

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE RACING RULES OF SAILING (RRS): - OR RACING FOR RABBITS!

Like any sport sailing has a set of rules under which it operates. The Racing Rules of Sailing (RRS), as they are known, are complicated but for us to enjoy racing it isn't necessary to know them all in detail, we can get by quite well knowing just a few key things, and we shouldn't therefore, be worried by this complexity. The rules are there to ensure fairness and discourage overly aggressive or dangerous tactics. The RRS should therefore be seen as something affording us protection and, not as an encumbrance or something to make life difficult. They are there to help us and to ensure fair sailing, improving the quality of racing and increasing the enjoyment of everyone involved. It may help if you think of them as 'Rules of the Road' for sailing. When we drive our cars it is better if we obey the law and observe the Highway Code; giving way at junctions and roundabouts, stopping when the traffic lights are red, observing speed limits and so on. Imagine how unpleasant it would be and the carnage, if we all just drove as we wanted to with no rules and no consideration for other road users.

Fair play and sportsmanship is the bed rock upon which the sport of sailing is built and it is interesting that sailing gives such an emphasis to it when cheating; by deliberately breaking a rule, and hoping it isn't seen, or by attempting to intimidate other competitors and officials is endemic in many other sports and is tacitly accepted by competitors, coaches, managers, spectators and fans if it helps produce the results they want. In sailing we don't have a referee or umpire watching our every move, it is therefore incumbent upon everyone to sail and race within the rules and behave in a sportsmanlike and fair manner.

The '**Golden Rule**' of sailing is set down in the RRS as the:

***"Basic Principle - Sportsmanship and the Rules"***: - and this 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"***.

Well, that's pretty straightforward isn't it? If I break a rule I have to take a penalty, and if someone else breaks a rule, they have to take a penalty. Can't say fairer than that, but sometimes a competitor is unaware or reluctant to acknowledge that he/she has broken a rule and then the other party to the incident has no alternative but to call protest and the protested boat should then acknowledge fault and complete a penalty turn. However the other party may feel that they were not at fault and then the only course of action is for them to protest as well and let a protest committee,

at the end of the race, decide the outcome. The correct protest procedure is very important to fair sailing and should not be seen as a nuisance or interruption of the days racing. However a detailed explanation of the protest procedure is outside the scope of this document - but see ***“When a Protest Does Not Lead to Exoneration on the Water”*** by the same author. What mustn't happen is for both parties to ignore the incident and continue sailing as if nothing had happened, because this is in breach of the **'Basic Principle'** and is unfair to all the other competitors.

***N.B. It is essential that the two parties involved do not get into an argument about the incident. The RRS require action in the form of a penalty turn or retirement - which should be accepted with good grace - or a protest. They do not allow for any discussion or argument outside of a protest hearing, which would take place off the water and in private. We must always be aware that we sail in public places and any sort of argument is detrimental to the image of our sport and sours the atmosphere and spoils things for everyone present.***

There is a definition of sportsmanship which I have found helpful and it says it is;

***“Conduct - as fairness, respect for ones opponent and graciousness in winning or losing - becoming to one participating in a sport”.***

Keep that definition and the basic principle in mind all the time you are sailing and apply the principles embodied in them and you and everyone else will have a thoroughly enjoyable time.

Of course everyone makes mistakes from time to time, usually it is a simple error of judgement, someone pushing a bit too hard or taking a chance which doesn't come off. Most of the time a competitor can exonerate him/herself by taking a penalty promptly after the incident. To take a penalty the competitor must ***first sail clear of the fleet*** and then complete a full turn of the boat in one direction to include one tack and one gybe.

If you are to stay within the rules and avoid having to take lots of penalty turns, there are a few simple things you need to be aware of all the time that you are sailing.

Firstly and at all times, you need to know which tack your boat is on (port tack or starboard tack). A boat is on ***starboard*** tack when the wind is blowing onto the starboard (right hand) side of the boat and on ***port*** tack when the wind is blowing onto the port (left hand) side of the boat. Put more simply; when the main boom is on the left, the boat is on starboard tack and when the main boom is on the right the

boat is on port tack. You should also know what tack the nearby boats are on as well. The first rule we have to remember is therefore;

***A boat on port tack must keep clear of boats on starboard tack.***

Secondly, when we are sailing alongside another boat and on the **same tack** we need to know whether we are the **windward** boat or the **leeward** boat. The windward boat is the one on the windward side (or the side closer to the wind) of the other. Again look at which side of your boat the main boom is lying; if your main boom is lying towards the other boat then you are windward of it, if your main boom is lying away from the other boat then you are leeward. The second rule we have to remember is therefore;

***When on the same tack and overlapped a windward boat must keep clear of a leeward boat.***

When two boats are side by side and the main booms are lying in opposite directions then the boats are on **opposite tacks** and the **port/starboard** rule applies.

Thirdly, and this one is pretty straightforward, if you are directly behind another boat and on the **same tack** you must keep clear of it and avoid hitting it on the stern. The third rule we have to remember is therefore;

***When on the same tack a boat astern must keep clear of a boat ahead.***

Once again if the boats are on **opposite tacks** the **port/starboard** rule applies.

As you know it isn't possible for a yacht to sail directly into the wind so we make progress to windward by sailing at an angle across it. This is called **beating to windward** and whilst on this beat we will be either on **starboard tack** or **port tack**. Of course we can't stay on the same tack (beat to windward) all the time because we would simply sail off the course and the idea is to make progress towards the next mark, so at some time we have to change tack and we do this by using the rudder to bring the boat up into the wind, passing through head to wind, until the wind is coming onto the other side of the boat, the sails fill and the boat draws away on the **opposite tack**. So in a series of zig-zags, changing from tack to tack as necessary, it is possible for a sail boat to make progress in a windward direction. Any boat changing tack must keep clear of other boats - don't tack directly in front of, or into, another boat - so the fourth rule we have to remember;

***A boat tacking must keep clear of other boats.***

Rounding marks is one of the trickiest maneuvers we have to make and most incidents seem to occur here. The first thing is to imagine a circle or '**zone**' of four boat lengths around the mark, with the mark in the centre of this circle or zone. Any boat, (there may be more than one) which is **overlapped** with and **inside** your boat as you enter this zone is entitled to room to round the mark. The fifth rule we have to remember;

***Give room at the mark to all the overlapped, inside boats.***

Unfortunately the situation at marks is further complicated because the rule about giving room to round the mark - '**mark room**' - does not apply between **boats on opposite tacks on a beat to windward** or if **either boat passes head to wind** (tacks) within the zone. The simplest way of remembering this is; '**at the windward mark, when boats are on opposite tacks, take the mark away**'. The windward mark is usually the first mark following the start, and take it away means imagine there is no mark and then apply the usual rules i.e. port/starboard, ahead/astern, windward/leeward, keep clear whilst tacking. So the sixth rule we have to remember is;

***At the windward mark, when boats are on opposite tacks, take the mark away and apply the usual rules.***

When boats are on the **same tack**, the usual **mark room** rules apply.

Lastly, and very importantly;

***if you have broken a rule, take a penalty; and don't wait to be called.***

***It is all about sportsmanship and self policing.***

***Hailing.***

When you are on starboard tack and approaching a boat on port tack there is no obligation on you to call '**starboard**' to remind the other boat to keep clear but if you make a habit of not hailing you may become involved in incidents unnecessarily. Similarly, hailing for '**room at the mark**' or hailing '**no room at the mark**', are useful hails which will often remove doubt and avoid disputes, although not required by the RRS. Hailing or calling to another boat or boats should be used as a means of providing information and clarifying a situation, and should never be used as a chastisement or a form of intimidation. The hail must however be loud and clear enough that it is heard by the parties concerned and any observers who may be nearby.

This is a very simplified version of what are, in my view, the most essential of the RRS. Learn and apply these and you will soon be racing with confidence and without having to take too many penalty turns. Inevitably, in this short article, there are many situations not covered and others not covered in much depth, so at some time you will need a book that explains the RRS thoroughly and you must study it if your racing is to develop and improve in the way you will most probably want. Racing a sail boat is about much more than just sailing fast, although boat speed is important. It has often been described as 'chess on water' with competitors first identifying a race strategy and then boat on boat and race tactics to gain an advantage. It is this challenge that makes our sport so addictive, worthwhile, rewarding and fun. Most of us tire and become bored quite quickly with activities that are too easy to master.

There are many books available which cover and explain the RRS in detail, however, the rules are revised following every Olympic Games, so if you are thinking of buying a rule book bear this in mind. The next rule book revision is due out in January 2013 and will cover the period 2013 - 2016.

Some examples of books primarily covering the Racing Rules of Sailing;  
'The Rules in Practice' by Bryan Willis.  
'The Rules Book' by Eric Twiname.  
'Paul Elvstrom explains The Racing Rules of Sailing' lots of detail and explanation in this one.  
'RYA Handy Guide to Racing Rules' - especially suitable for newcomers.  
'RYA Racing Rules of Sailing' - which includes the 'RYA Racing Charter'  
'RYA Racing Rules Explained' by Trevor Lewis - for those looking for detail and full explanations.

Some examples of books primarily covering race strategy and tactics;  
'Start to Win' by Eric Twiname.  
'RYA Start to Race' by Jeremy Lewis  
'RYA Tactics' by Mark Rushall  
'Positioning - The Logic of Sailboat Racing' by Stuart H Walker.  
'Winning in One Designs' by Dave Perry.

These books and many others are available from; [www.rya.org.uk](http://www.rya.org.uk)  
[www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk) [www.sailingbooks.co.uk](http://www.sailingbooks.co.uk) and other good book sellers.

There is also a very useful on-line rules game at [www.finckh.net](http://www.finckh.net)