



Winning in the Italian lakes - by Mark Rushall

Sun, wind, good food, food wine, and a great atmosphere. Many UK and International classes include a visit to one of the lakes in their fixture list, and those who haven't yet tried it are missing out on a fantastic experience.

Most first time visitors will be sailing from Torbole or Riva on Lake Garda, or Gravedona on Lake Como. Since similar principles apply at many other mountainous lake venues, we will focus on these venues.

Preparation

Sun block, cap and sunglasses are all recommended. The water at both Garda and Como is extremely deep, and can be cold. Summer steamer / shortie plus dry top/ spray top are the most popular clothing combinations for dinghy racing on the lakes in the summer. The Italians, being cool people, don't usually organise racing in the rain, but a waterproof jacket for hanging around the dinghy park can pay dividends.

Getting There.

Through France, Germany, Switzerland, and the Gotthard Tunnel appears to be the fastest route. In theory an annual pass for both car and trailer is needed for the Swiss motorways. (I have been stopped at the border and directed to the nearby ticket office!) Alternatively take the slightly less stressful French motorways (tolls payable) and the Mont Blanc Tunnel.

A spare trailer wheel is a must. Full legal requirements for driving in Europe can be found on the RAC website. European breakdown cover may provide additional reassurance. It's a long drive, and the boat is likely to arrive filthy, so make sure it's wrapped up well and don't wear your white shorts to unpack!

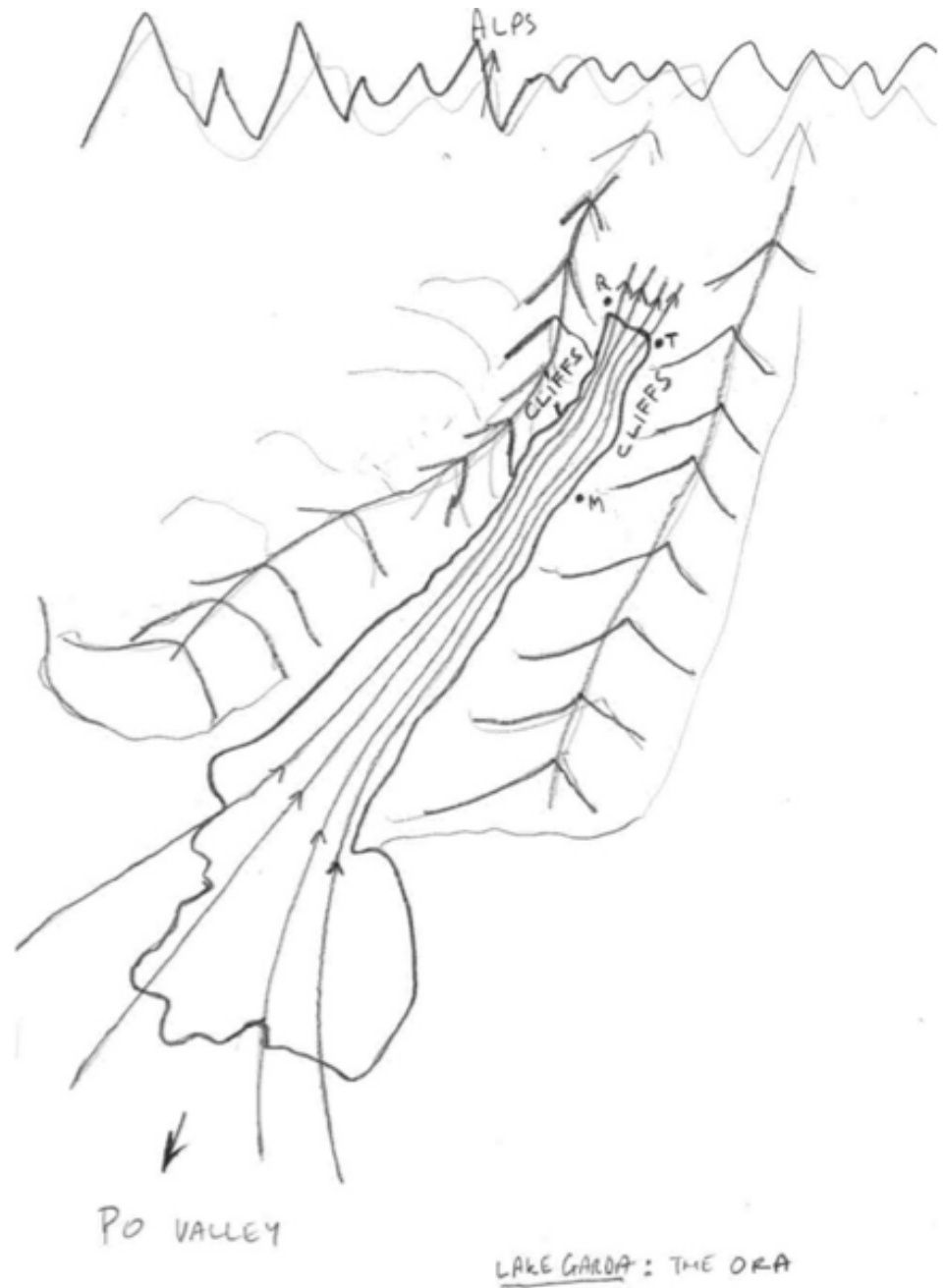
Lake Garda

The summer wind usually follows a predictable pattern.

During the night, the temperature on the mountains to the north drops. The "Peler" is a cool northerly wind which blows down from the mountains to the warmer Po valley to the south, beginning in the early hours and normally disappearing by 10 am. If the regatta is behind schedule, racing is often held early in the morning in the last of the Peler, followed by a lunchtime siesta through the mid morning calm. If there is no Peler at night, it is normally an indication of changing weather. In this case, rain, thunderstorms, flat calms, and storms are all possible.

On a classic Garda racing day, the decline of the Peler indicates that the "Ora" is about to arrive. This is the warm southerly racing wind, emanating from the valleys at the bottom of the lake, rushing up to the rapidly heating mountains to the north. The Ora increases dramatically in strength as it funnels between the cliffs which narrow toward the top of the lake, producing the conditions many British sailors travel 2000 miles each year to enjoy. The breeze tends to be steady rather than gusty, with strength typically 18 knots but can be up to 25 or more!

Riva and Torbole are both situated at the north end of the lake, where the depth in the centre is over 300 metres. Courses are therefore laid either side of the lake causing the shore effect to be the overriding strategic consideration in normal conditions.



Racing from Riva

The Ora: Generally, the closer to the cliffs, the stronger the wind. Sail toward the cliffs on port tack, and the effect is dramatic. Boats to leeward but closer inshore appear to be on a conveyor belt: visibly gaining each second, while in turn you are gaining on the boats offshore. Though there are shifts to be had, hitting the cliffs, and staying there, is a good option.

Krister Bergstrom won three races in a row at the 505 Europeans by simply ignoring the port biased start line, and starting on port at the committee boat end. Each time, by the time the port end starters were able to tack across toward the right, he had an unassailable lead.

There are a few other tricks, though. Depending on where the course is laid, there is even more wind near the several headlands along the lake side, plus a favourable wind bend around each one. Conversely, there is less wind in the bays. So there is still more to be gained from hitting a headland layline whenever you tack into the cliffs.

Some of the successful 14er's try to start on port, preferably with a port "blocker" to leeward, sweeping starboard boats out of the way. If they don't end in hospital, and their track takes them down the layline to a headland, they will be hard to beat. Assuming a well port biased line, with the headland some distance up the beat, a less extreme starting strategy needs a good leeward gap mid-line, and a well timed start on starboard tack. Frequently, the boats to the right slow by stuffing each other, trying to persuade the windward boat to tack. Drive the boat fast and free, and the first shift should give the ability to tack across these boats. If the boats to windward tack first, it is imperative to tack with them and get the bow down fast, to turn the line advantage into distance toward the cliff, before the escalator takes effect.

If the biggest headland is past the starboard layline to the windward mark, it may pay to overstand, sail into the extra pressure off the headland, and use the starboard lift out of the bend to close reach to the mark at 1 1/2 speed.

It is also possible that there may be so much breeze right in by the cliffs that there is no boat speed benefit: with main and jib ragging the boat staggers, doesn't plane upwind, and tacking is near impossible. In this case, since the major advantage inshore is through wind velocity rather than direction, there is no gain from going "all the way" To give a little more margin out of the tack in these conditions, ease the vang 6 inches before the tack: the extra twist out of the tack gives the crew more time and makes the boat easier to lay off onto the new tack.

Strategy on the offwind legs is, once again, wind speed led. On a windward/leeward course, a gybe set or an early gybe to the cliffs is the most likely winning strategy. With luck the beating boats are well clear and are reaching in from above the starboard layline! As the cliffs are approached on port gybe the apparent wind comes further and further forward as wind strength increases, until it's almost possible to lay the leeward mark.

Occasionally, especially later in the afternoon, there are concentrated gusts coming down the middle of the lake which are irrelevant to the beat but can be utilised down the run, see "Tracy's golden moments" below.

The strategy on a reaching course becomes really interesting in these conditions. Main factors are gybe mark position, reach angle, and absolute wind speed. Sailing the course is the only way to figure this out. Generally, even on the reach, choosing a course taking you toward stronger breeze on one side of the lake will pay, compared with a rhumb line course. It can pay to gybe on the reach, or delay the gybe at the wing mark, to achieve this.

The Peler: Basically the same as the Ora, in reverse. The biggest problem with sailing in the Peler is that it involves getting up early in the morning. There is still more wind at the cliff, and the bends around the headlands and reduced velocity in the bays are still present. Starting on starboard will take you toward the favoured left hand side of the beat. However, traditional wind shifts are more pronounced, and more relevant. Therefore a conservative “playing the fleet” approach produces more consistent winners. Remember that at some stage, the Peler will drop to nothing. I have sailed a race at Garda where the boats at the “leeward” mark were already enjoying the Ora while we were still struggling to get round the “windward” in the Peler! Fortunately the race was abandoned!

Racing from Torbole

The Ora: As with Riva, the strongest wind is next to the cliffs. The cliffs around the headlands are not as steep as on the Riva side, so the effect is more subtle. The start is far more civilised, a start on starboard tack taking you to the favoured side of the beat. The first boat to get the bow down, and out of “stuffing “ mode, is usually the first to the escalator, therefore space on the start line and a rig set up for speed is often more important than start line bias. At Torbole it rarely pays to overstand the windward mark: tacking inside a bunch of starboard tack boats from a port close reach in 20 knots never made it into the RYA manual! Downwind, heading for the cliffs is a reasonably safe option, but there are definite gusts to be picked up near the centre of the lake. These gusts can be big enough to create sufficient apparent wind to take you straight down the lake to the leeward gate. Sky TV viewers may have seen Tracy Covell’s Laser 5000 “golden moments”, where she and John Hodgart gybed early onto port and into one of these “busters”. With racks dragging in the water, and main and jib ragging, they just managed to lay the finish line having passed the top six ranked boats, all sailing in five knots less wind.

Gybing with a fully battened main on flat water in one of these big gusts can be a heart stopper: In traffic, when it is likely to be harder to pick a spot to gybe, I cheat by leaving the cunningham on hard until after the first crucial gybe. This stops the battens flicking immediately, taking the sting out of the gybe, and makes gybing at full speed less of an imperative.

The Peler: As with Riva, applying “traditional” lake sailing skills of spotting the shifts, sailing toward the pressure, to work toward the favoured starboard side of the course, usually work better than “banging the corner.” When wind is very light, both northerly and southerly, there is no wind at all in the bays: once dragged in, there is no way out without infringing rule 42! Don’t go in there! Better still: stay in bed and wait for the Ora!

Sailing at Malcesine

Malcesine is situated further south, where the lake is wider, and the cliffs further apart. The wind tends not to be as strong as at Riva or Torbole. Racing in the mornings in the Peler is also more likely. With less extreme conditions, strategy is correspondingly less extreme. Spotting shifts and gusts are key, especially in the northerly. There is more wind near the shore, but the bays are generally to be avoided.

Sailing at Gravedona

Lake Como provides another beautiful Italian sailing venue. Como at Gravedona is wider than the top of lake Garda, and the hills each side of the lake in the Gravedona area are nowhere near as dramatic. The usual summer thermal winds are the north easterly “Tivano”, which blows early in the morning up to 10 knots until around 10 o’clock, and the “Breva”, the southerly afternoon wind which usually provides good racing in up to 16 knots from midday onwards. Last year the RS 800’s also experienced the “Vento”: this is a cold wind which follows bad weather in the Alps which can (and did) hit 25-30 knots.

The parties in Gravedona seem to go on too late to allow sailing in the Tivano! “Find your tree, and sleep under it” is Edgerton’s’ race winning preparatory advice

The best sailing area is between Gravedona and Olgiasca: the headland directly south, though we have also raced further west between Dongo and Gravedona.

The Breva: There is a definite wind bend around the point of Olgiasca. More breeze is expected closer to the land, and in 12 knots plus, the left hand side generally pays as a result. A clear start is important to be able to sail fast to the paying side.

However in less than 12 knots the effect is not so reliable. Oscillating shifts become more important, and the left hand corner can turn into a disastrous flat patch. Boats finding a rogue puff on the right hand side of the course can make big gains. “Heads out of the boat” is the key to consistent success in these sub- powered conditions. Once the puffs (or the holes), either on the water or in the fleet, are spotted, fast action is required. If the new wind is to leeward, reach over the fleet to get to it more quickly. If to windward, tack over to the new wind.

Downwind, the bend generally favours the right hand side. However in lighter conditions, beware the lull under the fleet approaching on port tack. Watch for the gusts coming down the lake and stay in them, gybing if necessary. Avoid the potential flat spot on the extreme right of the course.

The Vento: Wear warm clothes! This one feels as if it has come straight from the glacier. There is no real pattern: big gusts and even bigger wind shifts mean that survival is the order of the day.

Have fun!

Fun is the primary reason for returning to the Italian lakes each year. Some points worth considering which apply to all venues:

Rig set up:

1 For a given wind strength, the water is generally flatter than we experience at a sea venue. It’s therefore tempting to straighten the rig and close the leaches down a bit to give more power. However a common tactical lakes theme is that it’s more important to be able to move forward than to gain height, for this reason we’d recommend a more open, “reacher” set up.

2 Between leave the beach time and start time the wind strength can frequently increase 5 knots or more. Know your rig settings to a tee and be ready to adjust at the warning signal. For boats where this isn’t possible, think hard about what the conditions will be, don’t forget that the locals have seen it all before!

Finish line

Due to depth constraints, the finish line is often far longer than at home. Be aware of the bias, and use it to gain a place on the line.

Never give up

Strange things happen on the lakes. A radical move is not the only cause. If “down the pan”, sail a considered race, watch the fleet, and react to signs of change.

Boat handling

The warm weather means that we are often racing in more extreme conditions than at home. Practise that boat handling before the event, not during it!

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Thanks to the following winners of championships in Riva, Torbole, Malcesine and Gravedona for their additional input and lake racing tips:

Chips Howarth: MUSTO Skiff European champion, Laser 4000 Eurocup winner
Andy Richards: three times Laser 5000 Eurocup champion
Barrie Edgerton: RS 800 Eurocup champion

Mark Rushall, project manager, marine consultant, and coach, is one of the UK's leading small boat sailors having won major championships in a wide range of performance dinghy & keelboat classes, including Mirror, Firefly, Lark, Fireball, Laser 5000, and 1720. [Buy Marks excellent book >>>](#)