

The Racing Rules of Sailing are published in the UK by The RYA. They are revised every four years (to coincide with the Olympics).

A copy can be downloaded at [http://www.sailing.org/tools/documents/RRS2005-2008-\[502\].pdf](http://www.sailing.org/tools/documents/RRS2005-2008-[502].pdf)

The key rules which govern normal fleet racing take up about six A5 pages. They are written with great care, elegance and economy. Every word which is written (and every word which isn't written) means something. Pay particular attention to the definitions.

Dave Perry, in his excellent book Understanding the racing rules of sailing, United States sailing Association, 2004, takes 200 A5 pages to explain the six pages of rules.

You are unlikely to learn all of this before you first go racing. Besides, you need experience better to understand the rules.

There is no substitute for knowing the rules well. Learning them verbatim is not helpful. You need to know how they govern the many situations which occur on the water. Whilst you are polishing your knowledge, this abridged version might be helpful. Also, the RYA Handy Guide to the Racing Rules gives a simplified view of the basic racing rules. There are exceptions to what is written here. Do not take this document into a protest meeting.

The rules are designed to avoid collisions, damage and injury. They are also intended to maintain the relative positions of boats, as they come close to each other. They apply to boats competing in different races.

A port tack boat shall keep clear of a starboard tack boat.

A member of the Gareloch Class (I hesitate to say a senior member, few of will see 40 again) was irritated after he bought a pair of white sailing wellies. His friends painted the left one red for port and the right green for starboard. A boat is on starboard tack when the wind is coming over the starboard side of the boat. It follows that the boom will be over the port side; important when the wind is from behind and its not clear which side its on.

Mostly, the rule comes into force on windward legs when boats are crossing tacks. It also applies between boats reaching towards each other, before the start say. Provided they are on opposite tacks, it applies between a boat beating up to a mark and one on a collision course which has already rounded.

When boats are on the same tack and overlapped, a windward boat shall keep clear of a leeward boat.

There are complications to this rule (read the definition of clear astern, clear ahead and overlap) but always remember, windward boat keeps clear. This rule applies between a boat beating up to a mark and one on a collision course which has already rounded if they are on the same tack.

When boats are on the same tack and not overlapped, a boat clear astern shall keep clear of a boat clear ahead.

But, if you are going downwind on port tack, watch out for boats behind on starboard, clear of whom you must keep.

While tacking. After a boat passes head to wind, she shall keep clear of other boats until she is on a close hauled course.

When a right of way boat changes course, she shall give the other boat room to keep clear.

In a port/starboard, that usually means the boat on starboard holds her course.

In a windward/leeward overlap, (when boats are on the same leg) the leeward boat can turn as far as she likes into the wind (luffing) until she is head to wind. The leeward boat must luff sufficiently slowly to give the windward boat room to keep clear. The windward boat must keep clear. All this unless the leeward boat established the overlap by sneaking up from clear astern. Then, she cannot sail above her proper course. That is the course she would sail if the other boat wasn't there.

Have another read of the definitions of *clear ahead and clear astern, overlap; keep clear and room.*

Always remember, though, windward boat keeps clear.

Rounding marks.

Rule 18 takes up a page, so you know its going to be complicated.

If the mark is at the end of a beat to windward and boats are on opposite tacks, the boat on port must keep clear of the boat on starboard. Just as if the mark wasn't there.

Imagine a circle, two boat lengths radius, around the mark. Rights of way between boats rounding the mark depend on their relative positions when the leading boat touches that circle. If the boats were overlapped when the leading boat touched the circle, the outside boat shall give the inside boat room to round or pass the mark. If the leading boat was clear ahead, the boat that was clear astern shall, thereafter, keep clear.

As the rule itself says, "Other parts of Rule 18 contain exceptions to this rule". If you are going to be amongst other boats when rounding marks, careful study of Perry will pay.

Starting.

The official RYA starting sequence is as follows:-

Warning	Class flag, 1 sound	5 minutes before start.	
Preparatory	Flag P (usually), 1 sound	4 minutes before start.	You are now governed by the racing rules.
One-minute	Flag P removed, 1 long sound	1 minute before start.	
Starting	Class flag removed, 1 sound.		

Some, antediluvian, race committees use other, obsolete, sequences. Check your sailing instructions.

Rule 18 for rounding marks does not (usually) apply at a starting mark. If you are windward boat, you

are not entitled to room at the mark when you start. You must keep clear of a boat to leeward, which is allowed to squeeze you out.

Before the start, there is no proper course. That means that someone can establish an overlap to leeward from clear astern and luff you head to wind. They must give you room to respond, though.

Avoiding Contact

A boat shall avoid contact with another boat if reasonably possible. A right of way boat or one entitled to room (there are important differences, the definitions and Perry again) must try to avoid contact if it is clear that the other boat is not keeping clear.

Penal Servitude

You have transgressed if you force a boat which has right of way or one entitled to room to alter course so as to avoid a collision, or you touch it (that includes pushing off by hand or touching a sheet). The penalty is promptly to make 2 turns, including 2 tacks and 2 gybes.

If you touch a mark, the penalty is one turn.

If you do more than one thing wrong in any one incident, you only do 2 turns.

Whilst you are taking a penalty, you must keep clear of boats which are not.

If you think another boat has wronged you, you may protest. Hail "Protest" and conspicuously display a red flag at the first reasonable opportunity. That means pretty quickly. The boat against which you protest might, if she thinks she was in the wrong, do the penalty turns. If not you have 4 options:-

- 1) Forget it. Easy, but no one learns any more about the rules that way.
- 2) Request an advisory hearing within the time specified in the sailing instructions. Its voluntary, both parties have to agree. It can go ahead even if you didn't protest correctly (no red flag for instance). A club rules advisor will discuss the incident with the parties and suggest a 20% penalty (that is 20% of the number of entrants in the race or series added to a boat's race score) if it is thought someone broke a rule. Acceptance of the penalty is voluntary. The decision cannot be appealed.
- 3) Request an arbitration hearing. Similar to 2, but you need to complete a protest form and to have protested correctly. Either party may appeal by calling for a protest hearing.
- 4) Request a protest hearing. You need to have protested correctly and to submit a protest form within the time limit (which is extended for an appeal of an arbitration). The Protest Committee will hold a hearing at which you may call witnesses. It will determine what happened. A boat found to have broken a rule will be disqualified (unless she has already accepted a 20% penalty from an arbitration hearing). You can appeal the decision of a Protest Committee to the RYA. If you are thinking of that, though, your knowledge of the rules is beyond this abridged version.

You might think there is a stigma attached to pursuing a protest. There should not be. To quote Perry

“Protests that are the result of honest differences of opinions on the rules or observations of the incident should never have a negative taint to them. Quite the contrary, protests are an essential part of our competitor-enforced rule system and are expected, particularly in situations where a boat has gained an advantage in the race or series by breaking a rule.”