

Boating Tips

Rules Of The Road

One of the many attractions my wife Susan and I love about boating in the Bay and Delta is the freedom to go just about anywhere you want (or dare). However, in order for all of us boating fanatics to get along, ensure a good time for all and be safe, we all need to share some basic rules.

There are four basic rules that apply to power-driven vessels encountering other power-driven vessels. (Remember: A sailboat under way, under power is considered a power-driven vessel regardless of whether she has her sails deployed or not.)

Overtaking Another Vessel:

This is something almost all boaters do at some point. In my case, being a reformed “waker,” I did it all the time! Heck, offshore boats do it all day long! But, I digress.

The basic rule is that the overtaken vessel is the “stand on” vessel and the overtaking vessel is the “give way” vessel. The “give way” vessel cannot impede the course or speed of the “stand on” vessel. So, if that vessel decides to make a sharp turn to starboard right in front of you, you have to stay out of the way.

One short blast of your horn indicates you intend to pass the overtaken vessel on its starboard side. If you intend to pass on the overtaken vessel's port side, give two short blasts (inland rules). The overtaken vessel should

respond with a corresponding: One blast = OK to pass on starboard. Two blasts = OK to pass on port.

If the overtaken vessel responds with five (or more) blasts of her horn, do not proceed with the overtaking of the vessel ahead. This is the danger signal. The skipper probably sees something you don't. Back off and get a clear understanding of what is going on ahead, and then reinitiate passing intentions.

Most boaters I encounter, both in instructing clients or on (our) personal vessel, either don't know this rule or disregard it. More often than not I get looks of annoyance from the skipper of the overtaken vessel when I attempt to signal him. (It's like they think I'm getting on their case for something.)

I do it anyway for one (very) important reason: It is critical to the safety of both vessels that the skipper of the overtaken vessel is aware that they are about to be passed and on which side. I just wave at them as if to say I just wanted to get their attention.

Crossing Situations:

Crossing situations refer to two vessels crossing each other's paths and the appropriate action that should be taken based on which vessel is “stand on” and which is “give way.”

So what is the difference between the “stand on” vessel and the “give way” vessel? In a perfect world, the “stand on” vessel would not change its course or speed when encountering



BY KEVIN O'LEARY

a crossing situation. The “give way” vessel, on the other hand, should alter course, slow down or both.

There are many rules regarding crossing situations, so for our purposes here I'm going to stick to the basics. First, visualize looking down on your vessel from above. Next, consider your vessel a clock with the bow representing 12 o'clock. Any (power-driven) vessel approaching your vessel from 12 to 4 o'clock is the “stand on” vessel. You become the “give way” vessel. It doesn't matter which direction the bow is pointed, i.e. north, south, east or west. They will see your green navigation light and you will see their red navigation light. You must let this vessel pass unimpeded by slowing down, changing course or a combination of both. Usually, the best course of action is to pass astern of the “stand on” vessel.

Any power-driven vessel approaching your vessel from 8 o'clock to 12 o'clock is the “give way” vessel to you. They see your red light and you see their green light. Red for “stop” and “green” for go.

Remember, at night all you can expect to see are the navigation lights or other specific lighting to identify what you are up against. (Don't get me started on the rules of the road regarding navigation/identification lights on different vessels!)

These rules are a large part of the onboard instruction I do for my clients at Pacific Powerboating. I've found that getting familiar with the rules in real time with real situations has the best impact (excuse the pun, HA!), on learning.

Having said this, I drill into my clients' heads: Obey the rules, but don't trust anyone else you encounter on the water to do so. Don't take for granted that the skipper of the other vessel knows the rules or is even aware that he is approaching a "crossing" situation.

I tell my clients if they are not sure of the other vessel's intentions: when the situation is approaching critical, slow down to bare steerageway and let the other vessel go wherever he wants to. Try to avoid confrontations!

Head-On Situations:

In a head on situation involving vessels under power, neither vessel is "stand on." Both are "give way." The appropriate course of action in these circumstances is for both skippers to show intention by altering course to starboard. Now you're both on the same page!

Believe it or not, a sound signal should also be given in such circumstances. If the vessels are going to pass port to port, both should give one blast of the horn. If passing starboard to starboard both skippers should give two short blasts of their horns. (It is perfectly legal to pass starboard to starboard if the circumstances indicate this is the safest course of action.)

Maritime Law:

By now many of you may have realized that nowhere in this column have I mentioned the term "right of way." The fact is the term is not used in maritime law, and instead is substituted by the terms "stand on" and "give way."

Maritime law is based on commercial shipping rules on the high seas. Historically, few if any collisions at sea are 100 percent the fault of one of the skippers involved. The fact that no vessel has the right of way explains, in part, the sharing of liability in marine collisions. In vehicular law, one auto has the right of way over another; this is not the case with watercraft.

As an example, let's assume a vessel is crossing you from 10 o'clock. Since we know that vessels crossing from 12 o'clock to 4 o'clock are the "stand on" vessel, this vessel would seem to be the "give way" vessel. He should slow down, adjust his course or a combination of both in order to avoid a collision with your vessel.

Next, his vessel does indeed collide with yours. Who's at fault? Sounds simple enough, right? Wrong!

Were you traveling at a safe speed? Did you have an adequate lookout? Did the collision occur in a narrow fairway? Did you sound your horn? Did you take appropriate

evasive action? If it was just before sunset, did you have your navigation lights on? Were they in good working order?

I think you get the point. "Contributory negligence" is often used in maritime litigation to assign a share of responsibility for collisions to all parties involved.

If I haven't confused you by now try this: Maritime law states that you must obey the rules, unless obeying the rules creates an even more dangerous situation. If this is the case and you obey the rules and as a result have a collision, you are at fault. A skipper must disobey the rules if by doing so a collision is avoided. (I'd love to hear a good trial attorney spin that one in court!)

Kevo's Tip:

Know and obey the rules of the road. Don't trust anyone else to. Take a "safe boating" class. Better still: invest in onboard training. (I've got a friend whose brother has an uncle whose nephew actually instructs folks how to operate their vessels confidently and competently.) HA!

Be safe & happy boating!

As always, feedback is appreciated. I can be reached at 925/890-8428 or kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com. ☞

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