

by Allan Hoffman

In the official Racing Rules of Sailing, even before the first rule, under the title “Basic Principle” and under the heading “Sportsmanship and the Rules” it says, *“Competitors in the sport of sailing are governed by a body of rules that they are expected to follow and enforce. A fundamental principle of sportsmanship is that when competitors break a rule they will promptly take a penalty, which may be to retire.”*

We have too many skippers who prefer to argue, or to just ignore it, when a protest is called on them rather than to take their penalty. The object of this article is to help instill that fundamental principle of sportsmanship in all of us.

In my reading, I have found many references to the Corinthian Spirit. Unfortunately, there is not as much written to explain exactly what that spirit is. It is presumed that the reader already knows. So that there will be no presumption about it, the Corinthian Spirit originated in the ancient Greek city of Corinth. The citizens of Corinth made some magnanimous gesture to someone else’s navy, or something; the details of that gesture are shrouded in history.

In the years since, the Corinthian Spirit has become closely associated with sailing and has come to mean:

- good sportsmanship
- respect for the rights of others
- the Seaman’s code of honesty, courtesy, and consideration towards other boats
- the idea of it not being if you win, but how you play the game that counts
- the desire to do the best you can with what you’ve got

Try to keep these concepts in mind as you race. The idea is to purposefully get out of a boat's way before you foul her. Also, realize that stuff happens while racing and everyone violates someone else’s rights on occasion. Don’t argue or defend yourself or rationalize, just take your penalty when you do it.

Think about it, assuming that you learn from your mistakes and you don’t make those mistakes again, you will eventually have made all the mistakes there are to be made and you will have learned to not make them again. The

closer each of us comes to that ideal, the more protest free the racing will be and the more fun we all have.

The American Model Yachting Association (AMYA) has been publishing a very good racing rules tutorial in Model Yachting, their quarterly magazine. At the time of this writing, the tutorial is in its sixth part, with more to come. AMYA has also published the tutorial on their web site, along with a list of pertinent definitions. They have made it available to everyone, AMYA member or not. I encourage you to read these tutorials. <http://www.theamya.org/rules.php>. The writer gives numerous detailed examples of racing situations and how the rules apply to them. There is a lot of information there, and a quick read-through will not be sufficient to give you true knowledge. You will have to visualize and understand the situations, and relate them to your own experiences. Just do it. Your efforts will be rewarded with fewer collisions for us all.

The rules, themselves, are available at: <http://www.theamya.org/resources/racerule.php>. Scroll down about two thirds of the page to the current RRS (Racing Rules of Sailing) links.

AMYA has also distributed a list of simplified rules as written by the President of the International Sailing Federation several years ago:

- Port keeps clear of starboard
- Windward keeps clear of leeward
- Astern keeps clear of a boat ahead
- Keep clear while tacking or gybing
- When you gain the right of way, or when you change course, give other boats time to keep clear
- Give room to (all) the inside boat(s) to round the mark
- Give room to a boat avoiding an obstruction
- Do not barge in at the start
- If you have violated a rule, take a penalty: and don’t wait to be called
- It is better to give way and avoid a collision or take a penalty, than to protest.

The simplified rules don’t cover every situation. They’re only simplified rules. They are intended to be an easy to remember reminder of the full rules.

Being able to apply the rules is as important as knowing them. You should try to anticipate situations, and plan what to do before you get there. A technique I like is to actually say to yourself things like, “What do I do if...”

- the other boat tacks?
- the other boat changes course?
- the wind shifts?
- I need to tack?

Of course, just asking yourself is not enough. You need to answer those questions to yourself, as well.

While there is no board to play on, the boats are analogous to chess pieces. They either affect, or are affected by, the other boats.

You try to prevent the other skippers from doing what you don’t want them to do, or you try to force them to do what you do want them to do.

You control other boats by you:

- being on starboard tack
- being the leeward boat
- getting an inside overlap at the mark

Why? Because you have the right-of-way and they have to stay out of your way.

Other boats control you by you:

- being on port tack
- being the windward boat
- not getting an inside overlap at the mark

Why? Because you are the give-way boat and you have to stay out of their way.

While racing, you will either be in the right-of-way position or in the give-way position. Your object is to be in the right-of-way position when it counts most, such as at the start, a mark rounding, or the finish. Possibly, by thinking ahead and taking the give-way position now, you will get the right-of-way position later.

Sailing very close to other boats induces the Rafting Effect. When several boats are in close proximity to each other, especially at slow speeds, they all seem to “raft” or stick together. The cause of the rafting (be it surface tension of the water or dirty air or something else) is less important than the effect of rafting. That effect is that if the boats move at all, they do it slowly and all together.

In no particular order, the following are common examples of rules violations that can be seen every week.

Example One

A close-hauled windward boat falls off the wind to avoid going into irons because she can’t point high enough and encroaches on a leeward, right-of-way boat that can point higher. When warned to keep clear by the leeward boat, the keep-clear windward boat will try to do so, but doesn’t or can’t, and when protested says, “... but there was no contact.” Meanwhile, the leeward boat may have had to alter her course to avoid contact, which may have screwed-up her course and speed to the next mark. While it was true that no contact was made, the rule has nothing to do with contact, it has to do with whether the windward boat kept clear.

The definition of keeping clear is, *“One boat keeps clear of another if the other can sail her course with no need to take avoiding action and when the boats are overlapped on the same tack, if the leeward boat can change her course in both directions without immediately making contact with the windward boat.”*

That means if your boat is overlapped with a leeward boat and you are so close that the other boat cannot maneuver, whether there was contact or not, you have fouled the other boat. If you are protested, don’t argue. You’re in the wrong. Just do your turn. In order to avoid the protest in the first place, tack away or leave enough room between you and the other boat.

Example Two

A boat will acquire an inside overlap within the four-boat length circle, and then call for room at the mark. Wrong! The inside overlap has to be established when the lead boat reaches the boundary of the circle. If there is an overlap at that time, then the inside boat is entitled to room at the mark, whether or not the overlap gets broken later within the circle.

If there is not an overlap at that time, then the inside boat is not entitled to room at the mark whether or not she establishes an overlap inside the circle. The inside boat then has two choices. Either to follow the lead boat around the mark, or try to pass her on the outside; just don’t get in her way because she still has rights at the mark.

How do you determine if an overlap existed? Rule 18.2(e) says it. *“If there is reasonable doubt that a boat obtained or broke an overlap, it shall be presumed that she did not.”*

Example Three

There are far too many times where the give-way boat does not give way, or just plain gets in the way. Not looking ahead far enough to see developing situations is the major source of rights infringements. If you focus only on your own boat, you will not see the mark roundings or crossing situations that you are sailing towards. This narrow view practically invites collisions. Why? By the time you find yourself in a situation, there is neither the time nor the room to avoid it.

Example Four

Appendix E of the Rules of Sailing has to do specifically with radio controlled sailing. It details concessions made for model yachts. The following rule has been modified to reflect one of those concessions.

44.1 A boat that may have broken a rule of Part 2 while racing may take a penalty at the time of the incident. Her penalty shall be a One-Turn Penalty unless the sailing instructions specify the use of the Scoring Penalty or some other penalty. However, if she caused injury or serious damage or gained a significant advantage in the race or series by her breach her penalty shall be to retire. The interesting part is what is underlined.

There is an unwritten “rule” that says, “If you can make it”, such as at a mark rounding or port-starboard crossing, “then there is no penalty”. This kind of thinking invites skippers to take the chance of breaking a rule, thereby causing problems when they don’t “make it”. The following scenario is a perfect example of that faulty thinking.

Several months ago, I was the lead boat to the windward mark at the North end. I approached on a port tack then tacked onto starboard outside the circle near the wall in order to gain the starboard tack advantage. Just as I was about to round the mark, two other boats, roughly even with each other, approached on port, very fast and very close to the mark. Their idea was to get there in front of me, round the mark, and be gone. I hailed that I was on starboard, but they ignored it. I held my course because I had the right-of-way and I believed that they would give way and take my stern. They didn’t and I t-boned one of them into the other one. They both

had enough momentum to slide off my bow and continue around the mark, as if they weren’t touched. I, however, was stopped dead in my tracks and was actually backing up from the rebound after the crash. Both boats told me that they did their penalty turn, and continued on racing.

By not giving way, both of those boats gained a significant advantage in the race by getting ahead of me and by getting ahead of all the other starboard tack boats approaching the mark that they would have had to duck behind had they followed the rules. Instead of doing penalty turns, those two boats should have retired. But, go tell them that.

Example Five

Barging at the start is commonplace. What is barging? It is not defined in the Rules, but it is when a windward boat tries to force herself between the starting mark and a leeward boat. Almost as common is when a windward boat is early to the starting line, then turns towards the lee and runs along the line in order to avoid crossing early, causing the leeward boats to do the same thing in order to avoid contact. Let’s see if I can put this subtly, “THE WINDWARD BOAT MUST KEEP CLEAR!” When you are early to the line and you’ve got nowhere to go, it’s already too late. You’ve blown the start. Just cross the line, circle one of the starting marks and cross the line again. Be sure to keep out of everyone else’s way, though. Until you start properly you have no rights over a boat that does.

At the starting mark a boat is not required to leave room for an inside overlapped boat. All over the rest of the course she is required to do so, but the starting mark is an exception to that rule. The outside boat is perfectly within her rights to force the barger to go to windward of the starting mark and to miss the start. If you find yourself being forced above the starting mark, again realize that you’ve blown the start and don’t fight it; just miss the mark, circle around and start properly. Don’t crash into everyone else in an attempt to force yourself across the starting line.

Learning how to get a good start is probably the most challenging part of sailboat racing. It is a matter of practice, practice, and more practice.