

Sailboat Racing – What is a Regatta

A regatta is a term that means “a series of boat races”. At the end of all the races, the finishes that each boat received (i.e. 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.) are added together, similar to a Golf tournament for example. The competitor with the lowest total points wins the event.

Note: In the case of the 2011 Charity Regatta, the regatta is one race only. Therefore, whoever wins the race, wins the regatta overall.

It’s taken for granted often, but many an onlooker does not know exactly how a sailboat race works. It’s actually not much different from a runner’s track race. There’s a start, a finish and marks to go around that simulate the track. There are however, a few major differences that make a sailboat race look very different from a track race.

First, sailboats don’t have any type of brakes or the ability to stand still, so while there is a start line that each boat must cross, they cannot all line up and simply wait around for a gun to start the race. Instead, there is a five minute countdown (sometimes it can be three or four minutes, but five is the standard) where the boats will sail around, check the breeze direction, look for puffs of wind seen by ripples on the water, and come up with a general game plan of where they want to be on the start line when the gun goes off. As time dwindles down to under a minute, each sailboat starts to approach the line in hopes of being as close as possible but not over when the starting gun goes off. (If a boat is over the line when the gun goes off, they are notified via flags and sounds signals that they must come back completely under the line before they have officially started).

The second major difference is how each boat goes around the course. The first mark will most often be directly upwind, so one can just look in the direction of the breeze and see the first mark that boats will round. Because a sail boat cannot go directly into the wind, they need to zigzag or “tack” back and forth upwind to the first mark. Marks are typically rounded to “port” (on the left side of the boat) unless otherwise noted.

After that, they will head to the next mark of the course until eventually they have rounded all the marks completing a lap of the race course. The Race Committee dictates how many laps and what type of course is to be sailed before they begin the starting sequence.

The combination of a good start, strong race course tactics, and simply making the boat move as fast as possible will get a competitor to the front of the fleet and winning the race.