

# Slalom Secrets: Tuning, Training and Competition Motivation

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We all love going fast; blasting back and forth, racing mates and trying to get that little bit of extra speed out of a gybe. For these very reasons slalom racing is pretty popular, many of us taking part in it at national, local or even a very informal level. Boards is joined by some of the UKWA's top slalom racers in a short 'Slalom Secrets' series, which aims to give you inside scoop on how to improve your slalom skills.

**In this third part we will cover tuning, training and why people compete.**



BSA slalom action.

## Tuning and Training

**Simon Pettifer:** When I go for a sail I try to have some sort of aim, this could be gybing practice. I'll find two buoys close together (easy in Poole harbour), and gybe a lot, keep going until I cannot gybe any longer, this is the only way to improve – keep doing it! It's also good to do this exercise with other sailors, if you make the two buoys really close together it makes for some fun sailing.

As for tuning I just try different things, maybe try a couple of different fin combinations to see which is faster; you need someone else to judge your speed against, or a GPS unit where you can go home and download your tracks from the day and see at what points you were going fastest.

It could be the downhaul, try a little more or less see and what happens. Once you find the sail at its best for you try to note where your downhaul is set to, so that next time you sail you can rig it just how you like it. The

outhaul is the easiest to play about with, the adjustable outhaul systems let you sail around changing the settings all the time, letting you see where you want your outhaul for the appropriate wind strengths.

Sailing on your own is great for some things but to improve your speeds I think you need to sail with other people. We all know it sucks to be passed by other people so we try harder, if you get passed by your mate, go in pull on an inch of downhaul go back out and see if you can beat him; if doesn't work try changing your fin – put a smaller one in – it's all about finding out what makes a difference.



Simon Pettifer

**Simon Cofield:** Sail – I use a lot of downhaul, this allows you to accelerate in big gusts whilst the sail twists off. It's important to have an adjustable outhaul. When the wind is up and down I'll be adjusting my outhaul between heats, so I'm fully powered in the race. Board – You need a good fin, I have my straps as far apart as they go for control, deck plate position as above.

I do a bit of fitness training in the winter, on the water I do some practice racing around some of the marks in Poole harbour with Si Pettifer.

**Key Greenslade:** Downhaul I rig dependent on the wind but always enough to get a nice amount of twist in the sail, I use very little outhaul until I get completely stacked but by then probably thinking about changing down. It's also really important to find the right fin for you, your board and the conditions.

It's really hard to replicate the conditions whilst racing as you would almost never sail that fast that close to that many people, when it comes to gybing you have wakes going in all directions space to find etc etc. So the best form of practice is to race. There are fun slalom series being run at Hayling, Poole and Weymouth now so get involved, and if they are too far away get your own going, it's so easy. There is always a buoy to race around and if you do it in pursuit style, kit and ability doesn't matter, everyone has fun.



Ant Baker. Image credit Dave White.

**Ant Baker:** As a chubber I like lots of downhaul and not much outhaul, this means I get great twist and a nice full body to hold my board down.

As I have to work pretty much everyday I get very little time to practice, in fact the last year I have only sailed slalom boards at events 😊

**James Dinsmore:** When it comes to tuning your sail the single most important variable is the amount of downhaul you put on. It is really important to experiment and try to learn to feel what it is like to have too much or too little downhaul. If you have too much downhaul the sail tends to feel heavy and too powerful and when a gust comes you may feel as if you are getting lifted uncontrollably onto your toes. With my current iSonic board and Severne Reflex sails combination I notice that if I am under-downhailed it feels as if the nose of the board is being pushed down into the water. It feels 'sticky' and as if it might catch on chop. If I put a small amount of more downhaul (may only need as little as 5mm) the nose rides higher, the stickiness completely disappears and the board feels like it will make it's way over even the nastiest bit of chop. When you have cranked on too much downhaul the sail starts to feel gutless and has poor acceleration. You may feel yourself over sheeting and the sail tending to drop backwards. Ideally with each of your sails you need to spend a session during which you start with the sail under-downhailed and then incrementally increase the downhaul until the sail is over-downhailed. It is a useful exercise as you will learn to recognise too much or too little downhaul and you will also be able to find the sweet spot of your sail.

If you don't have one already then do get an adjustable outhaul. They are very easy to use and put at your fingertips the ability to massively increase the wind range of your sail. You will enjoy your sailing much more if you have one. Try to work towards sailing kit big enough that means that you are powered for the lulls rather than the gusts. An adjustable outhaul allows you to sail much closer to your limits. It may be more beneficial to have a very physical 30 minutes session quite over-powered than 90 minutes of cruising. It is a key skill to learn to get round a course while overpowered Make use of any buoys that may be in the water to practice gybing and starts. You will be forced to gybe whatever the water state is like at the mark, which is the same as on the racecourse. Otherwise it is only too easy to choose to gybe where it is flat and you will struggle in competition.



Racing at Weymouth. Image courtesy Dave White.

### **Why I Compete**

**Simon Pettifer:** I compete because it keeps me keen, always trying to do a bit better than the previous event. The feeling I get when I've had a good heat and beaten someone that usually beats me feels great, you can't get the same feeling from sailing down the park. When you do one slalom heat it may only last about three mins but it's knackered, so much is packed into three minutes and the whole time I'm fired up, it's hard to explain, something you've got to try.

If you want to try it, get down to your local spot and do some light hearted racing with your friends. Poole have a Poole slalom, Weymouth have the same thing going on, as do Hayling Island, all these places are ready for newcomers to turn up and give it a go, all abilities are welcomed. Any gear can be used, at Poole we do a handicap system where by the person that wins the first race starts last in the next one, the person that finished last starts first and so on, this means that the racing is good for all, there is always someone to catch up with or try to stop passing you.

I would encourage others to give competing a go because it will improve your sailing, it's definitely the best way to get better quicker, improve your gybes and go faster. Also you meet great people at events, all with the same thing in mind, windsurfing and maybe a couple of drinks – if there's no wind of course! I've met some of my best friends at windsurfing events over the last 20 years even with a 15 year break in the middle.

**Simon Cofield:** I enjoy the challenge of racing against the top guys.

**Keve Greenslade:** I have been very fortunate to have been racing from a very young age, I have travelled the country and some of the World with my best mates doing what we all love. Doing well is just a bonus (a nice one though).

**Ant Baker:** I love the feeling of winning! The race course is a great place to practice your skills and gain some bragging rights over your mates!