This summer, we’ve considered three key questions expert skippers ask as they start a race: Are we fast? Are we going in the right direction? And is the wind changing? We now encounter the most unusual question, so unusual, in fact, you might call it strange.

**Question #4: “Is something strange happening?”**

We all run a script in our minds of how the game will end, be it chess, tennis, football, or a sailboat race. That script provides powerful foreshadowing of how the contest will progress and has a big effect on our decision-making. This fourth question challenges that script.

Many times your prediction about the race will be accurate. But at other times, you’ll be making decisions on automatic pilot, and this can cause lost opportunities. This fourth question can save you from making broad errors, the kind every other sailor in your harbor will notice and wonder how you made such an obviously dumb mistake.

In one race, we were ahead and had just rounded the second mark in our preferred heavy air. We knew the compass course to the next mark and headed right for it. We had trouble finding the mark on visual, as we were sailing into the setting sun, and wondered if our hand-held GPS was providing good data. We were going fast but started to get worried. Why couldn’t we find the mark? It’s been too long. We should have been there by now.

Nervously, I looked behind and saw the fleet, led by our arch rival, heading way up on us, maybe 20 degrees higher. What were they doing? They were heading to the mark. But what about our compass? It was simply wrong. After a few years of finding the marks by following other boats or on visual, we were now in the lead. The running script in our head had changed, and we hadn’t noticed. That day, we had no one to follow, and had no idea that our compass was sticking, leading us astray. We changed the script right away, bought a new compass the next day, but didn’t win the race.

Another time, it was our wind, with lumpy seas, and we knew we would win. That was the script.

Out on the course a giant freighter was anchored, lying just beyond the outer edge of the downwind leg. We rounded the mark nicely out in front of our rivals and gybed out toward that glorious ship. As we did, our very experienced helmsman Ray noted: “You guys need to call the gybe point for me.” We confirmed.

The script in our heads was, “This race is ours, we’ve won.” The reality was that we wildly overstood the gybe.
mark while talking about all manner of non-racing nonsense and taking a good, long look at that big, fascinating ship. When we finally woke up, one competitor had slipped by. We didn’t win.

In the video “American Sailors,” which is a superb production of the 100th Chicago Mackinac Race (find it on YouTube), Brian Torresen, a highly accomplished competitor, notes: “You can never be far enough ahead in a Mac Race.” He’s right, and assume the same in your course races. Never let a script enter your head that has you far enough ahead. You can relax when you cross the finish line. Until then, stay in the race.

We were blanketed by one of our chief rivals right after a start as he headed inshore to a mark. We could have fallen off and made a lane for ourselves but chose to tack over his transom and out to sea. It turned out we sailed against an offshore current, and he sailed alongside it. When we met up, he was several boat lengths ahead, as the current was far less severe inshore along his route. Current in Lake Michigan is quite rare. But when it appears, it can be invisible if you are not looking for it.

What develops with a good team are sailors always busy, always looking, always running scripts in their heads, alert that something strange may be happening. Mostly, on the best boats, it isn’t the helmsman as he or she is busy driving. You need to develop several sets of well-practiced eyes, ears, and minds looking out for how you are doing and what lies ahead.

On some boats I’ve crewed on, one person drives, makes all the calls, has no time to explain, and is too busy to take in much new knowledge during the race. If they won the race, they were brilliant. If not, the cause was bad luck.

The explosion of knowledge explaining expert performance allows us to understand what separates consistent winners from everyone else. That difference is due to understanding the mind’s eye in racing. Build on this, and you can set yourself up to make the best decisions in those precious hours we spend on the race course. Sailing, like any other intellectually rigorous pursuit, requires a dedication to improvement. For the team willing to do that, winning is well within reach.

About the Author: James E. Schrager has raced for more than 20 years in Southern Lake Michigan, winning BotY twice, most port-to-port races at least once, and crewed on a section-winning boat in the Mac. He now races with his two sons and friends out of St. Joseph, MI. In his day job, he teaches a popular course in strategy at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.