboat racers as well. What do you think about when racing? It turns out, this matters quite a bit.

Last summer my racing article series covered the basics of racing (PHRF in particular), including boat selection, boat speed, and building a deep memory through written memos after each race. This summer, we’ll look at what needs to be going through your head in those precious hours spent on the race course.

As I watch new skippers race, I can see which scripts are active, and which are silent. At times, when other boats are moving well and you aren’t, the race can feel like sand slipping through your fingers as you search for what to do to get back in the hunt. The best skippers keep the right scripts readily at hand and seamlessly switch to the one needed at the right moment.

Just as a great tennis player loads the “serve projection program” into her head before the ball is coming her way, the great skipper thinks about exactly what matters at each point in the race.

**Question #1:**
“Are we fast?”

Boat speed is everything. Ken Read, successful skipper and TV commentator for the recent America’s Cup noted that “Boat speed is the tactician’s
best friend.” In the 2010 America’s Cup, Larry Ellison’s team made tactical errors, suffered equipment failures, missed a big wind shift, and had to play catch-up in both races. But none of this mattered, because they had boat speed. They won in a rout. Boat speed conquers all.

Before we can answer “Are we fast?,” we need some facts. Let’s begin as the gun goes off, and we cross the starting line. First, do we have clean air? If not, shame on us; we need to tack away or get in a lane where we aren’t blanketed. Then, do we have the boat balanced well? Are we heeling too much or too little? Do we have the proper fore-and-aft trim for our point of sail and wind conditions?

Once those adjustments are set, we need to predict our boat speed. Do we believe we should be fast in these wind, water, and point of sail conditions? Or are we in a combination that is difficult for us? Should we be sailing faster—right now—than the boats sailing with us?

The only real way to know if you are fast is when racing head-to-head against boats with similar PHRF ratings. This is why America’s Cup teams, if possible, have a “two boat campaign.” They know you only test boat speed with another boat racing next to you. The first team to try a wing sail for the America’s Cup built two identical catamarans and equipped one with conventional sails and one with a wing. Only then, in head-to-head racing, did they choose the wing.

Rather than looking at a knot meter to see if we have boat speed, we look at our competition, using a “velocity prediction program” to predict our speed against competitors. We derive this from racing, carefully noting who is fast, when, and in what conditions. This is our signpost, our check point. Without it, we aren’t racing.

If we are supposed to be fast and are, fine. On to the next question (appearing next month in this column). If not, we need to find out why. Start with the sails. Are the right sails hoisted for these conditions? Is the genoa halyard too firm or slack? Is the headsail turning block set correctly? Jib sheet adjusted properly? Backstay tension appropriate? At the same time, someone does the same with the main, which may have even more controls. This is where we use the knot meter. Make a change, let the boat settle in, watch the knot meter. Trim for speed with the knot meter.

We’ll do more work on boat speed next month, then on to our second question, which takes us in a different direction.

About the Author: Jim Schrager has raced big boats for more than 20 years in Southern Lake Michigan, winning BotY twice and many port-to-port races. He now races with his two sons and friends out of St. Joseph, MI, and as a day job, teaches a popular strategy course at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

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