



Local Conditions Upper Hillsborough Bay in March, Tampa Florida

From Jeff Linton, local sailor, Lightning World Champion, five-time Sunfish North American Champion, past Prince of Wales Cup winner.

First, A Quick Picture of Racing at Davis Island Yacht Club

The club is located on Upper Hillsborough Bay. The open water to the South and West of the Club is where racing takes place. The Hillsborough River feeds Hillsborough Bay, which then leads into Tampa Bay, which in turn connects to the Gulf of Mexico. I'll refer to the waters as "the bay."

The bay is salt water. It warms up and cools quickly this time of year -- you may notice that the top 8 inches / 20 cm or so are warmer. The temperature ranges from 50-70° F / 10-20° C. Because land surrounds the bay, the bay often behaves like a lake. In light air, for instance, you would generally want to sail for the thermals (hot-land/cool-water breezes).

There's rarely a seaweed problem. It's smart, however, to check your board before races to make sure that it's clear of any debris — especially if it has rained recently. The water running off the streets of Tampa can bring plastic bags and such trash into the bay.

The bay is fairly shallow (10-12 feet / 3-3.5 meters deep), and chop develops quickly, especially when there's a long fetch, such as from the South/Southwest. This chop gets very interesting. It bounces off the concrete seawall on the West side of the bay (downtown Tampa) and Davis Island. You can surf upwind — and up the waves — on the rebound chop.

Be cautious while sailing off the racecourse: we don't have a rocky bottom, but you can still run aground hard on a sandbar. Watch for shallow water just off the dog park to the East of the club, along the seawall to the West of the club and off the gin pole rig amid the pine trees along the club driveway.

Tides

We have tides of about 2-3 feet / .6-1 meters, and they may run four a day, or two a day. They can flow as much as a half a knot or so. They will be stronger around the equinox in the middle of March. Look in the newspaper or other source for tide charts. As you're sailing, confirm the direction of the tide by looking at anchor lines, buoys, and marks on the racecourse.

Also important to note: shipping channels run along the eastern side of the bay. The deeper water (40 feet / 12 meters) makes a big difference in water flow. Obviously, water moves faster in the deep. So for instance, if the tide is going out, and you are heading for a mark that's down current — go for the channel side within reasonable limits.

Finally, watch for boat traffic in the channel. Not only are you obliged to keep clear, but also when a very large vessel moves through, current will be affected all over the bay.

Cold Fronts

Cold fronts drive the weather in the winter and spring in Florida. High-pressure fronts (spinning clockwise) travel from the Arctic in a fairly predictable pattern. Known as Canadian Clippers for their speed and chill, these weather fronts often appear as follows:

1. Cold front passes over north Florida. The center will tend to move east. The wind will pick up from the South. The air will be humid. There may be some high, fast-moving cloud cover. The wind may become gusty, especially if combined with thermals.

2. Cold front passes over Tampa Bay, sometimes with disturbed, squally weather. Clouds come. The temperature drops, the wind clocks through Northwest. This is generally the strongest velocity.
3. The air is dry and the weather is very bright after the cold front moves further south. The wind drops but continues to clock through North, possibly going Northeast.
4. The next cold front comes along.

Of course, the speed of each front varies. If the front is not very strong but moves quickly, this can all take place in a single day. Other times, it might take a week. Sometimes the fronts don't make it all the way through the area or they stall or back up. This is weather, after all.

When the cold front is perhaps 30 miles / 50 km to the North, you start to see big fluffy clouds and the wind often goes west. When you see bright, dry sky behind the clouds — especially the line between the clouds and the clear sky is very sharp — the breeze often goes Northwest. In these situations, you might find an advantage in going left in a cold puff, right in a warm puff.

The breeze might stay a day in the Northwest, and you'll generally have terrific sailing. When the wind goes into the North-Northeast, it gets odd and hard to predict.

Easterlies

If the cold front is not especially strong, or if it doesn't quite make it through the area, or if there's nothing else going on, we get a light Easterly. Easterly winds sometimes bring the smell of the industrial plants and shipping works on the East side of the bay. So if something smells funny -- it's probably an Easterly.

Oftentimes, the breeze will start moving in the early morning, peak at 10:30a.m. or so, and then die by 12 noon. The air will be sticky and very still. A haze may be seen along the horizon. Lovebugs (harmless black bugs that travel in pairs) may start appearing.

As you stand in the clubhouse, look down the bay at the open water. The point of land to the right in the middle distance is MacDill. When you see dark water at MacDill, you can be pretty sure it's the seabreeze, and it tends to fill by 1:30-2p.m. on an Easterly day.

Seabreeze

This time of year, the seabreeze comes in from the Southern quadrant, and it's most obvious on clear, very warm days, when the water is colder. The landmass of Florida, which lies to the East of your race area, heats up, produces cloud, and draws the wind from the West. This breeze tends to funnel up Tampa Bay and then up Hillsborough Bay to the racecourse. Just to make things interesting, there may be some conflicting seabreeze that develops over the peninsula to the west of the racecourse.

In general, the seabreeze will be more variable — both with gusts and oscillation — near shore, and steadier if sometimes lighter toward the middle or East part of the bay. As the seabreeze fills in, however, you can sometimes find a right lift on the West side of the bay.

Disclaimer, or, "It's never like this here!"

Of course, all weather is subject to strange variations, *especially* during regattas. There have been days when the wind blew 15kt from the East. There have been days when fog has come up and stayed all day, despite a breeze. We had a 5-day Northerly in September once. So bear in mind that this is not an exact science.

In general, I find the best information comes from three sources: the weather channel on cable television or NOAA on the radio, the local television news (channels 8,10,13), and observation. If the weatherman calls for a cold front, but the Southerly never picks up, then I would play conservative. If the weatherman calls for a cold front, and the clouds start forming, I'd tend to favor the right side of the course.

Best of luck out there — don't hit any manatees, and sail clean.