



PHRF PERSPECTIVE
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Narrow Rating Band Racing: Progress Update

In the September 2000 PHRF Perspective column, we discussed a way of improving PHRF racing and making the competition within each class better and more tactical. Like One Design racing. It was suggested that with similar boats and narrower rating band classes, ratings become more level and inequities nearly go away.

The idea was to have race committees take a bold step and establish more than the usual two or three PHRF classes. Even if the classes are smaller than what we are used to, the competition would be better. Racers in slower rated boats could stay in touch tactically with the faster rated boats in their respective classes. When the class rating spread is about 30 seconds per mile or greater, the faster rated boats just get too far out ahead to maintain any tactical element in the race.

To be specific in this concept, instead of two classes with 10 or 15 boats in each with the typical 0-120 and 123+ classes, why not specify three, four or even five classes that represent the "rating clusters" that are usually apparent. For example, we may see a group of 0-35 boats, 51-72 boats, 90-120 boats (Olsons & 3030s), a group of 138-159 boats and 174 to 210. So, if each class had at least five starters or more, the plan will work. There are nearly always other boats entered to integrate into these classes so nothing is cast in stone. And of course, if the turnout is light, this plan goes overboard.

The idea of narrower rating bands and more classes is as much a question of gaining mindshare and making R/Cs and PROs aware of this concept and the on-the-water benefits as it is an organizational challenge.

Well, if new ideas are mice, then established ways of doing things are elephants and they're easily scared off (in a manner of speaking). However, change comes to those with patience. A lot of patience. The next spring after that September 2000 PHRF Perspective column, I contacted a local racer's website to try to develop a way of registering each racer to accommodate communication and plan which events each racer wanted to participate in. If we could plan on having, perhaps, 6 or 8 racers in the 100 to 120 something rating range, then the Race Committee could be petitioned for a separate start. And, the same goes for other rating groups.

This spreads the responsibility for narrower class breaks to the racers. To help in this process it's necessary to get racers to communicate what races are on their calendars and organize a method of communication. Later that summer, I handed out notices after the Wed. evening races at the YC to go to that website (www.yachtracersonline.com) and register. The site is used by a number of one-design fleets for the same purpose and there was an e-mail capability that would accomplish the communication we needed. After several attempts and a bit of cajoling, we had seventeen of some of the more active racers in the area signed up. In the Fall, it became more difficult to contact additional racers to sign up.

I went to the local PHRF Board in my area to present the idea. It was met with a tepidly favorable reaction with some reservations. It seemed the consensus was that this was a Race Committee decision and an organizational and Fleet responsibility. But the idea made more sense to some. Earlier, I had presented the idea to the regional PHRF Board. No one disagreed that PHRF racing would be better with narrower classes, but a few voiced their preference for larger classes to race in. If this work is done to make the racing better, more racers will come out and the fleets will grow in size. As a result, more and narrower rating band classes can be accommodated.

Last Fall, following a discussion with a R/C member of the host club for the Area B PHRF Championships it seemed he was attempting to incorporate the narrow rating band concept within limits of the event and the number of entrants.

This Spring, there was support for the concept and some allies gained including the new Chairman of the local PHRF Board. We presented the concept to the Sail Committees at several of the Yacht Clubs in our area.

Discussion ensued on the racer's chat room at www.yrrc.com. It was clear we needed to organize the racers. The Area Chairman came up with a "Racer's Summit" meeting. He put in a lot of work to get a venue, prepare an agenda and organize it all. We posted a notice of the meeting on the chat room on April 2 of this year. More than 34 racers and some Race Committee people showed up! We divided the fleet into four groups. We attempted to select fleet captains. That's not easy as there were few volunteers.

A couple of other ideas came out of that meeting. In our area, there were just too many events. Overall, attendance was down as racers were spread too thin. There was consensus to reduce the number of events. To accomplish that (YCs are loath to give up a date on the calendar) I proposed some of the regattas become "silver events." The idea is that these events are restricted to newbies and "Cruising Class racers" as a way to get them to race windward-leeward races without the handicap adjustments inherent with the Cruising Class.

We also discussed next year's race calendar. A few of the local events were scheduled on the same weekend as some of the large regional events. We're trying to fix that. Though I think a "stay at home" regatta is actually a cool idea, the decision needs to be made regarding scheduling larger local events against major Regional events.

Finally, the sailing site, www.yrrc.com decided to help by attempting to devise a calendar where racers could sign up to race and see how many others (and their ratings) were interested in doing a specific regatta. It has taken a while but the YRRC Calendar is slowly being implemented. Racers can sign up and share that commitment to race a series or regatta with others.

Racers in the 141 to 165 rating range recently missed a chance to petition for a class and a start at a major local Regatta. The Race Committee, based on light turnout last year limited the entries to ratings of 150 and below. That left out a group of very competitive racers. Had the Calendar been finished sooner (and had we thought of coordinating our participation) we could have presented a group of 6 or more racers and asked for a start! Well, at least the lessons are learned and there is always next year.

Be that as it may, our efforts have made many racers aware of this issue. A few PROs and R/C members are thinking along these lines. We realize there are limitations on implementing a couple of extra classes with narrower rating bands. Turnout, politics, time and manpower available to start several classes and a natural resistance to change all conspire to slow progress.

PHRF ratings work so much better when the boats are similar in speed potential and size. Narrower rating bands used as a guide for configuring class breaks for sailboat racing makes good sense. It's unfortunate that spreading the word doesn't just pop the cork off the Genie bottle! Still, some progress is better than nothing. The next challenge is to reinforce the idea of communication and get the racers to use the Calendar to plan participation.

Use this progress report as a blueprint of what's needed to get things going where you race. Try to get the ball rolling. Speak to the racers and Race Committee people at your club and in your harbor and spread the word that you want to make PHRF racing better and more "level." In your area, the cork in the Genie bottle may come loose easier than others. Also, be sure to volunteer for Race Committee or Sail Committee duty to help provide the kind of racing you want. The more active and involved you are, the more influence you will have!

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