The Mind's Eye in Racing: Part 3
by James E. Segrave

We are working on key questions all crews should ask as soon as they cross the starting line. Starting with "Are we fast?" we added "Are we going in the right direction?" In this column we tackle one of the toughest questions to answer.

Your crew should be drilled in reefing the mainsail, dousing headsails, and setting storm sails. Photo by Dan Phelps

Question #3: "Is the wind changing?"

As you are learning to be a better skipper, concentrate on boat speed and course navigation, so you can rapidly improve these two key skills so that they become more automatic. Then you can open the door to this third script of weather changes.

To think about the weather on our boat, we have an experienced small boat skipper, Michael, who in addition to trimming the main, watches for wind on the lake. This is a huge task; you can't just jump into it in the middle of a race. You have to be prepared and collect lots of data along the way. Of course, you'll check wind forecasts on the web a few days before and on race day, start to observe broad patterns of wind behavior, and overlay those on what you see on the race course prior to the start.

During the race, Michael looks in all directions at the water and other boats ahead and astern. Our weather hound wonders who is going especially fast or slow, hinting at different weather ahead or behind. Examples include boats heeling more than most, standing straight up, or sailing in unusual directions.

We were leading our section in light air and rounded the mark for the next leg to find boats close hauled sailing in many different directions, not just the two you'd normally expect with port or starboard tacks. This almost always means one thing: the air is going away. By not being surprised, but forewarned, we positioned ourselves to best wait out the lack of wind.

Begin watching and talking about broad patterns of wind direction changes. If the wind moves clockwise, say from a northerly to an easterly, we call that "clocking." If the wind moves counterclockwise, we call that "backing." Look at seven-day weather forecasts (on sailflow.com or windguru.com), and gauge the incidence of clocking versus backing in your area. Where we sail, generally the wind clocks.

Many times weather forecasters have the pattern right — that is, a front will be arriving bringing changes — but not the timing. When this happens, the forecast will be wrong but if you know what is coming, you can adjust during the race.

It is important to acknowledge two things about the wind and water conditions you will experience while racing: First, the weather is of vital importance, especially on long distance races; and second, no one ever gets the weather perfectly correct for every race. So how frequently does weather count in long distance racing? If you search for articles on the 2013 Transpac and the 2012 Chicago Mac online (as well as in the two Bermuda-bound race reports on pages 72 and 74), you'll learn how the races were won based on superb weather forecasting.

The good news is that even if you don't yet have a highly refined weather eye, in regular series races around the marks held at the same time of day, weather is usually not the primary determinant of success over a season's worth of effort. That usually falls to the team with the best boat speed and top-level navigation around the course. However, for long distance events, changes in the weather are often the deciding factor.

One final comment: develop a constant awareness of potentially dangerous weather headed your way, and have a plan to deal with it no matter what it brings. Your crew should be drilled in reefing the mainsail, dousing headsails, and setting storm sails. As you are learning, err on the side of caution. When aware that bad weather is on the way, change down and reef early rather than late. At times, "sailing into the storm" makes for a great racing yarn. But more frequently, shortening sail to stay under control is more likely the winning move.

See the September SpinSheet for the final part of this four-part series. spinsheet.com