

Rules Specialist Group 2021-2024 Racing Rules of Sailing

Right of way boat altering course

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Question

I am seeking clarification and a clear understanding on a racing rules scenario.

The clarification sought is the obligations of a right of way boat racing upwind in a typical port starboard crossing. Whilst we understand the fundamental rule, we would like to understand the obligation of the starboard tack boat regarding 'holding her course'. For example, can the starboard tack boat claim she was adjusting course to follow a wind shift, and at point must she maintain her 'straight line' course.

This question has arisen as a result of some competitors 'hunting' others in a port / starboard situation where the starboard boat has pointed higher or lower to indeed take advantage of their right of way position.

Response

There is nothing in the rules that requires a right of way boat to 'hold her course' or maintain a 'straight line' course. However, rule 16 places limitations on a right-of-way boat so when it changes course, for whatever reason, it must give keep clear boats room to keep clear, based on the new course.

'Room' is defined as: The space a boat needs in the existing conditions, including space to comply with her obligations under the rules of Part 2 and rule 31, while manoeuvring promptly in a seamanlike way.

'Course' is not defined in the Racing Rules. Words not defined in the rules are used in the sense ordinarily understood in nautical or general use. A boat 'changes course' when the direction it is travelling changes. Therefore, a boat that adjusts her course following a wind shift has changed course so she must give those keep clear boats the room to continue to keep clear of it.

World Sailing Cases 92 and 105 provide useful interpretations of rules 16.1 and 16.2 for scenarios similar to that raised in the question.

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