

Pre-ambling around the event & the case for the prosecution !

From every championship we learn a little more about how to make the next one even better. This time we have to thank several top racers who paid out-of-character visits to the middle of the fleet at Grafham Water S.C. They reported back some shocking examples of rule observance, or rather the lack of it, so listen up at the back, please.

For many years the class has thrived on the notion that a gentleman knows when he has inadvertently sailed in someone else's water, does his turns and does not delay the proceedings with protest hearings. That has attracted many people who might otherwise be frightened off racing by their ignorance. However our numbers are now becoming so large that close quarters combat is unavoidable, and the risk of accidents is becoming much greater when the wind blows, as it did on Sunday.

Hence this lecture. In some classes racers believe that it is not breaking the rules that counts but getting caught. Fortunately in this fleet we are generally wise enough to appreciate that what we have to lose is what we really want – the friendship and respect of our colleagues who know what really happened and will whisper the word around, even if it never gets back to us. Racers with that attitude may win, but should not be surprised if they are frozen out in this fleet.

Typical Incidents

Case 1: You copy a hot shot at the pin end of the line for a port-hand start because that looks favoured. Indeed race officers often try to set the line with 5 –10 degrees port bias. The hot shot starts right on the pin end and crosses successfully in front of the entire fleet. You are a bit slower and a bit further towards the committee boat and realise you will not make it and try to tack over on to starboard as the row of bows approaches.

In a panic you fluff the tack and end up head to wind. Fortunately damage is avoided because the first approaching starboard hand boat also turns head to wind. You apologise, try to do your turn but can't because there are so many boats around, and have to wait for the whole fleet to sail past. That is bad enough for you, but your conscience should also be making you feel guilty because you have also ruined his race. As pin end cat on starboard he had the perfect start with rights over everybody and was well set up for a good result. Instead he now has the same problems as you. If he goes over on to port, he has no rights. If he gets back to starboard, he is buried by the starboard hand cats sailing over the top of him.

Case 2: On the windward leg, you are on port and another boat is approaching on starboard. He calls for water. You think you can cross in front and do so. Glancing behind afterwards you see that he safely avoided you, so carry on.

WRONG, if he had to change course to dip behind you, you miscalculated and should take your penalty. The only exception is in heavy seas and big winds, where sailing your turn is likely to involve capsize. In this case the alternative penalty among gentlemen is to express your gratitude appropriately with a pint at the bar.

If you leave it to the last minute, your only option is to tack, stop, sail in his dirty wind and sail off in the opposite direction to that you intended. Don't try bearing off. You will accelerate and may well put a hole in his starboard side. If you are in doubt and react early enough, the right decision is usually to dip behind the starboard cat.

Case 3: Now repeat the same incident at the windward mark. Here a new rule says port hand cats have absolutely no rights approaching the mark, even if they tack onto starboard within two boat's lengths. You must go to the back of the starboard-hand queue, and that may be twenty boats. If you tack on to starboard underneath them, do not be surprised if you find that there is a hole in the wind, so you do not make it round the mark. That hole is created by the wall of sails. The only exception is when there is a strong tide in your favour that can drift you round the mark. The temptation on Sunday was great as a wind bend off the shore meant that it paid to come in on port. The tactic may work if gaps appear in the queue, and that is more likely in later rounds, but seldom in the first.

Case 4: Sailing on towards the gybe mark, a wall of boats develops in line abreast as those reaching down slow up while those pointing up accelerate. Tactically it is better, much, much better to be on the inside of the turn, but if you do not secure an overlap before two boat lengths, you have absolutely no rights and must stop to let the entire group pass or go to the outside of the turn. If you do not do that you are likely to put a hole in the port hull of a boat ahead, when he gybes.

Case 5: Now repeat the same incident, when you are ahead but have sailed too high approaching the mark. Yes, you are ahead, but you will have to turn, and when you do, an overlap develops which can extend right to the horizon, because it is measured across your transoms. You will be going very slowly because you are running, while a boat on the inside may be going much faster when reaching in, so could get there at the same time and may have rights.

The right thing to do is sail lower in the first place, and make sure you do not have to change direction until you are within two boat lengths. Then you have rights, and the boat behind has to point up and go outside you. Again he could crash into your port hull, if he does not react quickly enough, so shout "NO WATER" loud, early and decisively.

Case 6: On the run, Fifteens can sail in line abreast on different tacks. If you are the cat on the right end of the line, when seen from behind, watch out. The one on the left end has the right to bear up on port tack to give himself enough room to round the leeward mark anti-clockwise, and he even has the right to gybe over from starboard, not that you could see which tack he was on. He should warn the boat next to him, and so on, and you may be slow to get the message, but you are still the one in the wrong, so leave plenty of room or gybe over on to starboard before the incident develops.

Case 7: You are beating, but other cats are still on the run. You believe you are in the right and yell "WINDWARD BOAT KEEP CLEAR". Unfortunately that is not necessarily so. If you are on port and he is on starboard, he may still have rights over you. Now let's assume the cheeky monkey is also on port but quickly gybes over on to starboard. Yes, he now has rights, but these are subject to the over-riding principle of avoiding collisions. You have no chance so late of taking avoiding action, so there could be an accident.

General Guidance

Tip 1: Somebody is always to blame: The racing rules were first designed for safety of navigation, and only later enhanced for racing, so there is that over-riding principle of avoiding collisions first, and arguing it out afterwards. It used to be popular for a racer in the right to tap the other one lightly just so that he could not brazen it out, claiming that there was 'miles of room', so he is excused from taking avoiding action. However this is not the law court where there is a presumption of innocence until proved guilty. In the racing rules there is a presumption of guilt, because one party must be in the wrong, so the dice are stacked against you if: -

- You are on port and the other one is on starboard
- You are tacking while the other goes on
- You are overtaking a slower boat
- You are to windward of the other boat

Tip 2: If in doubt, both of you should do your turns. Often you may be convinced you were in the right at the time, but find out later that there was some aspect of the rules you had misunderstood. Sometimes you may be convinced that, even though there is a presumption of guilt against you, there was a witness who could support you, but cannot find him later. If you both do your turns, you may lose a few places, but you cannot be disqualified, will still get a result and in a series such as a championship, that will make a big difference to your overall result.

Tip 3: You have no rights when doing a penalty turn. This is not the America's Cup, so you can't leave it till the last moment. You should do it at the earliest safe opportunity. Usually you are better off gybing round, as the acceleration when you bear away makes it quicker, but if it is near the beginning of a windward leg, you are better off tacking round, so you do not end up downwind of the procession upwind from the mark. NB You must end up on the same tack as you started, otherwise you have not completed the penalty turn.

Tip 4: Avoid getting into losing situations. If you know the rules, you can plan your race tactically to be in the position where you have rights when it does matter. Every time you approach a mark, think about the likely positions of the boats around you, and manoeuvre to be on starboard, or on the inside of the turn well ahead of time. If someone shouts at you claiming water, the worst thing is to say and do nothing. If you have rights, shout back, if not, take action. If you do neither, there is likely to be an accident, because the other boat will only take avoiding action late, if at all.

Tip 5: Apologise afterwards. You miscalculated. That's human and it happens to all of us. A pint in the bar is a very small price to pay for keeping a friend. You may also get a free tip on how to avoid that mistake next time.

P.S. Treat yourself to a good book on the racing rules from your chandler this Christmas.

EDITOR'S NOTES AND SUMMARY

With regard to the above, I completely agree with Nick's comments, but am unsure whether it is down to **lack of knowledge** of the racing rules, **lack of sensible judgement**, **lack of adequate control** of the boat or **lack of basic observation** that these incidents happened at all.

I personally witnessed numerous incidents which could have been avoided if people had only LOOKED beyond their own boat to assess situations developing, such as not giving enough room for inside overlapping boats, tacking onto port immediately in front of a boat on starboard tack, close quarter manoeuvring without warning, and touching marks without taking the appropriate penalty! Most people drive cars, but they would not go very far without observing the Highway Code and the proximity of other road users. The same can be said of sailing - **Know the racing rules** and **always be aware of boats around you**. If you are in any doubt -

KEEP OUT OF TROUBLE !

