

Starting Line

April 2013



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Small Yacht Sailing Club of Oregon

From the Commodore

In like a lion, out like a lamb

So, here I sit at work on Monday morning, still tenderly nursing the bumps and bruises I received from being thrown about the cockpit of Wy'East on Saturday, the first day of the PYC-SYSCO Opening Day Regatta. It was a truly wild ride; tons of wind, the dismasting of a non-participating cruising boat as it meandered through the race course, plenty of round-ups and broach a collision, and a number of hull speed-plus downwind runs.

SYSCO was in charge of the on the water functions of the regatta, and our committee did its usual excellent job. Under the direction of Captain Billy Sanborn and Vice Commodore Warren Dalby, Phil Campagna, and their RC volunteers, kept the starting line square and the fleets moving. In fact, they almost did too good of a job on Saturday, managing to squeeze in four races in spite of the carnage and mayhem all around the committee boat.

Sunday, we limped and hobbled back aboard Wy'East and sailed into NOTHING. The fleets motored about yacking, Lynn Easton came out and gave us a Coast Guard safety inspection, and we attempted without success to get off a race, and went home early; whew!

What a great way to start the 2013 racing season, with SYSCO doing what it does best, always adhering the KISS "keep it simple, stupid" approach to small yacht racing.

SYSCO rocks! I'll be missing you, sadly, for the spring series since Wy'East will be off sailing its 20th Oregon Offshore/Swiftsure. See you this summer.



- Frank Colistro, Commodore

Drunkard's guide to the R.R.S.

By Tod Bassham

The 2013-16 Racing Rules of Sailing (RRS) are now in effect, the governing rules that define the “game” of sailboat racing. Unfortunately, the new rules offer little improvement over earlier versions, which—judging by the results—were apparently drafted by a panel of law school dropouts on a meth-fueled weekend in Tijuana. The RRS suffers from several well-known design flaws, described below. But the main problem, I will argue, is that the racing rules are so freakishly complicated that it takes a Ph.D in Linguistics or the patience of a Talmudic scholar to understand and apply them.



Few sailors qualify as scholars of any sort. Let's be honest: most sailors' knowledge of the rules is gained from boozy discussions with their sailing buddies at a tavern, using beer mugs and coasters to represent boat positions. Few if any sailors have actually read the 184-page rule book. What is needed, I contend, are simpler rules that are directed at that typical sailor sitting on the tavern stool. Lawyers talk about the “Reasonable Man” as a legal standard. I say the racing code should be based upon the Reasonably Inebriated Person (RIP). Expressed more plainly, the question we need to ask in evaluating any racing rule is: would this rule make sense to a drunken sailor? If not, I say chuck it out. In that spirit, then, I offer to a candid world: the Drunken Sailor's Guide to the Racing Rules of Sailing.

But first, let's examine some of the notorious flaws in the current rules.

Flaw No. 1: Much of the rule “meat” is located not in the actual rules, but in a list of defined terms. We can be grateful that for 2013-16 the rules authors decided to locate the definitions in the *front* of the book, instead of placing them at the end, lost amid a dozen appendices. That small comfort aside, the fact remains that many definitions are chock-a-block

with substantive rules and restrictions. For example, after defining the key term “proper course,” the drafters go on to provide that a boat has no proper course before her starting signal. This turns out to be critically important bit of information that has nothing to do with the actual meaning of “proper course,” and everything to do with how several rules get applied during a race. On behalf of RIPs everywhere, I say: definitions should simply define the meaning of key terms, not act as pseudo-rules.

Flaw No. 2: Certain critical information is located in “preambles” to rule sections. I’m sorry, but a Reasonably Inebriated Person doesn’t have the time or mental bandwidth to read prefaces, introductions, appendices, forwards or preambles. If it is important, put it in the frickin rule. The worst culprit in this regard is the preamble to Section C, which states that Section C rules do not apply at a starting mark “from the time boats are approaching to start” (whatever that means) until they have passed the starting mark. This preamble is the only clue that some Really Important Rules, like Rule 18 (Mark-room) and Rule 19 (Room to Pass an Obstruction), are not going to help you in the starting scrum. The actual rules suggest nothing of the kind. As a self-appointed spokesperson for RIPs of the world, I deplore this kind of shoddy draftsmanship.



Flaw No. 3: Some rules mysteriously turn off and on again in the blink of an eye, unless an exception applies, and if no exception to the exception applies. This design flaw is endemic in the rules. Take for example Rule 18 (Mark-Room), which “turns on” when overlapped boats enter an invisible circle three boat-lengths from a mark, and grants the inside boat room to pass or round the mark, even if it otherwise lacks the right to insist on doing so. As you can imagine, reasonable persons—especially Reasonably Inebriated Persons—can disagree as to when the bow of the lead boat crosses an imaginary line that, it should go without saying, no one can actually see.

Even if there no dispute about when Rule 18 turns on, the right to mark-room under Rule 18 can suddenly vanish in the blink of an eye under several poorly-defined circumstances. Worse, the rules neglect to state when Rule 18 “turns off,” leaving plenty of scope for disputed mark roundings. As noted above, the *preamble* to Section C does suggest, obscurely, that Rule 18 applies before the start, at least until the time the boats concerned are “approaching” a starting mark to start, at which time Rule 18 presumably goes poof and the inside boat suddenly loses the right to mark-room. But even in that circumstance other rules, such as a proper course restriction in Rule 17, may suddenly “turn on” and effectively prevent the outside right of way boat from shutting the door on the inside boat. It is hard enough for a Reasonably Inebriated Person to recognize where they are in the starting sequence; expecting RIPs to know in the moment that one rule has gone poof and another has magically switched on is asking more of human nature than it can stand.



Flaw No. 4: Some rule violations can be “exonerated.” For example, if a boat is sailing within the mark-room granted by Rule 18, and violates another rule, she is exonerated, meaning no penalty is attached. What is the point of having rules if boats can violate them with impunity? Reasonably Inebriated Persons struggle to understand this bizarre twist in the rules.

OK, nuff said. We’ve seen that the current rules are a mess, and that the average or typical sailor, *i.e.*, the Reasonably Inebriated Person, cannot possibly comprehend their mysteries while sitting at the tavern counter, much less apply them in real time on the race course. What to do?

I submit that the rules need to be revised with drunken sailors in mind. Let's see what that would look like.

The Section A rules are pretty simple, and work well for the RIP. Rule 10 (On Opposite Tacks) needs no changes. Most skippers are right-handed and prefer starboard tack, because it means they can steer with their left hand while using their dominant right hand to bring the bottle of beer accurately to their lips. Right-handed skippers on port tack use their weaker left hand to drink, and are probably spilling beer everywhere. The rules *should* penalize sloppy drinking, so Rule 10 is ok by me.

Same with Rule 11. Compared to a heeling windward boat, the leeward boat is wind-shadowed and more on an even keel, which favors precision drinking. I say give the leeward boat right of way over the beer-spiller to windward.

Ditto for Rule 12 (On the Same Tack, Not Overlapped). In an overtaking situation, the boat ahead is slower, undoubtedly because the crew is focused on operating the battery-powered blender. It makes no sense to require a boat engaged in serious mixology to give way to some frivolous, speed-happy teetotaler.

And no Reasonably Inebriated Person can find fault with Rule 13 (While Tacking), and Section B's Rule 15 (Acquiring Right of Way) and Rule 16 (Changing Course). Each of these rules in various ways limit the movement of boats, particularly right-of-way boats. If you can't drink and steer a steady course, you have no business racing sailboats.

But Rule 14 (Avoiding Contact) needs tweaking. Rule 14 properly requires all boats, even right-of-way boats, to avoid contact if reasonably possible, but it purports to "exonerate" the right of way boat from any penalty if the contact



results in no boat damage or personal injury. This is woefully inadequate. I say that if contact results in a spilled beverage, then the right of way boat should *not* be exonerated. If *both* boats suffer beverage losses, then both crews should retire immediately to the nearest tavern.

And don't get me started on Rule 17 (On the Same Tack; Proper Course), a complicated rule that is intended to limit the "luffing rights" of boats that establish an overlap from clear astern within two boat lengths of a windward boat on the same tack. For reasons that no Reasonably Inebriated Sailor can comprehend, the RSS is obsessed with "luffing rights." It's time to dump that antiquated concept. I say we start talking about "chugging rights." If a skipper wants to leave her proper course to interfere with another boat, that skipper should first earn the right to do so by chugging a tall boy. The skipper of the other boat can either give way, or choose to defend her position by promptly chugging two tall boys, in which case the "onus" is placed back on the first skipper to up the ante, and so on. Now, that's a rule that Reasonably Inebriated Sailors will have no trouble understanding.

Ok, now it is time to face up to the Big Kahuna of rules, Rule 18 (Mark-Room), a freakishly complicated 5-part rule that is intended to make mark roundings orderly and safe, but is simply a nightmare for the RIP. As noted above, its chief flaw is that it depends on the delusion that magical invisible fairy rings are floating on the water. That problem aside, the rule is just gibberish, with all sorts of sub-sections about when the rule does or does not apply, what happens when a boat tacks, circumstances when a boat must gybe, etc. My solution is simple: at some point when two boats are approaching

the mark, the two skippers make eye contact, and simultaneously start chugging a frosty tall boy. The first one that finishes gets to round the mark ahead of the other. End of rule.

The next two Section C rules, Rules 19 and 20, have something to do with passing and hailing for room at an obstruction, but both of them just hurt my head. I guess my only comment is about the narrow definition of "obstruction." To my mind, if a skipper suffering from delirium tremens happens to see a large purple polka-dotted elephant off her bow, and hails for room in order to avoid colliding with the elephant, the rules should treat the elephant as a legitimate obstruction.



There are scads of other rules, but no sailor—much less any Reasonably Inebriated Sailor—has ever read them, so they must not be important. Get rid of them.

To sum up, the current RSS is a mess; beyond the comprehension of the average sailor sitting at the bar counter trying to diagram boat positions in puddles of beer-condensation. Without rule reform, mayhem will continue to prevail on the race course, as befuddled skippers drift helplessly about, holding a beer in one hand and a 184-page rule book in the other, attempting to discern the “intent” of Rule 18. Let us return to the simpler days of yore, when the racing rules fit on a beer-stained postcard, and stomach pumps were more important equipment than bilge pumps.¹

In closing, I’d like to lead all sailors, inebriated or not, in a rousing chorus of the classic song:

What shall we do with the drunken sailor?

What shall we do with the drunken sailor?

What shall we do with the drunken sailor?

Ear-lie in the morning!

Read ‘er the rules until she’s sober

Read ‘er the rules until she’s sober

Read ‘er the rules until she’s sober

Ear-lie in the morning!



¹ Despite appearances to the contrary, the author does not condone consuming alcohol while racing, and Boating Under the Influence is no laughing matter. Yet, the fact that racing sailors are fond of their grog on and off the water, and the fact that even reasonably sober sailors struggle to understand the racing rules, are inherently funny, and the author cannot resist conflating the two. Anyone else puzzled by this quirk of human nature is invited to discuss the matter with the author at his favorite watering hole. Please leave your rule-book at home.

SYSCO Board Meeting Minutes

The April board meeting began promptly at 7pm at the Delta Park Elmer's. Attending members were; Bill Sanborn, Frank Colistro, Ryan Rodgers, Phil Campagna, and Warren Dalby, Rich Jones, and Gary Bruner.

Treasury

This year is shaping up to be a tight year since membership is down compared to years past.

Membership

Membership is down from last year; however, more members are expected to join once the season starts.

Racing

Much discussion about length of chain, weight of anchor, and length of rode took place. In the end, combinations of all three were adopted to help keep the marks to stay in place during the spring runoff.

Multihulls have expressed interest in racing with the monohulls. Until there are enough multihulls to make a one design, we elected to put them with the A fleet.

Social

The board discussed the options for collecting feedback from the race clinic. If you haven't already filled out your questionnaire, please take time to do so, so we can better serve our members.