

THE PHILOSOPHY OF RACING

It's been said that anytime there's more than one sailboat on a body of water, a race is in progress. This notion probably reveals more about human nature than it does about sailors, but when you consider that the soul of racing stems from the inclination to optimise a sailing vessel's performance, there's an undeniable element of truth to the statement.

It's not whether you win, but how well you sail that provides the true measure for a performance-minded sailor.

Were the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria racing when they came across the Atlantic in 1492? Probably not, but you can bet at a least a few of Christopher Columbus's crew were working hard to get one vessel ahead of the other from time to time. Putting your competitive juices to work on board sailboats is meant—above all—to be fun, but it also serves to validate that you know what you're doing out on the water.

The great thing about sailboat racing is its protean nature—it's possible in so many forms. You can race by yourself, or aboard a boat with a bunch of friends. You can compete in a lumbering, decades-old design, or zip across the racecourse aboard an ultra-light craft that'll barely support you when at rest. You can race around the buoys in the sanctuary of your home waters or go point-to-point across an ocean in a distance event. You can sail against competitors in identical craft, or you can compete under a handicapping format against boats of all shapes and sizes. And anyone of almost any age or physical ability can participate.

There really is an immense variety in this sport, which ultimately adds substance and dimension to the pursuit once referred to as the sport of kings.

Yes sailboat racing, unlike many other organised sports, offers an arena where novices can go head to head with seasoned professional racers. That mixture isn't always popular with everyone in the game, but there's no denying the fact that it promotes learning in a unique way that can excite the participants and accelerate the sharing of knowledge.

Learning a little bit each time we race is what keeps most sailors coming back to the sport.

Isn't it knowledge, after all—or at least the chance to learn incrementally more each time we sail—that ultimately keeps all of us coming back to our respective watery playgrounds whether we're racers or not? If you buy this reasoning, then it's hard to discount the opportunity for accelerated learning that can be derived through racing. I've heard more than a few sailors say that they never appreciated the many nuances of sail trim and boat performance that exist until they got a little racing experience under their belts. That's not a knock on cruising or non-racing recreational sailing, it's simply a statement in support of the benefits that can be had from racing. Optimising a boat's capacity to respond to and use wind power is what performance sailing is all about.

Of course the competitive side of the sport isn't for everyone, and that's just fine. But if you're game to improve your performance and learn more about what makes a sailboat work, or if you just want to see what all the fuss is about when two or more boats line up to see which crew can better optimise their vessel's performance, get out there and give it a try.