

Splitting into divisions: It seems that many regattas are becoming so popular that the best way to manage the starting line is the split the fleet into divisions. Yet, while this makes the race management easier, the method of dividing the fleet often leads to less racing and frustration for the sailors. Now I am a full believer that if a regatta is “good” the people will come and if it is not, they will avoid it, but the “free market economy” of regatta participation is influence by many other factors besides race management, so I offer my thoughts on how to split into divisions in a manner that can enhance the sailing experience.

The first decision should be to slip or not to split. Regatta organizers and race committees need to have a frank discussion before registration opens about what can be realistically handled on the line. Maybe the fleet needs to be capped at a certain size. Or maybe extra RC personnel can be set up to create a mid-line boat or two in order to have the whole fleet on the line. This is what Newport YC did at the Area A Bemis qualifiers in Rhode Island earlier this year. The result was more races than a split fleet would have allowed under the weather conditions. Both capping the fleet and the split line start are valid options for fleet management for regatta organizers but require pre-planning before they can be pulled off.

If the decision is made to split the fleet, here are some factors to consider. First of all, there is no rule that states each division must sail against all the others the same amount of time. While it is often considered “fairest,” there are a lot of factors that go into sail boat racing and in my experience the greatest equalizer is the number of races. The more races that are completed allow the better talent to rise to the top. When the RC tires to follow a pattern that switches the match-ups after each race, it often reduces the number of races they are able to pull off in a day, especially when one flight has a general recall. One way of balancing the divisions and keeping the racing moving, is set a daily pattern. For example, yellow and green will race against each other all day. On the second day, yellow and red are matched up. And on the final day, it is yellow and pink. While this format may not yield the same number of races against each fleet, it will keep racing moving. Ultimately that is what the sailors came to your event for.

If you have to split an Opti fleet into divisions, it seems to me you would split them into their natural divisions – white, blue, and red – and the sailors would sail in those divisions all regatta. After all, at the end of the regatta, prizes are handed out for standings in the divisions. Why shouldn’t the sailors compete directly against the people in their own divisions all the time? The benefit of this split is more sailing. When the breeze comes up, the RC can send White fleet (typically the younger and lighter sailor) in, but keep racing with the more experienced blue and red fleets. More races, better regatta. Of course this would prevent the awarding of an overall prize. Maybe I am naïve, but does a 12 year old really need two trophies from one event?

In conclusion, when the size of your regatta fleets starts to get big, figure out what you can safely handle and cap your regatta at that number. If you can manage a starting line with multiple start boats, do it. If not, when you split your fleet, don’t be afraid to

think outside of the box and look at different options to accomplish that. The ultimate goal is more racing.