



Play by the Rules

THEY ARE NOT LIGHT READING, BUT AN OCCASIONAL REVIEW OF THE RULES OF THE ROAD WILL KEEP YOU PROFICIENT

Sailing outbound from my mooring field on a sailboat without an engine requires passage through a short bottleneck channel with a sandbar to port. Recently, as I sized up the narrow part of the channel, I observed a motorboat inbound, farther out. It appeared that he had slowed, waiting for me to come through. A light breeze was blowing straight in the cut, dictating I steer as close to the wind as possible to clear the bar. This limited maneuverability is exactly the reason a vessel under sail alone has the right of way over a power-driven vessel, according to the Rules of the Road.

Suddenly, the inbound motorboat throttled up, rushed across my bow from right to left and then steered hard to port toward us, asserting his position port-to-port between the sandbar and my boat. Perhaps in his view, he wanted to force a narrow channel passing situation (Rule 9).

"You aren't allowed to sail through here," he yelled to me. "Turn on your engine!"

I communicated my stand-on responsibilities and clearly claimed my right of way with two sentences. "Sorry, I have no engine," I replied. "I'm sailing here and have to hold my course until we clear the bar."

I couldn't turn away to starboard because

of the wind direction—we would have lost steerageway. He muscled through anyway, passing within feet of us and the sandbar. His actions put him in a tight spot and reduced safe passing distance.

Many boaters don't understand how a sailboat maneuvers on the wind and that's understandable. But the rules offer a basic acknowledgement of a sailboat's limitations, stating the need to slow or stop if necessary. This situation could have been prevented if the powerboat simply held his position for another minute until we cleared the bar.

Do you know exactly who has the right of way out on the water? The Rules of the Road prevent ambiguity. But even so, operators

Top: It may look like the J105 was crossing the Statue of Liberty ferry, but the ferry captain had maneuvering room to port and gave the sailboat racers right of way.

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are sometimes still in doubt. That's unfortunate, particularly with a Covid-related increase in recreational traffic on the water. To keep your family and friends safe on the water, make it a habit to review the Rules, which are also known as the COLREGS—Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea). They provide us with a code of conduct to rise above rude or ignorant behavior on the water.

It's hard to cover all the rules in one column but here are some highlights. In my view, Rule 5, the use of a proper lookout, is one of the most important to remember. "Every vessel shall at all times maintain a proper lookout by sight and hearing, as well as by all available means appropriate in the prevailing circumstances and conditions so as to make a full appraisal of the situation and of the risk of collision." This means radar and collision-avoidance equipment alone are no substitute for eyes and ears. Look out the windows and use your own good judgement.

If you've ever wondered what defines "safe speed," Rule 6 is explicit. It forces us to consider the consequences of throttling up and going, regardless of others' rights or their ability to maneuver to avoid a dangerous scenario. It makes it clear that a vessel operator is legally responsible for his own wake.

Assessing the risk of collision becomes second nature when you scrutinize the relative bearing of a potential collision target, as described in Rule 7. Watch how a target changes as you maintain course and speed. A steady bearing and decreasing range mean a collision is imminent. A relative bearing moving aft hints that the target will pass astern, and one with a forward change foretells of a target passing ahead.

Rule 8 describes how to be proactive if the risk of collision exists. Yes, we need to pass safely but we also need to demonstrate our intentions effectively to the other vessel. Change course early, make a large enough heading change to be understood and avoid small incremental alterations. Rule 8 is very clear about avoiding or assessing a collision. Slow down or take way off if necessary.

Which power-driven vessel has the right of way within sight? That's covered in Rules 13 through 15. When two power-driven vessels are crossing, the vessel with the other on her starboard side shall keep out of the way. The side-light memory aid

"red means stop" is useful. Meeting head-on, both vessels are expected to turn to starboard and pass port-to-port. At night, meeting vessels should see each other's masthead lights in line and red/green side lights. A vessel overtaking must keep clear of the vessel being overtaken.

Rule 12 describes which sailing vessel in sight of another boat sailing has the right of way. Rule 18 classifies the hierarchy of which vessels must stay clear of others. Remember that a sailboat with its sails up and its engine engaged is no longer classified as a sailing vessel. It's a power-driven vessel.

Commercial ships add another challenge to interpreting right-of-way rules. Often, because of their draft, ships can only navigate within a narrow channel—the real intention of Rule 9. Contrary to what some boaters think, there is no such thing as the rule of tonnage, but ships lack maneuverability, and many travel inland waters at maneuvering speeds of 12 to 15 knots. Do not cut across a ship's bow, and do not expect a ship to slow, stop or turn in a channel. They cannot slow or stop for us and they are sluggish to turn. Just stay clear.

Also remember that a ship's crew has difficulty seeing small craft. A ship's navigation bridge, located far aft of the bow, creates a significant blind spot ahead of the ship—sometimes more than 1,000 feet. When maneuvering to avoid a ship, make your course change early and substantial to make your intentions unequivocal.

Interactions between ships and recreational vessels are good reasons to consider equipping your boat with AIS. But don't forget that not all boats have it and the transponder must be switched on for AIS to be functional. A disabled AIS was the reason solo Vendee Globe sailor Boris Herrmann collided with a fishing boat on the last day of his voyage around the world in January. He relied on his alarm system to alert him to AIS signals, except the fishing boat had its system turned off. Remember Rule 5?

Make safety a priority. The Coast Guard Navigation Rules and Regulations handbook should always be on board. The Rules are not meant to be pulled out as a collision develops, but an occasional review will help you stay proficient. Are balls or diamonds used to indicate the side of a dredge that's safe to pass? Here's a hint: Diamonds are a captain's best friend.