

Winter Winds in Sausalito. Forecasting wind in the summer is really pretty simple, at least for a sculler's purposes. Summer winds consistently blow inland from the ocean and come up fairly predictably in the late morning. By early afternoon, Bay Area sailors are rejoicing in 15 to 20 knots of steady wind coming through the Gate.

Most scullers are off the water by then, and if not, should at least be heading back into Richardson Bay to get some protection from those summer westerlies (winds are described by the direction they are coming from) by staying under the shelter of the Sausalito hills.

In winter, winds aren't so predictable. They can blow from any point on the compass. Worse, winter winds often come up very, very fast. What does this mean for rowers?

The Truth about Summer vs. Winter Rowing. Many people start their rowing careers in the summer, when the wind's timing and direction is so constant that it's soon second nature to expect that after 11 a.m. or so, there may well be a noticeable breeze and the best place to seek shelter is near the Sausalito shore where the hills give you some protection. But now it's winter, and as you roq off downtown Sausalito, you feel a breeze just starting to blow. Out of habit, you head in towards the Sausalito shore, only to find the water getting worse and worse, until you feel unable to balance and control your shell. How can this be?

You didn't check to see where the wind is coming from. If the wind is blowing at the Sausalito shore from Tiburon (the north-northeast), it's also pushing chop in that direction. That chop hits the Sausalito shore and bounces back. Now you have waves coming at you in two directions, making the water a washing machine mess. The harder the wind blows, the worse that effect gets. In winds averaging 15 knots, that bounce-back affect from the Sausalito shore out to the channel can be felt a few hundred yards away.

What if the wind blows straight up into Richardson Bay from San Francisco (the south-southwest), as it does before a weather front moves in during the winter?

Now the wind has an even bigger piece of water to blow across, and on which to build up chop, before it reaches Sausalito. This is when you see some of the biggest waves coming up Richardson Bay. The problem is there is no place for a sculler to hide — unless you can sneak into water protected by the Sausalito marinas. This is the wind that our building blocks so well and why the water off our dock looks fairly calm, while sailboats at anchor further out in the Bay are pitching wildly in the wind-driven chop.

If you're in doubt about conditions and see that the flags are waving but the water out in front of the boathouse looks pretty flat, walk to the other end of the marina. From up onto the docks that look south towards San Francisco, you'll see the whole picture. And, be sure to follow the pointers on the following page.

These six points sum up for me the heart of taking care of yourself on the Bay, where the biggest problems for rowers come from the tough, wind-generated chop which, in winter, can come up astonishingly fast and get astonishingly large compared to the sometimes choppy summer conditions. The difference? Location, location, location and direction, direction, direction!

— Shirwin Smith

