

Jaguar Cup
Interview with Winner Jud Smith
By Dave Powlison

Miami's Key Biscayne YC is host to the Jaguar Winter series, a four-event Etchells series that runs from early December to early February. The best three of the four events—Piana Cup, South Atlantics, Florida States and Midwinters--count, and competitors do everything possible to avoid burning that valuable throw-out early in the series. With a 17th in the Piana Cup, Marblehead, Mass. sailor Jud Smith had little choice and needed an unbroken string of top finishes to end up in the top of the fleet. Along with his crew, which over the course of the series included Henry Frazier, Jim Porter and Mike Craig, Smith reeled off a third and two firsts in the remaining three events, winning the 64-boat series by 4.5 points over their closest rival.

What happened in that first event?

It was just a bad from the start. The wind was really unsettled for the whole event, but on the first day, especially, I really felt I was in the dark about the weather, which is why we did so lousy. It was so cloudy, and as the clouds went over the race course, the wind was all over the place. The bottom line is, once the cloud goes through, the wind generally goes back to its gradient direction. But I was fooled into thinking we were getting a sea breeze effect. The clouds brought a little cell of wind that a bunch of us who went right never got, and there was no coming back from that race. Later on in that event, we had an OCS, and once that happens, it's all over.

How did that affect your plans from then on?

After that regatta, I made a decision that I was going to have a lot better understanding of what to expect from the gradient winds, which is what drives the winter weather in Florida and most of the East Coast, except when it's really hot.

What did you do to understand it better?

I used a weather service out of Newport [RI] called Real Weather, run by Susan Genett (www.realwx.com). I've used it and other services, such as Ken Campbell's Commander's Weather (www.commandersweather@compuserve.com) in the past. A lot of the pro racers use those sites. Another great one, and it's free, is the NOAA website (www.noaa.gov). It's got some great 3-D graphics that show the wind every six hours. You don't need a service in smaller regattas with, say, 20 boats, because the course is smaller, the lines are smaller, and it's easier to switch sides of the course. But with more boats, bigger courses, and longer lines, you're committed when you come off the line. It's very hard to undo mistakes in a big fleet.

Did that change your strategy?

At the beginning of that first race of the Midwinters, I remember being extremely concerned about the situation—looking upwind and not having any idea what to do. I got burned in the same situation in a race here last year by going left. What I learned is, just because it didn't work before doesn't mean it won't work again. The default should have

been, when I don't know, go to the middle. That's the way I sailed the rest of that regatta.

Your back was clearly against the wall after that first event. How did you keep that from affecting your sailing?

I didn't worry about the fact that it was a series. How we ended up in the series overall was going to be what it was going to be. After the first event, I was too deep to concern myself with that, so I just focused on the regatta at hand, knowing that whoever was going to win would probably do so with mostly top-three finishes. When we came out of the South Atlantic [the second event] with a third, I knew we had a keeper.

And your crew?

Other than getting a good night's sleep and preparing the same way every day for every race, there isn't anything I do other than be satisfied that everything's off our minds and that we're prepared.

Did your early series situation make you more conservative on starts?

Having a terrible first regatta and not wanting to take myself out of the series, I couldn't afford to be OCS. I'd rather finish 15th than get an OCS, and it cost me a couple of times because I had to hold back from the start a little. The least risky start is somewhere in the middle of the line, from the windward quarter to the leeward quarter. I will not start at the weather end of the line unless it's a small fleet, and I will not start at the leeward end unless there's nobody there and/or it's a small fleet. It's too risky.

That must have occasionally put you in less-than-optimum situations. What do you do when you discover you're in a bad position at the start?

You have to be patient. There's two things I do. First, I try to hold that lane as long as I can, but I don't sit there going pathetically slow. There will be a time when I get so much bad air, when the boat in front of me or to leeward of me is affecting my wind, that I'll sail lower just to keep my speed up and wait for an opportunity to get a lane out of there. Second, when I commit to port tack I'd better be able to sail for a while. It's ok to duck some boats, but I don't want to make radical ducks, and I don't want to have to tack back onto starboard again if I can help it. I did get pinged around in one race in the middle of this series, and I don't recommend it. I was 17th in that race.

What's your crew doing to help you in those situations?

I always have my middle guy helping me with how I'm doing against the boats to weather of me, behind my back. I can see what's going on to leeward. I want to know about our speed, our height and if we can tack when we want to, when a lane opens up.

When you end up in dirty air, such as can happen right after the start, are there things you try to avoid doing?

There are a couple of mistakes people make. When they're in dirty air, the boat in front of them bends the breeze, and they try to sail too high. If you're going to hold that lane, you're going to be sailing a header relative to the boats in front. It's not that you're set up poorly, it's that they're affecting your breeze. If you just get used to that idea, and

you're sailing three to four degrees lower but still keeping your boat going, that's way better than trying to pinch and go three-quarter throttle to hold that lane. You'll never catch up doing that. Also, if I'm in the back of the pack, I try not to get myself caught in a group of boats.

Do you set the boat up any differently in those situations?

If I feel like I'm underpowered, I might ease the backstay a little bit, but because they're affecting my air, the basic thing I do is sail in the wind I have, meaning I'm more headed than them, but I don't get hung up about it. I obviously look for an opportunity to clear my air, but if there is no opportunity, you've got to keep sailing fast, and I think that's the difference between first and tenth—not slowing down, not giving up.

The Etchells is known as a boat with ultimate adjustability. Can you describe what you do?

I do less than people think, although I'll spend some time up to the five-minute gun thinking about it. I'll make some automatic changes if conditions change—take two turns off the lowers, or if it looks like the breeze is dropping a bit, put another chock behind the mast. I'll do the same thing going down toward the leeward mark, trying to prepare myself for the next leg. But our boat is set up so that we can adjust it going upwind just as easily, with a mast adjuster that allows us to change the mast location at the partners without anyone coming off the rail. We spent a lot of time before the regatta fitting a new step chock so that everything was working perfectly. There's not much play, we can still get things in and out, and it doesn't pop out on its own.

If you had to sum up trim on a boat like an Etchells, where would you start?

I'd say getting the headstay tension right. It's really critical. That's a function of backstay tension, mainsheet tension, chocking, mast-step position, as well as wind speed. Obviously, the more the wind comes up, the more the headstay sags because of the force of the wind. Then you have to offset that by either tensioning the backstay, but if you just do that, maybe the mast will bend too much, and you're not really supporting the headstay any more. That's when you've got to change the chocks. You've got to move all of them together, and I always think the goal is not just to power up or depower the main but to have the headstay set correctly for the windspeed and still have everything else set correctly. That's the one thing I'd key on, much like I would on a Mumm 30, a Sonar, Yngling or any other small keelboat.

Sidebar:

Navigating the NOAA website for wind speed and direction

Depending on your area, you may need to hunt around a bit, but start by clicking on the map on the homepage that is for current weather watches and warnings. From there, you can go to your area. You'll find good maps under "experimental forecast image" as well as "models."