

WHAT DO STRATEGY & TACTICS HAVE TO DO WITH CRUISING ON SAN FRANCISCO BAY?

If you are not racing, good STRATEGY (your overall plan) and to a far lesser degree, good “tactics” (your interaction with other boats, buoys and miscellaneous things you come across) still play a big role in the enjoyment of your boat.

On San Francisco Bay, if you are out for a day sail, you generally have the option of sailing mostly with the current, mostly against the current or some combination of both. It’s kind of like choosing to walk with or against an escalator.

If you don’t have a tide book on board, you are just asking for more work than anyone should have to endure. If you don’t have one at home, you are missing out on the opportunity easily plan better days on the bay when you want to take friends out for a sail. A half hour spent going through the tide book, or the weekend currents in the Latitude 38 Annual YRA Calendar (works for the weekends) can make the difference between a great day on the bay or feeling like you stuck watching grass grow.

In the “Tide Book” you will find information about the tides (how hi or low the water will be) and much more importantly, you will find information on the CURRENTS (which direction and speed the water will be moving at different parts of the bay at different times).

Here are a few rules of thumb:

- 1) The current changes first on the shore, then moves to the middle of the bay.
- 2) The current changes on the San Francisco side of the bay before the Marin side.
- 3) At Max Flood, the current is ripping in in the middle of the bay, but already almost slack very close to the shore especially west of the St. Francis YC.

The opposite is true at Max Ebb.

- 4) From week to week, the flood current and the ebb current basically change places.

For example, if you decided to take friends out sailing from your berth at South Beach Harbor at 1 PM on Sept 19, 2020 and do a Bay Tour reaching over to sail through Raccoon Straights, then up to the Golden Gate Bridge and back to South Beach, you would be leaving the harbor an hour after the big **Max Flood** of **3.9 knots** which means you would be fighting the flood all the way until you got to around Pier 39 before you could head off on port tack toward Angel Island. By the time you got abeam of Alcatraz the current would be more on your port side pushing you toward Richmond before it got behind you for a nice little push, for about the length of Angel Island, then when you started to head up through Raccoon Straights, you would be fighting the building flood in light winds and most likely not be able to make it through the straights without turning on your engine. It would seem like work to make it as far as the Golden Gate Bridge, even if there was a good breeze.

However, when you were planning this little trip on the phone with your friends, if you pulled out your Tide Book, you would see that the next Saturday, Sept 26th, if you also left at 1 PM, you would be leaving a few minutes after a mild **Max Ebb** of **1.3 kts**. Obviously, the same Bay Tour would be much easier and more enjoyable for your guests if you were not fighting the current all day.

- 5) There are 2 high tides and 2 low tides per day. The currents connected with the higher tides, also have faster max currents as compared to the max currents connected to lower tides.

What about the “TACTICS” part? The most important thing is to keep a good lookout, not hit anything and stay well out of the way of any commercial traffic. I have been sailing with many people who were constantly worried about an approaching boat or some other obstacle. They will typically stare directly at the object and worry that something bad might happen, which is not conducive to an enjoyable day on the bay. Rather than stare at the object, you should note the land behind the object.

If it is a stationary object like a buoy, if the land behind the buoy is not changing position relative to the buoy, you are on a collision course. If it is moving, you will pass to the right or left of it. This is called taking a range or “ranging” on the buoy. If it is a buoy that you are approaching and must leave to one side or the other, it is easy to tell if you are passing on the correct side by ranging on the buoy. If you are approaching on starboard tack and you must leave it to port, if the land on the starboard side of the buoy seems to be getting bigger, you are gaining on the buoy and should be fine. If the opposite is true, you will not make it so you can plan a convenient time to tack.

This technique also works when two boats are approaching at approximately 90 degrees. It is quite easy to tell from a long way off if you are ahead or behind another vessel, even a big ship. Just sight from your boat to the bow of the other boat. If there seems to be more land coming out in front of the other boat, you are ahead. If there is more land coming out behind the boat, the vessel is ahead of you. The problem is if there is little or no movement. This means you are on or close to a collision course, so if you are very far away, you can head up a bit or fall off a bit to avoid any issues. If you are close with a ship, it is always better to adjust your course to go behind it and earlier is always better than later.

If the other boat is far away, it is good to check periodically because a course or speed change can will alter the results. It is fun to teach this to non-sailing guests. Besides learning something, they will be more relaxed.

Have Fun sailing!

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