

October 25, 1998

Mr. Richard H. Roberts, Race Secretary  
Off Soundings Club  
60 Dart Street  
New London CT 06320

Dear Dick:

I am writing in response to your letter of October 16, inviting comments on this year's racing. Specifically I oppose the trend in recent years away from the traditional point-to-point race courses around government marks. These are now replaced by a vast menu of course options with set marks, presumably so that the race committee can give us a more perfect race course to suit the conditions.

The numerous course variations now possible are signalled from the Committee Boat at the start. It was nearly impossible for us aboard "Ragtime" in the Spring Series to decipher the course as presented on the alpha-numeric placards displayed on the committee boat. In Friday's race not only were the multitude of numbers and letters hard to read, but they were presented in a different order from what was laid out in the instructions, which by themselves were confusing. The marks used are too small to be spotted in open water with waves such as we had both days in the Spring 1998. Had we not had other classes and boats in our class in front of us, I doubt whether we would have found the set marks and sailed the course correctly on either day.

The use of set marks, particularly in the deep water of Block Island Sound, is a guarantee that a large proportion of the fleet will not complete the course if the visibility is at all limited. In every case (except the short windward mark in the 1997 second race and Round the Island race) where a mark was set in the Spring Series of 1997 and 1998 it could not be successfully located within a quarter of a mile with a GPS. In 1998 the problem was that marks drifted because of wind and wave, and water depth over 100 feet.

The concept of giving the OSC Race Committee discretion to create a more perfect race course is a bad concept. "The more perfect race course" usually means making sure there are more windward legs, and more buoy roundings so that the more highly talented and populated crews can show up everybody else with their well-practiced sail handling. I would guess that many contestants would prefer more emphasis on navigation and race course strategy - the skills required more for long distance offshore racing. There would also be less incentive for overpopulating each boat.

The historic popularity of the Off Soundings Series has depended on the predictability and sameness of the race courses that have tested all these skills down through the years. Participation is encouraged if (1) the course is known for certain ahead of time, (2) one can hope that the weather gods may provide the desired wind strength and direction so that, this time, one's boat may have a prayer of winning with its assigned handicap, and (3)

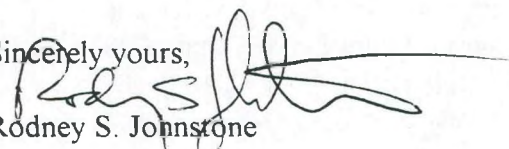
one does not have to line the rail with hotshot racing talent in order to have a chance of winning, and (4) If the first leg is **not** deliberately set to windward to favor those boats whose rails are overpopulated with crew.

Increasing the demands on our skill to follow complicated directions from the committee boat while trying to dodge over 100 other boats in the same vicinity is not the kind of challenge any sailor seeks. Minimizing the course options and stating them clearly in the race instructions is far more preferable. Use government marks which can be reliably located with GPS and/or dead reckoning. Keep the courses simple and keep the buoy roundings to a minimum. Eliminate all but the most simple signal flag communications from the Committee Boat. Why introduce complexity and confusion to the responsibilities of the Off Soundings Race Committee which has always been called on to do a difficult task, sometimes under very difficult conditions? Let's make it simple for everybody involved. Perhaps more people would show up for these events, as formerly was the case.

Don't get me wrong. I love the fast pace of short course windward leeward set-course racing. Our J/Boats do better than most going to windward and accelerating out of maneuvers. However the playing field will be more level enabling a wider variety of boats and people to do well if OSC goes back to the formula that formerly attracted so much more participation in the two Off Soundings series - namely, limited predetermined course options (published ahead of time) around government marks and minimal signalling from the committee boat.

Please revive the same old courses and stick to the point-to-point racing. Let Mother Nature provide the variety and sense of adventure which has always been a part of Off Soundings Racing. This is the formula that has made Off Soundings Racing uniquely successful compared to any other offshore racing in the Northeast US. Please don't abandon it.

Sincerely yours,

  
Rodney S. Johnstone