

# To Race or Not To Race, Is That the Question?

by Ken Whitt (T-534)



Having had only about a half dozen previous sailing outings on a motley collection of rental and friend's boats, I purchased my Tanzer 16 for the exclusive purpose of leisurely day sailing with my family and friends. While convinced by the large cockpit, beamy stability, sturdy construction, and moderate cost of the Tanzer's sloop rigged design, I just happened to purchase a boat with a racing heritage (and a

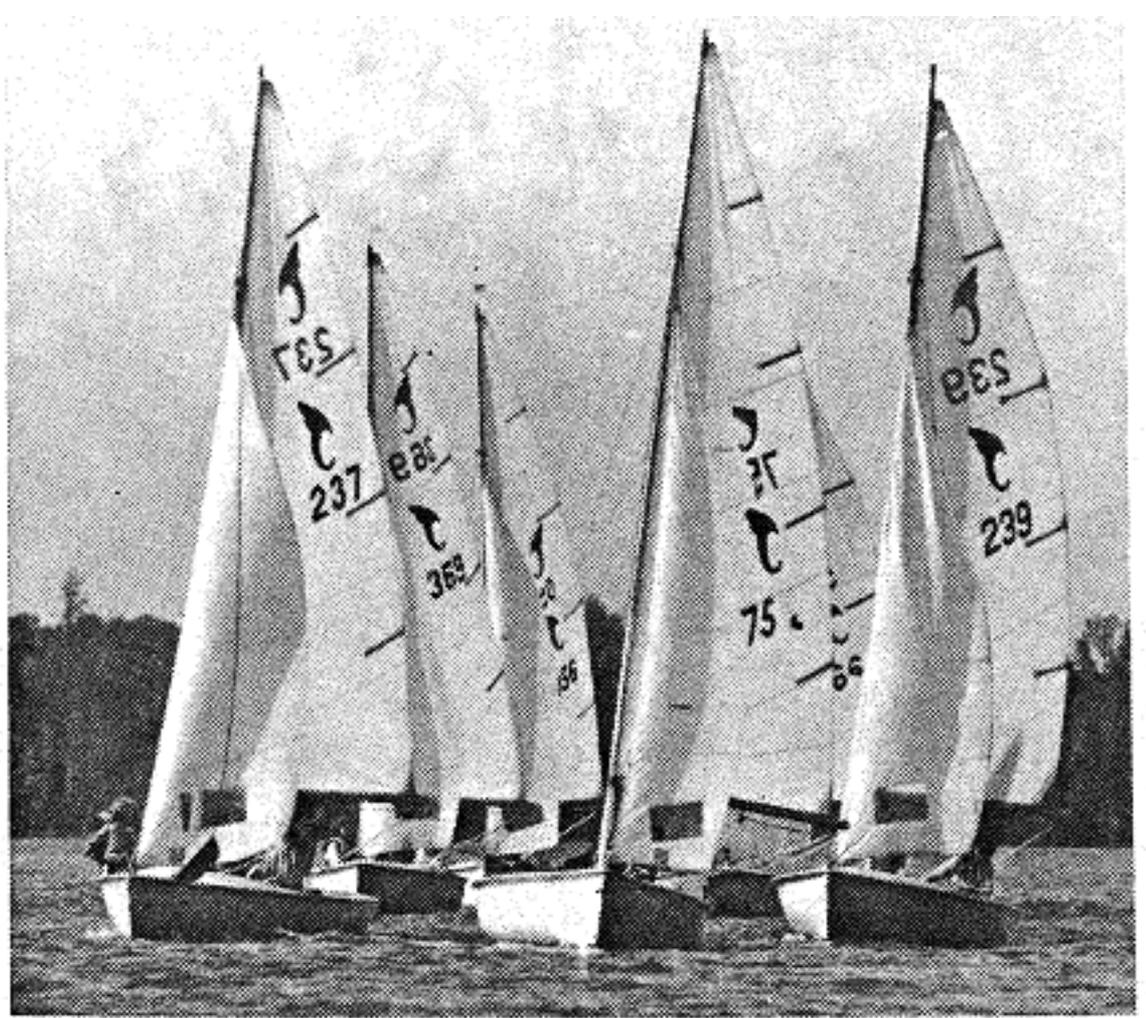
flashy purple and white striped spinnaker). Perhaps I should not have been so surprised when Dave Permar called to invite me to the North Carolina 1983 Governor's Cup Regatta. Naturally, I protested that I wasn't yet knowledgeable enough about sailing and had never even seen a race. Although Dave insisted that he had raced his boat the first time he put it in the water, I declined to participate. I reasoned that he probably was born into a sailing family, the Tanzer was his third or fourth boat, no sane person would race having as little experience as I had, and so on. But the seed had been sown. Later that year when I inquired more about sailboat racing and the Carolina Sailing Club, Dave invited me to come as a guest and I accepted. Again, Dave's parting words were that racing is an excellent way to learn to sail

Still uncertain about this seemingly risky business, I first checked to see if my insurance covered racing mishaps. With visions of launching without installing the plug, I typed out a checklist which would guide me in rigging without undo delay and embarrassment in front of seasoned skippers. I included a cryptic summary of the three right of way rules which I was told would get me by without incident-- boat under sail, starboard-port tack, leeward-windward boat. I didn't understand the clear ahead/astern and mark rounding rules at all, but it didn't matter since I was to remain clear astern of all boats that day.

When I arrived at Henderson Point, Dave and several other skippers sketched out the expected course, starting line, and mark positions in the sand. Thankfully, the course was two triangles since a modified Olympic course still seemed foreign to me. Robert Macklen further helped allay my anxieties by tying a green ribbon to my boom which identified me as a beginner (and I presumed, warned other boats to stay clear). As I launched, I was comforted by his invitation to follow him around the course, but I was wishing he would "wait up" long before I finally reached the starting line. ("Just don't get ahead of me," he admonished-- 'wisdom' he has helped me heed in many subsequent races.) It was easy enough to follow the pack once the starting gun had been fired, no matter how hard we tried to do otherwise. We finished in last place by a boat length in the first

race, and, proudly, next to last in the day's second event. I was hooked!

With three years now (1985) under my belt, I look back and realize that what Dave said was true. Racing is an excellent way to learn to sail. Feedback on seamanship, sail handling, and balance comes immediately from comparing boat speed with other Tanzers. But more important are the friendly people who are willing to help each new sailor attain the most from his or her Tanzer. While no one offers suggestions for improving your sail trim as you race side by side up the windward leg, the members of Fleet 1 have offered encouragement, thoughtful discussion of tuning and rigging changes I might consider, guidance



about rules, reading suggestions, and a warm camaraderie which makes racing a pleasant challenge rather than a competitive struggle. Given this attitude, it is not surprising to find many families sailing in regattas either as skipper and crew or on separate boats. I also find racing to be an engaging and welcome respite from stresses which might otherwise claim my attention. While my wife, Marlene, does not share my enthusiasm, our day sailing adventures also benefit from the confidence I gain during racing. As one novice who spent many adult years dreaming about owning a sailboat, I can imagine few more efficient or enjoyable ways to acquire sailing skills than by rubbing elbows (and occasionally gunwales) with experienced sailors out on the course.