

Racing Rules of Sailing - Overlapped

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Let's take another look at the basic rules (RRS 18) for rounding marks and how they affect two common tactical situations.

First, a boat that is overlapped inside of another boat at a mark is entitled to room to round the mark and the outside boat must give room.

Second, a boat that is clear astern must keep clear while the boat ahead rounds the mark.

Your rights and responsibilities are determined by two factors: if you are overlapped or not and when overlapped if you are the inside or outside boat. These relationships are determined at the moment that the first boat reaches the "two length zone" near the mark and the rights set at that moment hold throughout the mark rounding.

The definition of "overlap" becomes a critical detail! By definition, two boats are overlapped when the bow of one is over the line drawn at a right angle to the stern of the other, or if a boat in between overlaps them both. When two boats are sailing side-by-side it's easy to tell if they are overlapped and the Racing Rules are somewhat intuitive. But when three or more boats are approaching the mark at about the same time, or two boats are approaching from widely different angles, it can be a bit tricky.

For example, imagine you are leading the fleet to the gybe mark on a triangle course (see diagram 1, boat "O"). When you are about to round the mark (within two boat lengths), you look back and realize that boat "I" right behind you has an inside overlap. Okay, you owe them room at the mark, but looking a little further back you notice that the next boat in line has an inside overlap on the middle boat. Now you have to swing wide enough to give them both room to round the mark, and the chances are good that they will both come out ahead on the next leg.

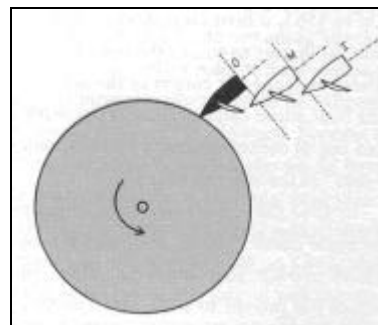


Diagram 1

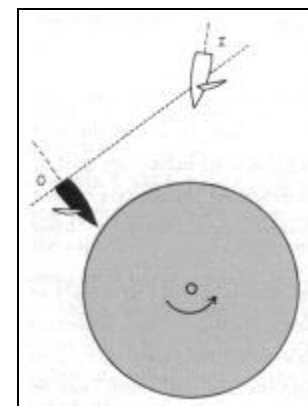


Diagram 2

For the next example, imagine you are heading towards the leeward mark on port tack (see diagram 2, boat "O"). About 90 degrees to your left is a starboard tack boat (boat "I"). When you reach the two length zone, how do you determine overlap? If any part of the starboard boat is in front of line drawn through your transom (or rudder, or motor, or whatever is farthest back on your particular boat), then they are the inside boat and you must give them room at the mark if they need it. At the same time, they are also the right of way boat, so you also have to keep clear while they gybe around the mark. If you are far enough ahead that you can cross and get around the mark without causing the starboard boat to change course then you are fine, but if the starboard boat is close enough that you can't easily get ahead, you will have to round outside of them and once again stand a good chance of coming out behind on the next leg.

Both of these examples show situations where a boat that is slightly behind can strategically position their boat to take advantage of the racing rules and sneak past a boat just ahead while rounding a mark. It may feel fast to sail high towards the gybe mark, but when you finally head down to the mark the leeward boats will have the right of way and you will have to let them round the mark inside. It is the same situation when you approach the lee mark on port tack. Anyone coming in on starboard will have right of way and will probably be the inside boat forcing you to sail farther from the mark than you would like. Sailing fast is only half the game!