

START WELL – FINISH WELL.

A good start is vital to achieving a good finishing position in a yacht race. The start is one time when boats are in close proximity to one another, and a solid knowledge of the rules as well as good boat handling skills are necessary to be able to consistently achieve good starts. This article looks at the rules applicable at the start of a race and investigates how you can use the rules to best advantage.

The Racing Rules of Sailing turn on one minute prior to the start of the race. Boats which infringe the rules during this final minute are required to perform an alternative penalty as soon as possible. They do not have to wait until the starting signal has sounded.

There are 4 rules of Section A of Part 2 of the Racing Rules of Sailing which primarily dictate the movement of boats, with limitations on these movements provided by the rules of Section B.

Section A dictates that:

- A boat on starboard tack has right of way over a boat on port tack
- A windward boat must keep clear of a leeward boat
- A boat clear astern must keep clear of a boat clear ahead and
- A boat tacking must keep clear of a boat on a tack

There are limitations placed on right-of-way boats by Section B.

1. If a boat on starboard encounters a boat on port, the starboard boat shall avoid contact if reasonably possible. The starboard boat does not have to commence keeping clear until it is obvious that the port boat is not keeping clear. (Rule 14 a)
2. A right-of-way boat need not anticipate that the other boat will not keep clear. (Case 87)
3. When a boat becomes overlapped to leeward from clear astern, the other boat must act promptly to keep clear. When she cannot do so in a seamanlike way, she has not been given sufficient room. (Case 24)
4. A boat clear ahead need not anticipate her obligation to keep clear before being overlapped to leeward from clear astern. (Case 53)
5. When a boat acquires right of way, she shall **initially** give the other boat *room to keep clear*, unless she acquires right of way because of the other boat's actions. (Rule 15)
6. When a right-of-way boat changes course, she shall give the other boat *room to keep clear*. (Rule 16.1)

The preamble to Section C of the rules (Rules at Marks and Obstructions) states that the Mark rounding rules are not applicable at a starting mark surrounded by navigable water. Therefore, a boat to windward is not entitled to mark room at a starting mark.

TACTICS AND BOAT HANDLING AT THE START

Rule 10: Starboard Tack has right of way

Under most circumstances, boats should plan to start the race on starboard tack.

The exception would be on a start line which is difficult to cross on starboard tack or one with a very heavy port end bias. Even in these situations, it can be safer to start on starboard but in a position to tack onto port either at the start, or very soon afterwards.

Rule 11: Windward boat keep clear

Many skippers make the mistake of sheeting their sails in with too much time remaining prior to the start. This builds boat speed and results in arriving at the start line too soon. At this point, skippers are reluctant to cross the start line and commence reaching along the line. They find themselves in a position to windward of other boats and in danger of a breach of Rule 11 (Windward boat:keep clear)

The skill to master is being able to time the sheeting in so that the boat hits the start line at full speed just as the start signal sounds. This takes lots of practice and experience to achieve regularly.

Some techniques which may be helpful:

- Establish a position in the lead up to the start which places your boat ahead and to leeward of the fleet. Boats approaching from behind need to pass to windward (in which case they have to keep clear) or leeward (in which case they need to give you room to keep clear and you do not have to anticipate the overlap being established).
- If you are able to hold boats to windward and create a hole to leeward, it gives you space to sail into just prior to the start to build boat speed. Timing the run into the space is a skill to practice.
- Holding the boat in position can be achieved using the sheets to pull the sails in until the leech of the main just catches some wind and holds the boat in the direction you wish, without generating any forward movement.
- A skill to practice is sailing your boat really slowly. If you can control your boat at slow speed and hold a good position then accelerate, it will help you get good starts. Takes practice though!
- Practice learning where to position your boat so that you are able to sail on the 'lay line' to the starboard end of the start line, rather than positioning your boat above that line.

What can you do if you find yourself in position too early?

- There is no rule which prohibits skippers from wagging their rudder to slow the boat down prior to the start. It can be useful to waggle the rudder to wash off boat speed in some circumstances.
- On many occasions, making an early decision to cross the start line and sail back around to the pre-start side of the line can be useful. Ensure the “Black flag” rule is not in place though. Making an early decision to cross and sail around the end will place the boat at the starboard end of the line, possibly not in the front of the fleet, but in a position to hold other boats on starboard, and maintaining the ability to tack when you want.

If you find yourself the leeward boat, with boats to windward of you, you may luff as far as head to wind prior to the start, as there is no proper course until the start. This can be a dangerous tactic, as a change of wind direction may tack your boat involuntarily, or you may find yourself sitting head to wind with no ability to move forward. Remember that a boat moving astern must give way to a boat which is not. (Rule 21.3) Also, as the right of way boat, you must give the windward boat room to keep clear, so you cannot slam your helm over and push head to wind in a rapid movement. The motion needs to be gradual, and in such a way that the boat to windward is able to react to.

Keep in mind that you are not required to make room for a boat to windward at the starting mark.

If you have moved into this leeward position from astern, you must initially give the boat to windward room to keep clear, including room for the windward boat’s transom to swing to leeward. Many boats sail so close, that their bow finishes up lodged in between the main boom and the port gunwale of the boat to windward. Clearly, this is not sufficient room to keep clear.

In addition, if your boat sails into this leeward position with speed, it can cause a problem, as the case book clearly states that the boat to windward need not anticipate that an overlap is about to occur, and does not have to take any action to keep clear until the overlap is established. If the leeward boat is moving quickly, there is a good chance that the windward boat will not receive the required room to keep clear that it is entitled to.

Rule 12: A boat clear astern must give way to a boat clear ahead.

There is nothing more frustrating than sitting waiting for the start, and having another boat run into your transom, pushing you over the start line, just as the race starts. You are called as being “OCS” (on course side) through no fault of your own. There is no exoneration available to you, and the boat behind merely has to sail an alternative penalty before continuing. There is not a lot you can do in this situation, and is a risk of sitting too close to the start line too early.

Rule 13: A boat tacking must keep clear of a boat on a tack.

This rule does not allow a boat to tack and interfere with a boat on a tack. A boat on port tack approaching another (or a group of boats) on starboard, must not tack in such close proximity that the boat/s on starboard tack must avoid the tacking boat. Take care if you approach the leeward end of a group of boats not to tack too close to those boats.

The boat handling skills to practice are sailing very slowly and trying to hold your boat in a position without moving forwards. Then practice getting your boat up to speed as quickly as possible from this almost stationary position. If you can achieve these skills, and have an understanding of the rules, then your starting ability is sure to improve.

Naturally, different classes have different characteristics. The starting technique for an A Class is likely to be very different to that of a Micro Magic or One Meter. Similarly, a Marblehead or Ten Rater might take far too long to get up to speed, and a more timed approach to the starting line might be in order. However, this risks finding yourself in the second or third row of boats without a hole to sail into to get to the front!

All of this makes starting a yacht race a fairly complicated process – particularly when you are involved with a large fleet. How often do you hear the complaint that “I can’t get a good start today”? Perhaps we ought to spend more time practicing starting than we spend racing. How often do we do this – not very often at all.

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