

# Club Racing on LIS: Ten Commandments For Skippers

By Captain Bernie Weiss

Family racing, club racing, twilight racing, around-the buoys, beer-can racing, whatever you call it . . . In recent summers, Long Island Sound seems to have filled up with racing fleets that tend to involve young people, families with children, and even old-timers who are “done” with the hotly competitive racing circuit. This is truly low-key “fun” racing. It’s not club one-design competition, which remains greatly -- even fiercely -- competitive, with or without family involvement. It’s not distance racing (overnight racing), which seems to be growing in intensity. And it’s not the high-profile hotly competitive regional racing events, such as Block Island Race Week and Larchmont Race Week.

What I’m describing here is around-the-buoys club racing, occasionally including unrated yachts with novice skippers participating as guests in PHRF events. We all know this scene. On any given weekday evening, late May through early September, starting around 1800, a bird’s-eye view of LIS from City Island to Fisher’s Island reveals several multi-division PHRF fleets sailing 5-10 mile triangles. Sailing, that is, except for a short interval at sunset when the typical Southwesterly dies and Long Island Sound morphs into the Dead Sea. In most of these fleets, the first guns are an hour or two before sunset and the fleets usually finish in the twilight or dark.

Is this a positive trend in yachting? You bet. It’s not expensive. It’s a terrific night out with the buoys and gulls, just as they proclaim in the Can One series. And, as I have maintained for years, the best way to learn recreational boat management, and the fastest route to optimizing a boat’s sailing qualities, is to actively race the yacht. Racing teaches important practical aspects of seamanship, safety, navigation, boat control, and other lessons that enhance an owner’s sailing pleasure. Racing also builds the skipper’s confidence and skills in boat management, useful when the sailing conditions become adverse, perhaps threatening. This is particularly true for the new sailor who lacks experience, and even for the experienced sailor who has acquired a new boat. Racing accentuates the learning curve.

But buoy racing, as much fun and as diverting as it may be, is not without its dark side. The rewards are accompanied by some risks, and because this must be acknowledged, there are some important “rules” or “commandments” -- sometimes described as “**Ten Commandments**” -- that pertain to this activity. Here’s my take on that subject:

**1. Thou shalt have fun.** If you can only remember one Commandment at a time, this is the one. No racing instructions? Follow the fleet. Over early? No big deal.

**2. Thou shalt bring thy spouse, kids, friends and whoever else wants to come along.** Twilight races are great forums for introducing new folks to sailing, such as your neighbors, out-of-town visitors, co-workers or maybe even the family dog. Get everyone involved.

**3. Thou must take personal safety seriously.** You’re in the dark. You’re working on a small, heaving platform. There are other boats all around you. Add some rain, maybe a cold or gusty wind . . . it’s a potential recipe for disaster. In all matters, be prudent and sensible.

**4. Thou shalt study up on the current racing rules and honor them.** At least, honor the biggies (port tack boats shall avoid starboard ones; windward boats shall avoid leeward ones; and outside boats shall give room at the mark).

**5. Thou shalt not covet thy competitor’s boat, sails, equipment, crew, or PHRF rating.** No excuses or whining; if you’re lucky enough to have a sailboat, just go use it! You don’t need the latest in Technora, Spectra, or PBO/Zylon to have a great time out on the water with your friends.

**6. Thou shalt not amp out.** No screaming, swearing, or overly aggressive tactics. Save that stuff for the office or, if you must, for next weekend’s real race. If you blow your cool during a Tuesday nighter, you’re going to run out of crew -- not to mention friends -- in a big hurry.

**7. Thou shalt not protest thy neighbor; thou shalt be courteous.** Protesting is extremely tacky at this level of competition and should be avoided at all costs. Alternatively, if you committed the foul, apologize and withdraw. And later, a word of apology at the Club bar is useful in making amends. “They” say that yachting is a sport of gentlemen and ladies. Prove it.

**8. Thou shalt not mess up thy boat.** Everybody knows some hardcore weekend warrior who blew out his new light A-sail in a Wednesday night tune-up. Is it worth risking your boat and gear in casual competition? Probably not, but if in doubt, refer to Commandment No. 1.

**9. Thou shalt be generous with snacks and beverages.** When the wind dies, your crew will remind you that they skipped dinner in their rush to the boat. Now’s the time to acknowledge their nutritional deficits with chips, pretzels, and nuts -- accompanied by a generous supply of soda, water, Gatorade, and other non-alcoholic drinks. This will also encourage the crew to be patient while awaiting the wind’s return. Some boats seem to be fueled by beer (“brewskis,” “chill pills,” “thought cylinders”). But my personal policy is to avoid bar beverages until the boat is back in her berth or on the hook -- at least, until after the race.

**10. Thou shalt always go to the yacht club (pizza parlor, hamburger joint) after the race.** Etiquette demands that you congratulate the winners, as well as buy a round of drinks for your crew. Besides, as the winners gloat over their victories and the losers explain why they lost, what better setting to quietly absorb new guidance on how to improve your own performance! As Yogi Berra put it, “You can observe a lot by watching.”

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