

## Winning and Losing

Olympic bronze medalist ('72, Dragon) Don Cohan takes issue with Dr. Stuart Walker's assessment that we're predisposed to follow one path or the other.

By DON COHAN    JUNE 24, 2010

0 Comments

Revisiting "Winning and Losing"

In the May 2010, issue of this magazine, Stuart Walker wrote an article, "Winning and Losing". I have great respect for Stuart's sailing knowledge and abilities. In addition, I have competed against him for many years in the Soling class and we both belonged to the Severn Sailing Association. I did not start actively racing sailboats until I was 37 years old and my initial and continuing instruction on the elements of racing a sailboat I learned by reading Stuart's books. Few have contributed to the sport of racing sailboats as much as Stuart has. I am very fond of Stuart- off the water. Since we both are in our eighties and have been substantially successful on the racecourse, we bring a long view towards sailboat racing, and mine is strongly opposite to that expressed by Stuart in his article. People race sailboats for many different reasons, (I am not discussing professional sailor's here.) and to divide them into winners or losers demeans them. I absolutely disagree with the overall attitude of the article.

**1. Re: Stuart's statement: \*\*\*\*"The eventual winners are those who hate to lose, hate to reveal their incompetence, and deeply resent those who beat them (although they hate to admit they do). They do not fear to be distinguished or to be resented; they enjoy their high rank once they acquire it. The continuing losers are those who accept losing, accept their subordinate status in the hierarchy and successfully suppress their resentment of those who are ranked higher. They believe that they do not deserve to win and they fear the resentment that their undeserved winning would arouse. They are satisfied with losing in part because they believe that they, rather than the winners, are the norm and because they know that losers are essential to the sport".**

I do not "hate to lose". I dislike personally not doing my best and if you can beat me, nice going. I do not mind revealing my incompetence. I have a secure ego and I absolutely do not "deeply resent those who beat me". I resent those who win by unfair means. There is nothing in the quote to which I agree. And I would not wish to sail with people who share those feelings. I do not "feel hopeless" when I am losing. I am energized and will fight on until the sod goes on top of me. Let me emphasize that I enjoy winning as much as Stuart does and that I am doing everything I can that is appropriate to win, but unlike the statement in his article, I have never felt "miserable, defective, incompetent, cowardly, hopeless or doubted my ability or am filled with resentment" when I lose.

**2. Re: Stuart's statement: "Competition is both liberating and permissive. Because it occurs in a separate, artificial world, it releases us from the necessity of being careful, correct, and reserved, and it allows us to feel and to behave as our most basic instincts impel us to feel and behave. In no other setting is the self so willingly exposed, vulnerable, and susceptible to the unguarded expression of its innermost drives, feeling, and fears."**

"The perceptions described above, which I think are typical of those who regard themselves as true competitors in all forms of competition, show hatred of losing and my assumption that losing impugns my competence and diminishes my stature. They also show my love of winning and my assumption that winning verifies my power,

competence, and superiority. These races and their outcomes mattered to me”.

I do not agree with this because sailboat racing is not “an artificial world” and does not release us from our standards of how we behave ourselves. I am not perfect but I try very hard to be the same person in whatever situation I am in. Sailboat racing is a wonderful example of being true to your “inner compass”, despite being in a pressure cooker and having opportunities behave not well. Stuart’s statement is not “typical” of those who regard themselves as “true competitors”. I am a “true competitor”, but I am also aware that I do not leave my personal standards ashore or lose perspective of my life’s goals. Sailboat racing is just a part of my life’s mosaic – not the filter used to judge myself.

### **3. I do not agree with: “Participants may be divided into two categories, “Winners and Losers”.**

Am I a loser when, after having had cancer of the lymph glands and bones and experienced chemotherapy and radiation twice, at the age of 76 I sailed a Sonar for the first time with a good crew who had never sailed together and together we finished second in the New England Championships? Am I a loser when, I was advised physically not to race and in a very tough US Soling Championship, I finished second? Am I a loser when, learning to race a 40-foot sailboat in the Nantucket Opera House Regatta and racing with my granddaughter and grandson, we finished 14th out of 80 boats on corrected time, yet won the trophy for best performing boat? Am I a loser when, at the age of 78, in the Nantucket Opera House Race of 07’, I finished second in “The Classic division”, with my granddaughter crewing? Am I a loser when, after wanting so much to win the Atlantic Coast Soling Championship, which counted for national ranking and for making the US Sailing Team, I was challenged by my elder daughter who stated that I was a male chauvinist and only raced with men? And after challenging her to work hard on her sailing, I took her as my crew in a windy AC regatta off Marblehead – so windy that several boats did not leave the harbor one of the days- but we did! We finished in the middle of the fleet and after I apologized to her for the serious physical beating she had taken, my daughter looked at me and said, “I had the best time and you’re the greatest Dad”. What trophy would equal that? Am I a loser when, I agreed to crew for my 14 year old younger daughter in a competitive 16 boat Soling Fleet, and the fore deck hand did not show so I had to do the work of two on the old Olympic course and we finished second? Am I a loser when, racing my last Soling Regatta (Atlantic Coast Championship), I was beaten by a crew I had mentored as a youngster and whose skipper had crewed for me in the North American and Worlds Championships? He had learned my lessons and much more, very well. I genuinely felt great pride in his winning, and I knew I had sailed very well. Was I a winner when, I won the Atlantic Coast championship in the Soling a few months after finishing aggressive chemotherapy because of the trophy or because my 12-year-old grandson put his arm around me when I was shaking from fatigue after the race and said, “You are my hero”? Am I a winner because of the silverware when, at the age of 72 in a heavy air regatta and after undergoing aggressive chemotherapy twice, I won the US Soling Championship in a nasty Galveston Bay, or did it show something far more important?

\*\*4. I do not agree with: “The vignettes above reveal the feelings of a true competitor, one who believes that he deserves to win, who is completely dissatisfied with losing and who is preoccupied with ranking. \*\*They demonstrate his enthusiasm for challenging those ranked above him, advancing in the hierarchy of his competitors, for dominating those who are ranked below him and for resenting those who are ranked above or who attempt to beat him. They also demonstrate his delight in winning, in showing off his superiority, in confirming that he is, as he believes he deserves to be, the top dog.

I do not “resent those who are ranked above” me or “who attempt to beat” me. I consider them a challenge. My “delight in winning” is not in showing off my seniority or believing that I deserve to be the top dog. My delight is in challenging myself. I cannot in any way relate to this statement.

### **5. I do not agree with: “In few other aspects of his life is a man (or a woman) overwhelmed by anguish as great as that which accompanies his losing. And in few other aspects of his life is a man exhilarated by a joy as great as that that accompanies his winning.”**

I save my “anguish” for the hurts that life throws at me, not those that I go looking for. Racing sailboats and the joy of winning a sailboat race is not the pinnacle of achievement for me. I enjoy the challenge of racing a sailboat and all that means for me to put myself on the line. However, sailboat racing is just one aspect of my life and that should be kept in perspective. I have no “distress of defeat, desperation of failure and resentment that accompany dishonor” by asserting myself.

\*\*6. I doubt if I need too many lessons in what it takes to win, and I am no saint. \*\* Many years ago in Yachting

Magazine, Arthur Ellis wrote an article on “The psychology of racing”. In it, he states “Don Cohan is the king of psyche”. I am aware of what to do when being pounded and have more than pounded back – at times too hard. But I believe in “live and let live”, unless a competitor sets up a different standard. Race with a “harsh” demeanor and you are a moving target. Stuart and I have competed against each other for many years and would not give the other any leeway while racing. Our on- the- water relationship is constantly challenging and fits Stuart’s ideal of the harshness of racing. I have a far different rapport with most of the other competitive racers. A valued possession is a get-well card that I received from my competitors in a World Championship that I had to miss due to chemotherapy. It was signed with notes of personal encouragement. I was down, this meant a great deal to me, and I vowed to race in a future World Championship again. I did, and finished as the top amateur. This meaningful and encouraging card was Stuart Walker’s idea. The foregoing not only illustrates another side of him but also indicated the respect and camaraderie that sailboat racing engenders. I wish his article showed this. I also know that one cannot have the “petal to the medal” all of the time. I feel responsibility to my crew that transcends winning. I am much older than my crew is and I wish to be a positive influence on them by delving into areas other than winning sailboat races. I question them on how they are doing in school, what their life’s goals are, whether they’re eating properly, whether they understand the give and take of marriage, what their investment goals are. Do they understand the price to be paid for the goals they have chosen in sailboat racing and life generally? Do they notice how beautiful the autumn trees look when sailing in after the race (think “race” on the way out)? Do they understand the various levels of commitment to a lady friend and behave themselves? And finally, as we drove to the boat through some marginal areas, pointing out to some of my over testosteroneed young bucks, as they ogled the “landscape” that they were looking at - “trouble”.

In conclusion – racing and achieving success in racing sailboats have been an important part of my life, but other aspects of living far outweigh that. Maybe Stuart and I give you a goal as you age thru life: in our eighties, we are still competitive. Will you be? For those of you who do not “win”, you only lose if you did not play the game up to your standards, your needs, your physical abilities, your time constraints, you’re ability to fit it into your life’s mosaic. One need not be obsessed with winning sailboat races to enjoy the process. Come along and race sailboats against me! I will try to beat you fairly, and if you can beat me - nice going- I’ll get you next time.

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