

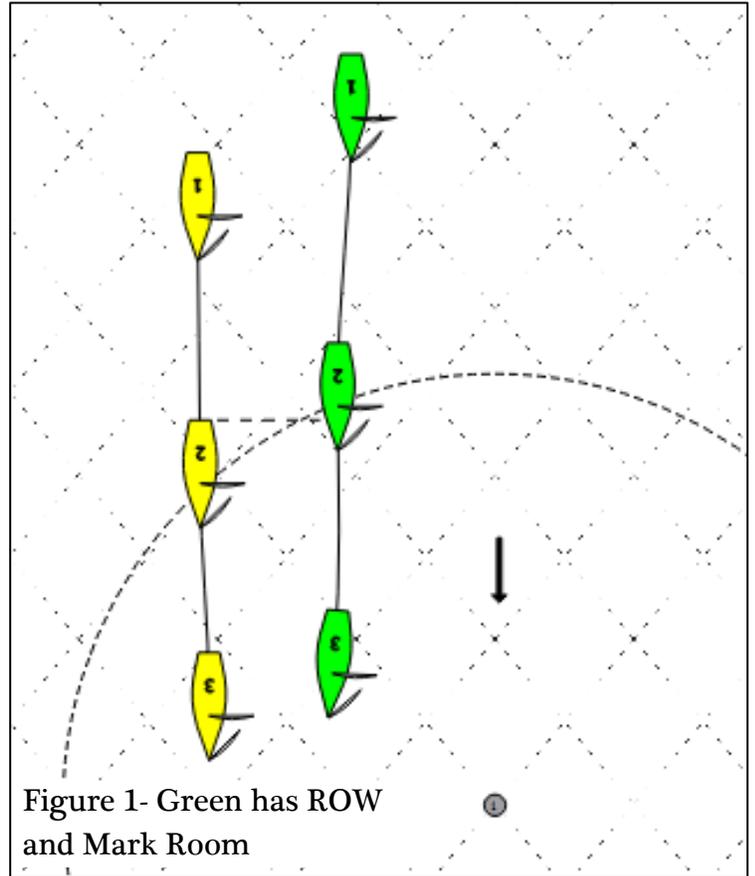
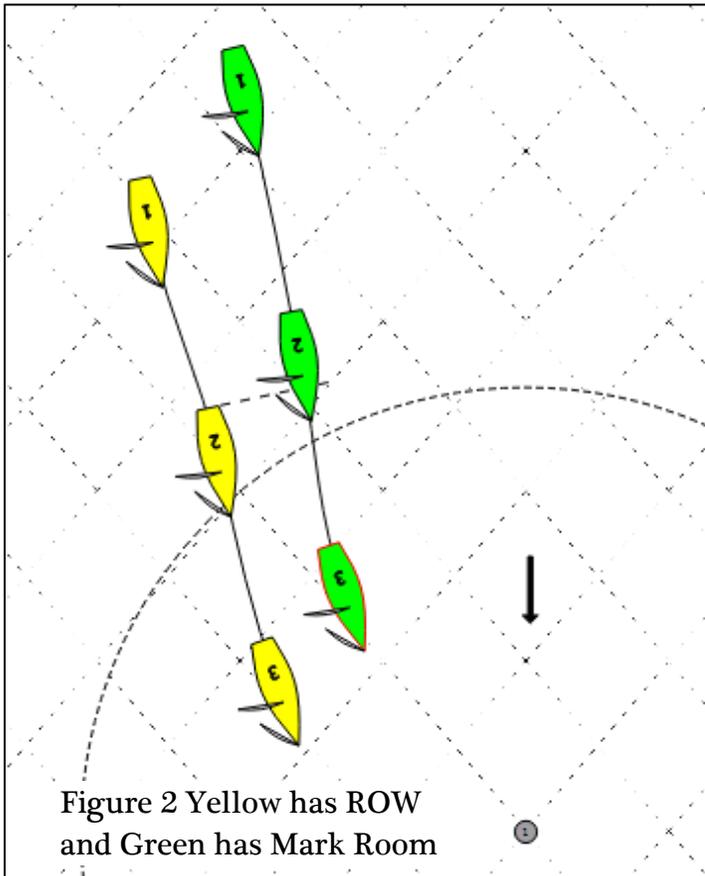
Proper Course

John Ball

How many times has another skipper yelled at you (or have you yelled at them) to “Sail your proper course!”? It may surprise you that there is no rule in the Racing Rules of Sailing (the RRS) that requires a boat to sail her proper course! There is a rule that says that you should not sail higher than your proper course (R17). There are rules that require you to allow the other boat to sail her proper course (parts of R18) – but no rule to actually require you to sail your proper course. So when you are racing, you can sail wherever you want – however, there may situations where a rule requires you to keep clear of, or give room to another boat – but that is nothing to do with proper course!

Right of Way vs. Mark Room vs. Proper Course

Before we discuss Proper Course, the first thing to get our heads around is that there is a big difference between Right of Way (ROW), Mark Room and Proper Course. You can be ROW and have (or not have) Mark Room, and conversely, you can be the Keep Clear boat and have (or not have) Mark Room. Once you have Mark Room, then you may sail close to the mark if your proper course from your current position, would be to sail close to the mark.



In Figure 1, Yellow and Green are overlapped as they reach the Mark Zone, with Yellow to leeward and has ROW under R11(W/L), but Green is inside boat and is entitled to Mark Room under R 18.2.b. Yellow as ROW controls how wide or tight Green is allowed to round the mark. In Figure 2, Yellow and Green are overlapped as they reach the Mark Zone. Green has ROW under R 11 (W/L) and gets Mark Room under R 18.2.b. Green gets to control how wide they approach the mark. So Green as ROW gets to do a wide in/close out ‘tactical’ rounding.

Some Definitions from the RRS

When you read the rules, some words appear in *italics*. That means that those words are defined words – i.e. they have a special, precise meaning when used in a rule. The Definitions section is right up front in the rule book, the RRS. Let's look at a couple of the Definitions in the RRS where Proper Course is mentioned.

Definitions

Proper Course A course a boat would sail to *finish* as soon as possible in the absence of the other boats referred to in the rule using the term. A boat has no **proper course** before her starting signal.

The definition 'Proper Course' describes what Proper Course is BUT also limits its application to situations where a rule specifically invokes 'Proper Course'. It also says that before the Starting signal; even those references do not apply.

The (now defined) term Proper Course also appears in the definition of Mark Room.

Mark-Room Room for a boat to leave a *mark* on the required side. Also,

(a) room to sail to the *mark* when her **proper course** is to sail close to it, and

(b) room to round the *mark* as necessary to sail the course.

However, *mark-room* for a boat does not include room to tack unless she is *overlapped* inside and to *windward* of the boat required to give *mark-room* and she would be *fetching* the *mark* after her tack.

In this definition, if a boat has Mark Room, she is allowed to sail close to the mark and pass it on the correct side, as long as her proper course from her current position would be to pass close to the mark. This means "Don't get between the mark and a boat that has Mark Room, if her proper course would be to sail close to the mark.

How the Rules are organized

If we look at how the RRS are put together, we will find that there are only four ROW rules (so it should be easy to learn and apply them). They are found in the **RRS, Part 2- When Boats Meet**. Then Part 2 is further divided into sections.

Section A contains the **Right of Way** Rules. Briefly, the four ROW rules are:

R 10 Port keeps clear of Stbd,

R 11 Windward keeps clear of Leeward,

R 12 Clear Astern keeps clear of Clear Ahead, and

R 13 Tacking Boat keeps clear.

Section B contains some General Limitations on the ROW boat. These are

R 14 Avoid contact, and includes exoneration for breaking R 14,

R 15 Give room when acquiring ROW (i.e. when ROW changes from one boat to another),

R 16 ROW boat altering course gives room, and

R 17 Same Tack: Proper Course that we will review shortly.

Section C covers Marks and Obstructions and includes
R 18 Mark Room,
R 19 Obstructions,
R 20 Hailing for room at Obstructions, and
R 21 Exoneration for breaking a rule of Section C.

It is important to note that R 18 (and R 19) does not grant nor take away ROW, rather they sometimes requires a ROW boat to give Mark Room (or room) to a Keep Clear boat. In addition, when you sail within the Mark Room (or room) to which you are entitled, and there is a contact with another boat or with the mark (R31), then the boat with Mark Room (or room) is exonerated under R 21 – HOWEVER, if you get greedy and take more than the Mark Room (or room) to which you are entitled, R 21 will not protect you and you are subject to the ROW rules of Part A and the Limitations of Part B.

Understanding Proper Course

Rules and ISAF Cases

There are only three rules in the RRS that include the defined term Proper Course. They are R 17, R18 (several times) and R24. We'll look at each separately. I have copied parts of each rule from the RRS, and then listed the ISAF Cases from the Case Book that relate to that rule. First, we will look at what happens when a boat is overtaking from clear astern and to leeward and how R17 applies.

R 17 ON THE SAME TACK; PROPER COURSE

If a boat *clear astern* becomes *overlapped* within two of her hull lengths to *leeward* of a boat on the same *tack*, she shall not sail above her *proper course* while they remain on the same *tack* and *overlapped* within that distance, unless in doing so she promptly sails astern of the other boat. This rule does not apply if the *overlap* begins while the *windward* boat is required by rule 13 to *keep clear*.

Applying R 17

In Figure 3, Green is overtaking from astern. At P1, Yellow is ROW (R12 Ahead/Astern). At P2, they become overlapped and ROW changes to Green under R11 (W/L). However, in this case, as ROW changes, we must also look at R 15 which says

R15 ACQUIRING RIGHT OF WAY

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.

Now, Green has created a problem for herself because she established the overlap so close to Yellow, she has failed to give room to Yellow, even though there is no contact! The definition of room requires that Yellow be able to alter course IN BOTH

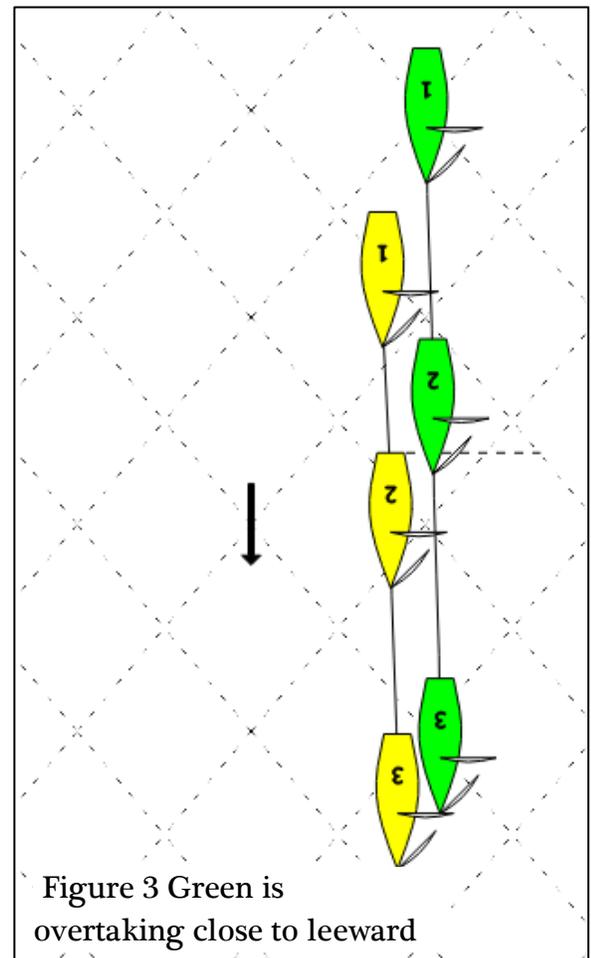
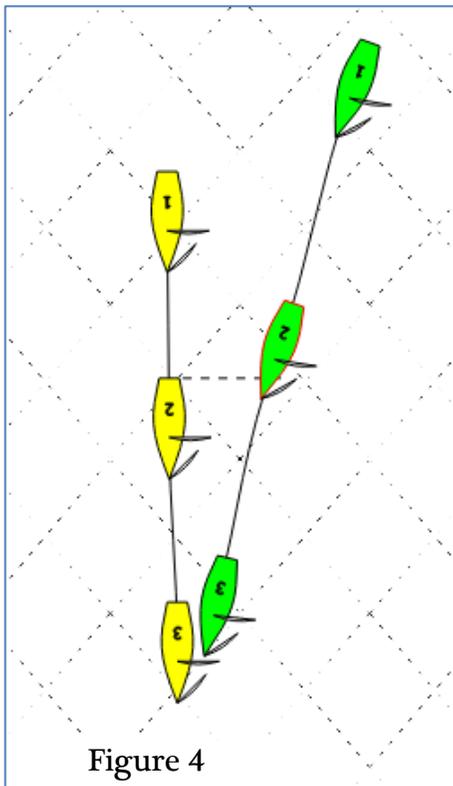


Figure 3 Green is overtaking close to leeward

directions. At P2, if Yellow puts her helm down to head up, her stern will swing to leeward and contact Green!

See ISAF Case 7 which says “When, after having been clear astern, a boat becomes overlapped to leeward within two of her hull lengths of the other boat, the windward boat must keep clear, but the leeward boat must initially give the windward boat room to keep clear and must not sail above her proper course.”



Green has a higher Proper Course

Compare figure 4 with Figure 3. In this case Green gives plenty of room to Yellow at P2 when the overlap starts, so Yellow can begin to keep clear as required by R 11 (W/L). In this example, Green does not break R 15.

Figure 4 raises a new question – “Whose course takes priority Yellow or Green”? Looking at Figure 4, Yellow is on a dead run, while Green is sailing a hotter/higher angle and is going faster than Yellow. So Green can claim (to a Protest Committee) that her faster course will get her to the next (downwind) mark sooner, and so it is her proper course. So Green is not breaking R 17, and Yellow MUST keep clear. Also of interest in this case is that Green does not alter course – she is sailing straight, so R 16 Altering Course, does not apply.

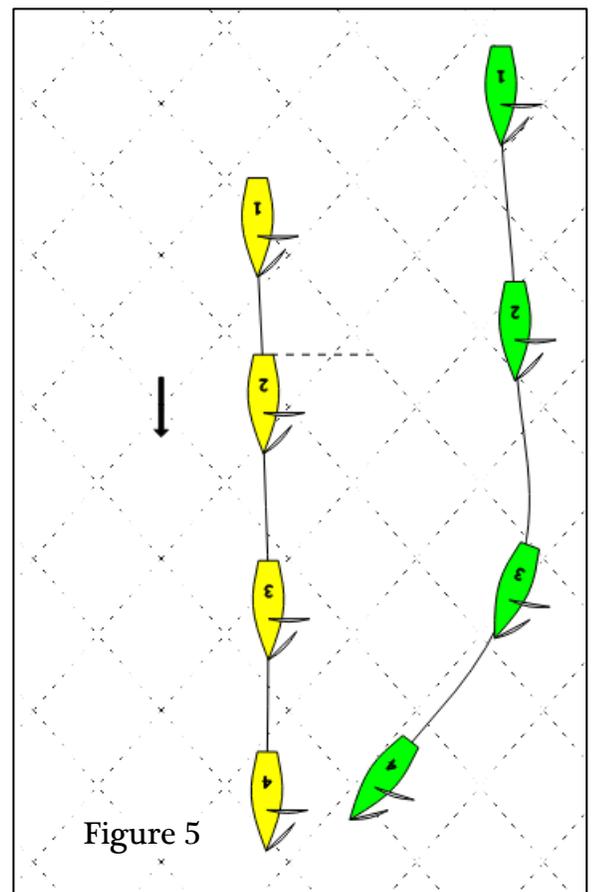
ISAF CASE 46. A leeward boat is entitled to sail up to her proper course, even when she has established a leeward overlap from clear astern and within two of her hull lengths of the windward boat.

Establish overlap more than two boat lengths away

Look at Figure 5. In this example, R 17 does not apply as the overlap at P2 was created greater than two boat lengths away, so Green is allowed to luff Yellow and Yellow must keep clear under R 11 W/L. Green is subject to R16 Altering Course, but does so far enough from Yellow that Yellow has lots of room to respond.

R 17 does not apply before the starting signal.

Note that prior to the starting signal, a boat has no proper course, and so R 17 does not apply during the 1 minute following the Preparatory signal. Before her starting signal, a leeward boat does not break a rule by sailing a course higher than the windward boat’s course. So a leeward boat may luff a weather boat, as long as she gives room as required by R 15 and/or R 16. See Case 13.



Mark Room and Proper Course

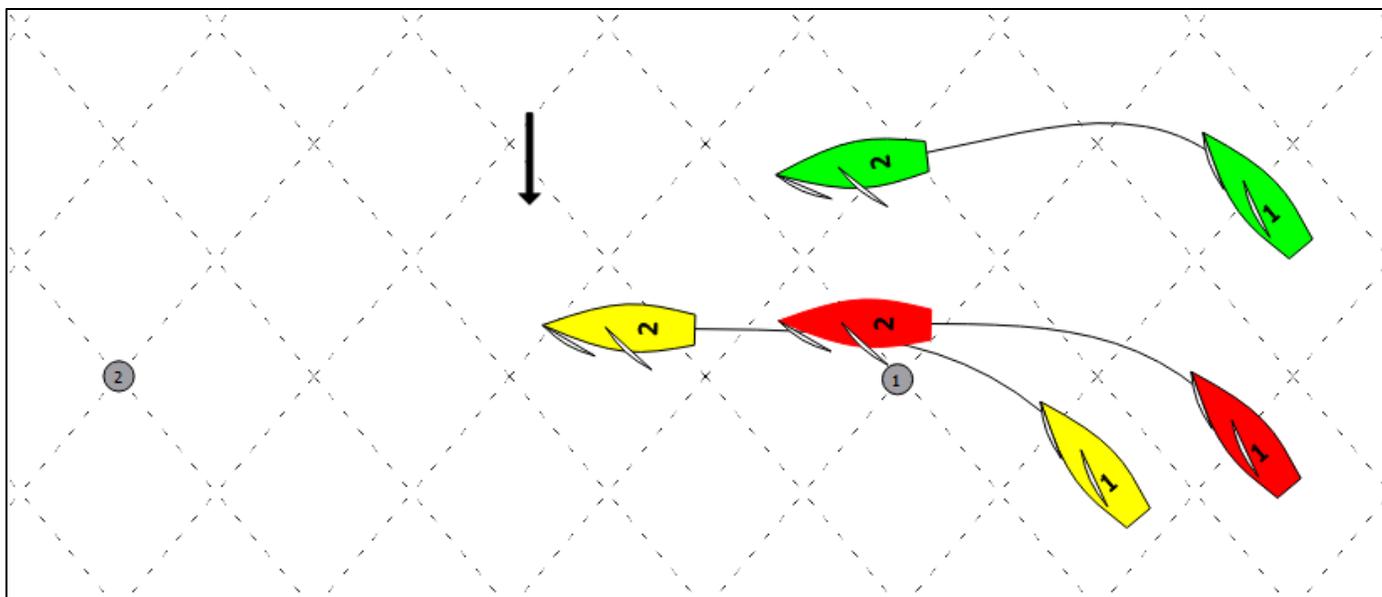


Figure 6 Proper Course Examples

In Figure 6 look at each boat at P1 as if the other boats were not there. Let's say that Yellow is clear ahead of any trailing boats and has Mark Room. From Position 1, her proper course would be to sail close to the mark to go to the next offset mark. Now look at Red – the same words may be used. Now look at Green. Green has sailed beyond the Weather Mark and her proper course would be to sail towards the Offset Mark, and not to sail close to the Weather Mark, which is well to leeward.

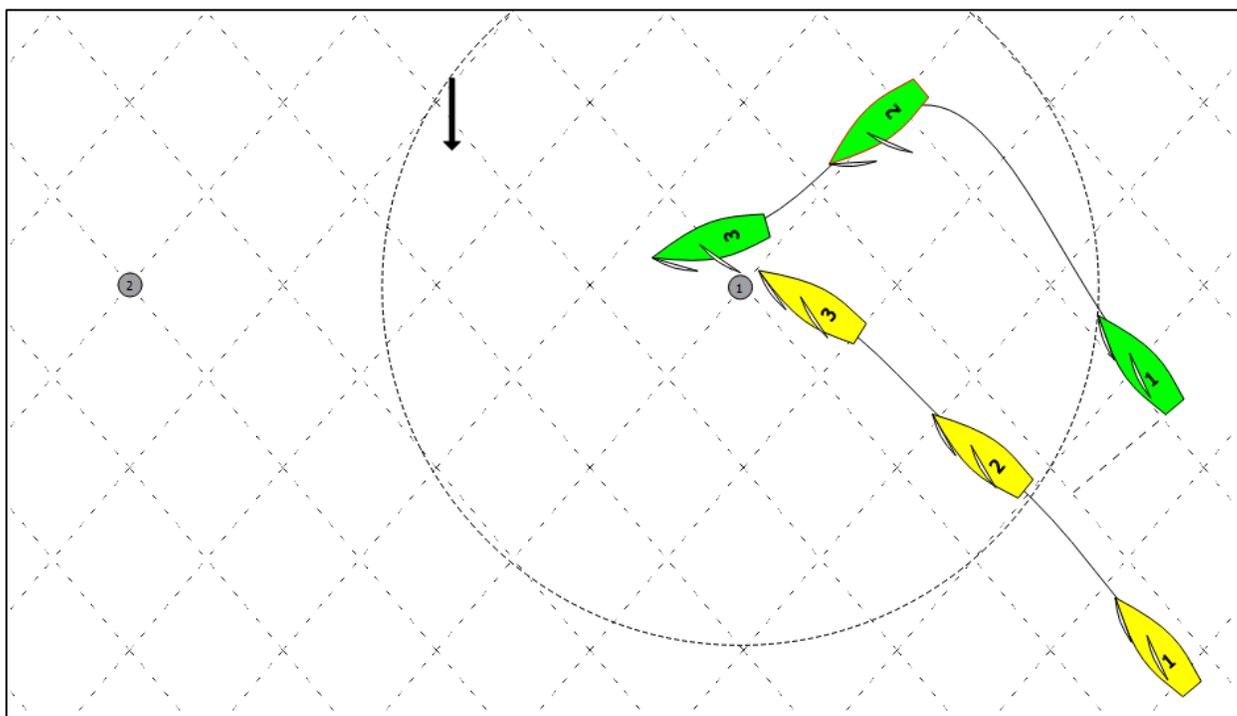


Figure 7 - Mark Room and Proper Course

In Figure 7, Green and Yellow are approaching the Weather Mark. Green is clear ahead at P1 when she reaches the zone and has Mark Room. But from her position P2, she cannot close the door on Yellow, as

her Proper Course at P2 is to sail to the Offset Mark, and not towards the Weather Mark. In this case, Green by sailing beyond what Mark Room permits, would be penalized under R 11 (W/L) for failing to stay clear of Yellow.

Now let's look at some extracts from R 18, where Proper Course is referenced. The first is in R 18.1(b) which refers to a situation where R 18 says Proper Course DOES NOT APPLY.

18 MARK-ROOM

18.1 When Rule 18 Applies

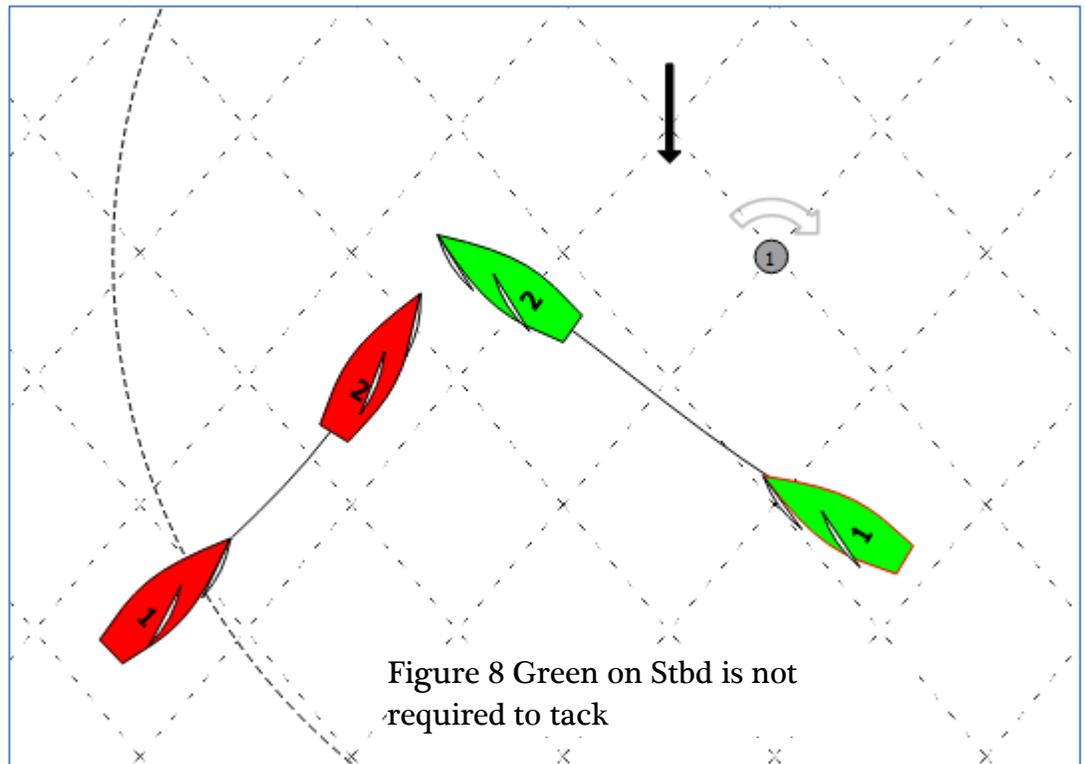
Rule 18 applies between boats when they are required to leave a *mark* on the same side and at least one of them is in the *zone*. However, it does not apply

(a) between boats on opposite *tacks* on a beat to windward,

(b) between boats on opposite *tacks* when the **proper course at the *mark* for one but not both of them is to tack,**

I can find only one situation where R18.1(b) may apply and it is shown in ISAF Case 9 which says - "When a starboard-tack boat chooses to sail past a windward mark, a port-tack boat must keep clear. There is no rule that requires a boat to sail a proper course".

Diagram 8 shows the situation. The mark is to be rounded to Stbd. Port is fetching the mark, but Green needs to tack to lay the mark. This case asks the question "Can Red, on Port ignore Green on Stbd because the proper course for Green would be to tack to round the mark. The answer is No! R 10 P/S applies and R18.1(b) says that Green on Stbd is not required to tack to sail her proper course around the mark and Red on Port must stay clear.



Next, we will look at the parts of R 18 where one boat must allow the other boat that has Mark

Room to sail her proper course. This is the most familiar part of R 18 that occurs on almost every race and at every mark rounding. The important thing to note is that while the other boat has mark room, she is allowed to sail her proper course (which may be close to the mark), if something happens that 'turns off' R 18, then the proper course requirement also ends. There are probably lots of possible examples, so we will look at just a few.

R18.2.

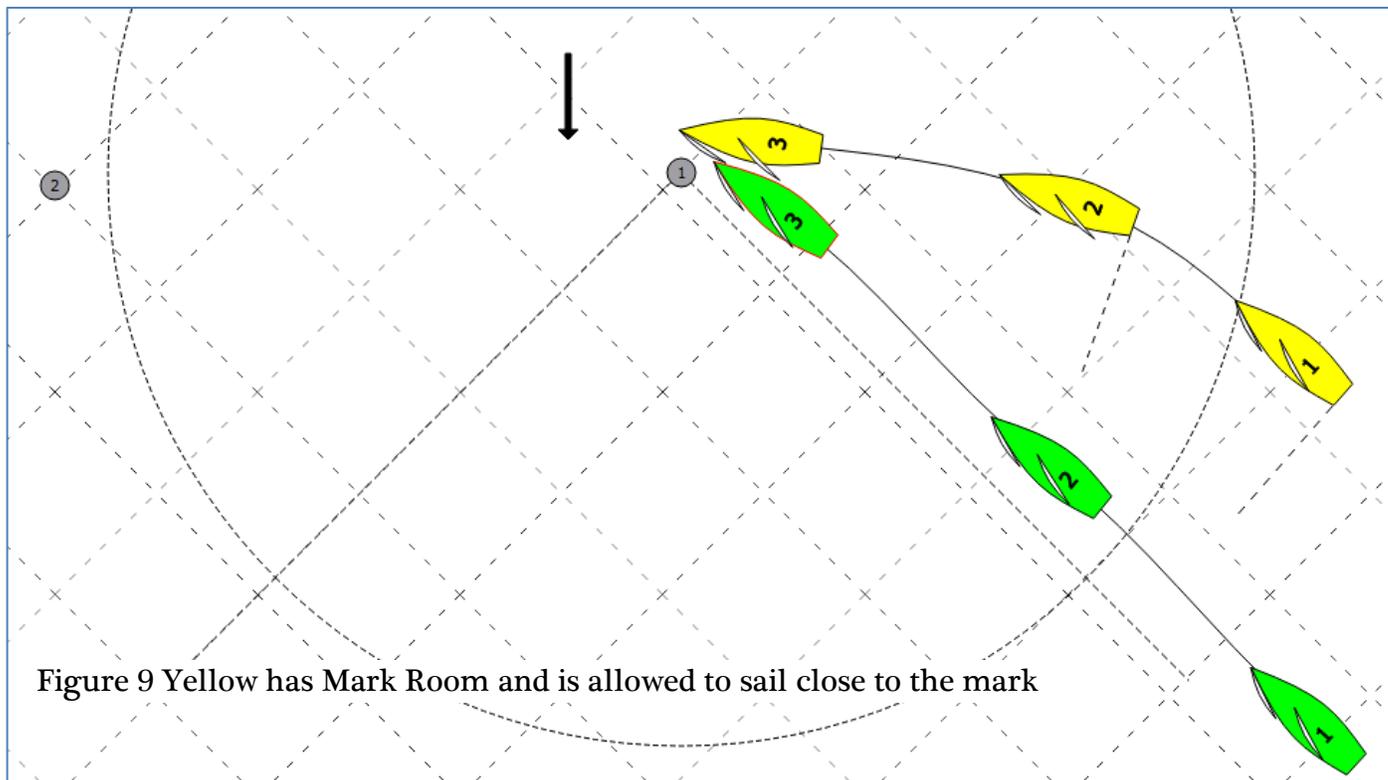
(c) When a boat is required to give *mark-room* by rule 18.2(b),

(1) she shall continue to do so even if later an *overlap* is broken or a new *overlap* begins;

(2) if she becomes *overlapped* inside the boat entitled to *mark-room*, she shall also give that boat *room* to sail her **proper course** while they remain *overlapped*. However, if the boat entitled to *mark-room* passes head to wind or leaves the *zone*, rule 18.2(b) ceases to apply.

First, look back at Figure 7. That was an example where a boat entitled to Mark Room, sailed beyond what Mark Room allowed, and becomes 'at fault' for breaking another rule – R11 W/L in this example.

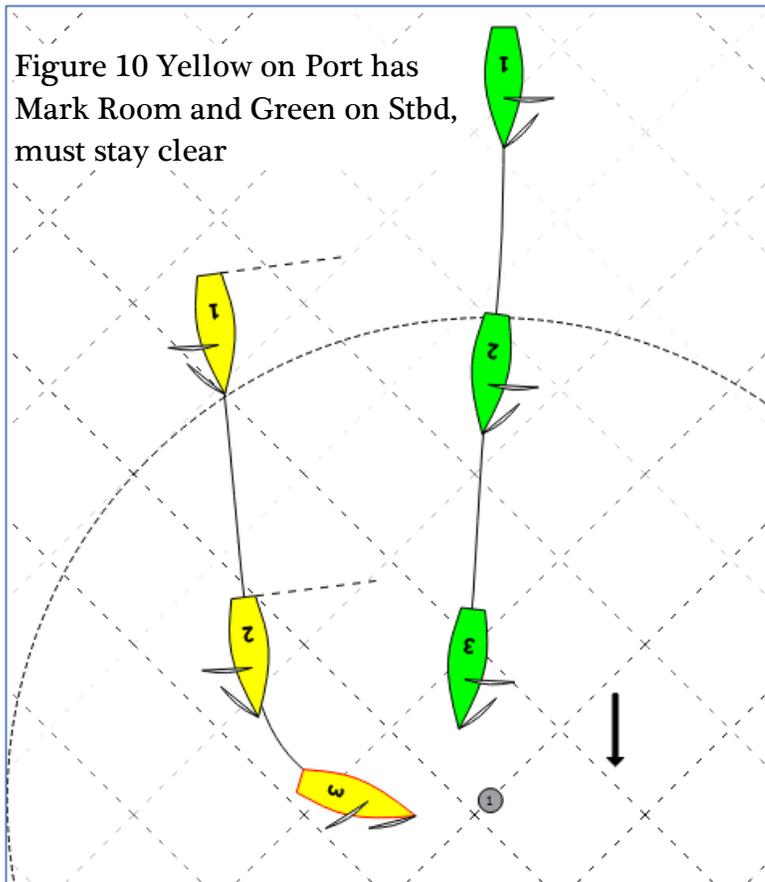
Now we will look at probably the most common example of R 18, Mark Room and Proper Course.



In Figure 9, Yellow has over stood the lay line, but is clear ahead of Green at the zone P1. Under R 18.2.b Yellow has Mark Room. At P2, a new overlap is created as Yellow bears off towards the mark. Under R 18.2.c, from her position P2, Yellow is allowed to sail close to the mark, as her Proper Course at P2 is to sail close to the mark. Green is at fault for preventing Yellow from sailing close to the mark. If there is contact, Yellow is exonerated under R 21 as she was sailing within the Mark Room to which she was entitled.

At P1, Green must begin to anticipate the Yellow may pass close to the mark and there may not be room to squeeze in – so Green should start to head up a bit to pass astern of Yellow.

Now look at Figure 10 – a downwind mark to be rounded to Port. Yellow on port, is clear ahead of Green on stbd at the zone, so Yellow is entitled to Mark Room. In this case, Green has ROW under R10 P/S, but R 18 places a restriction on Green to allow Yellow, with Mark Room, to sail close to the mark as that would be her Proper Course.



Under R 18.2.c, from her position P2, Yellow is allowed to sail close to the mark, as her Proper Course at P2 is to sail close to the mark. Green is at fault for preventing Yellow from sailing close to the mark. If there is contact, Yellow is exonerated under R 21 as she was sailing within the Mark Room to which she was entitled.

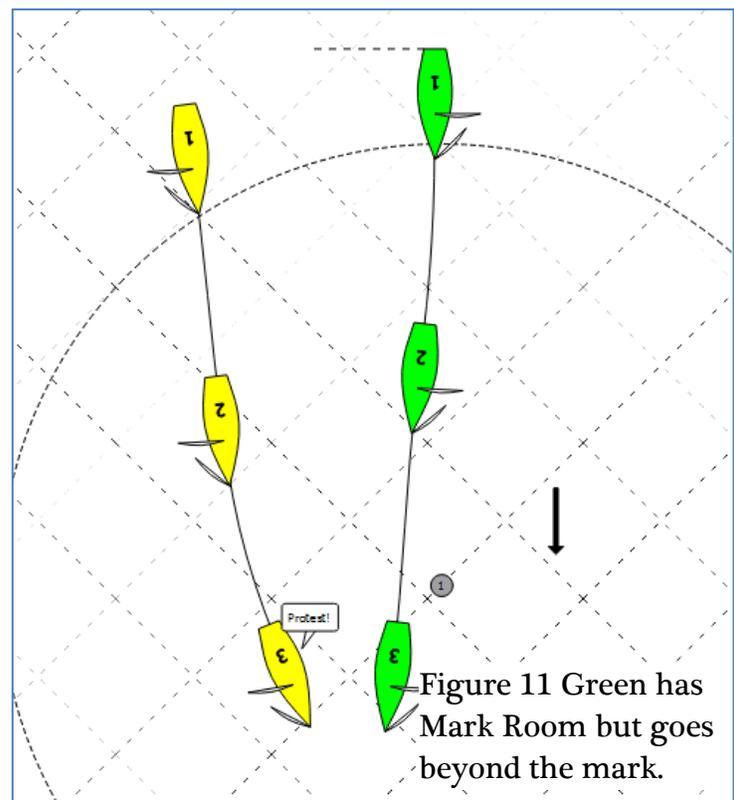
As early as P1, Green must begin to anticipate the Yellow may pass close to the mark and there may not be room to squeeze in – so Green should start to head up a bit to pass astern of Yellow.

The final reference to Proper Course in R18 appears in R 18.4 Gybing. Refer to Figure 11 – a downwind mark to be rounded to Port.

18.4 Gybing

When an inside *overlapped* right-of-way boat must gybe at a *mark* to sail her **proper course**, until she gybes she shall sail no farther from the *mark* than needed to sail that course. Rule 18.4 does not apply at a *gate mark*.

In Figure 11, Green has ROW under R10 P/S and as inside overlapped boat at the zone, is entitled to Mark Room. In this case, Green goes beyond the mark, and Yellow protests Green for breaking R 18.4. Green is entitled to room to gybe, but at a gybe mark, she shall sail no farther from the mark than the room needed to sail that course.



We probably see this protest more frequently in Big Boat racing than RC racing as they do not have the depth perception issues. In RC Racing, this may be harder to call.

Non- Interference !

The final appearance of Proper Course is in R 24.2. Basically this says, “Don’t sail off your proper course to interfere with a boat taking a penalty, or a boat sailing on another leg of the course”.

24.2 Except when sailing her proper course, a boat shall not interfere with a boat taking a penalty or sailing on another leg.

That sounds so simple that it should not even need a diagram. Let’s mention a couple of examples –

a) You are on a beat and sailing on stbd tack towards the weather mark. Another boat has rounded the weather mark and is sailing back downwind. R24.2 says ‘don’t bear off or luff up in order to interfere with the other boat’. However, if you sail straight on, close hauled, you are sailing your proper course and the other boat will have to keep clear of you as you will have ROW, either under R 10 P/S or R 11 W/L.

b) A boat touched the weather mark as they rounded, and on the short reach to the offset mark, they sail low of the rhumb line and start their penalty turn. You follow around the weather mark – so don’t sail low of the rhumb line to interfere with them as they do their turn. ISAF Case 126 covers this rule – especially read the 3rd example.

CASE 126

For the purpose of determining whether rule 24.2 applies to an incident, a boat is sailing on the leg which is consistent with her course immediately before the incident and her reasons for sailing that course.

Additional Reading – The ISAF Case Book

The ISAF Case Book may be downloaded for free (and save it on your computer)

<http://www.sailing.org/documents/caseandcall/case-book.php>

Here are some cases that discuss Proper Course. I have used some of them above.

CASE 7

When, after having been clear astern, a boat becomes overlapped to leeward within two of her hull lengths of the other boat, the windward boat must keep clear, but the leeward boat must initially give the windward boat room to keep clear and must not sail above her proper course.

CASE 9

When a starboard-tack boat chooses to sail past a windward mark, a port-tack boat must keep clear. There is no rule that requires a boat to sail a proper course.

CASE 13

Before her starting signal, a leeward boat does not break a rule by sailing a course higher than the windward boat’s course.

CASE 14

When, owing to a difference of opinion about a leeward boat’s proper course, two boats on the same tack

converge, the windward boat must keep clear. Two boats on the same leg sailing near one another may have different proper courses.

CASE 46

A leeward boat is entitled to sail up to her proper course, even when she has established a leeward overlap from clear astern and within two of her hull lengths of the windward boat.

CASE 75

When rule 18 applies, the rules of Sections A and B apply as well. When an inside overlapped right-of-way boat must gybe at a mark, she is entitled to sail her proper course until she gybes. A starboard-tack boat that changes course does not break rule 16.1 if she gives a port-tack boat adequate space to keep clear and the port-tack boat fails to take advantage of it promptly.

CASE 76

When a right-of-way boat changes course she may break rule 16, even if she is sailing her proper course.