

# The “RABBIT” Start

Many casual recreational sailors probably think that racing requires a club, a race committee, and scorekeepers, not to mention blue blazers and ascots. Well, nuts to that. Fun, casual racing among family and friends is easy to organize, requires a bare minimum of equipment, and is a great way to spend an afternoon or evening on the water. Here’s what you need:

## 1. A race course

The shorter the better, so you can run more races in a given amount of time. And short, quick races keep the fleet packed together, making it more interesting. The simplest course to create is a “windward-leeward,” which only requires two marks. Keep it to a maximum of 100 meters, top to bottom. Set the leeward mark, where you will start, in waters that will allow an unobstructed course to windward as the boats tack back and forth, then drop the windward mark the desired distance, as close to directly upwind as you can manage. This isn’t the Olympics, so don’t be too fussy.

## 2. The marks

A bleach bottle will do, or spring for a bright red inflatable mooring buoy, about 30 cm in diameter, at your local marine supply store (about \$35). Braided clothesline makes for cheap and serviceable anchor line. Any anchor will do, but a good solution is a 4.5-kilo plastic-coated barbell weight, which is cheap (about \$5), has a nice hole in the middle for tying on the anchor line, and can be carried in a dinghy without fear of scratching the gel-coat.

## 3. The fleet

Come one, come all. Over a short course, one- and two-person dinghies (no spinnakers allowed) will be in roughly the same ballpark of speed (catamarans and extreme high-performance designs excepted), so you can let everybody race one-on-one.

## 4. The start

Forget about a race committee boat, flags, sound signals, and all that stuff. Just use the “rabbit” system. One boat is designated the rabbit. It sails up to the start mark from the left side (looking to windward) and, after passing below the start mark, steers onto a close-hauled course (i.e., pointing as close to the wind as possible while still sailing) on port tack. The rest of the competitors have to approach from the right, on starboard tack, and sail between the start mark and the stern of the rabbit. That’s it. The rabbit has a slight advantage so, in a series of races, give the last-place finisher in the previous race the rabbit’s job for the next race, as it will give them the best possible start.

## 5. The rules

Stick with these two basic ones:

- (a) Boats on starboard tack (the wind is coming over the right side of the boat) have right of way over those on port tack.
- (b) A boat with its bow overlapped inside another boat’s stern as they come within two boat lengths of a mark must be given enough room to round the mark. That’s a grossly simplified system, but it will get you racing.

## 6. The finish

Whoever is first to round the last mark is the winner. Race as many times around your little course as people wish. Once around is a good way to start things, but if the race is close, you can talk it over among yourselves on the second leg and agree to do another lap.

A club can also employ the “honor system” as each boat records its finish time and

## 7. Scoring

Who cares about who finished where? Just enjoy the wind, the water, and the friendly competition or you can score it using other



methods such as US Sailing Time-on-Time which uses PHRF