Racing Rules of Sailing

Rule 18.3 – Urgent Rule Change

A submission from US Sailing

Purpose

To correct the effect of an unintended consequence of the changes made in rule 18.3 on 1 January 2017.

Proposal

Change rule 18.3 as follows:

18.3  Tacking in the Zone

If a boat in the zone of a mark to be left to port passes head to wind from port to starboard tack and is then fetching the mark, she shall not cause a boat that is fetching the mark and has been on starboard tack since entering the zone to sail above close-hauled to avoid contact and she shall give mark-room if that boat becomes overlapped inside her. When this rule applies between boats, rule 18.2 does not apply between them.

Council is asked to consider implementing this change in rule 18.3 on 1 January 2018 as a matter of clear necessity and pressing importance pursuant to Regulation 28.1.2.

Current Position

As above.

Reasons

Since 1997 rule 18.3 has been effective at significantly reducing windward mark congestion, rule 13 breaches, and collisions caused by port-tack boats tacking in the zone of a port-rounding windward mark. But now the 2017 requirement in rule 18.3 for the boat changing tack to be fetching the mark has created ambiguity about whether rule 18.3 or rule 18.2(a) applies at a port-rounding windward mark. The following example illustrates the problem.

The diagram below shows a fairly typical rule 18.3 situation. Blue is fetching the windward mark on starboard tack. Yellow passes head to wind inside the zone, is then on starboard tack and appears to be fetching the mark. Rule 18.3 applies and 18.2 does not. Yellow luffs to pass the mark and has to give Blue room to keep clear under rule 16.1. Blue sails above close hauled but cannot keep clear. Yellow breaks rules 16.1 and 18.3.
If, at position 5, Yellow stops head to wind and after position 5 has to tack to port and then tack back to starboard to round the mark, rule 18.3 did not apply since Yellow was not ‘fetching the mark’ at position 3. Therefore, the applicable rule between the boats is 18.2(a) and not 18.3. In this case, Blue broke rules 11 and 18.2(a). Yellow is exonerated if she breaks rule 16.1 while taking the mark-room she is entitled to.

Until there is certainty about whether Yellow will fetch the mark or not, the boats cannot know whether rule 18.3 or rule 18.2(a) applies between them. The proposed change to rule 18.3 removes this ambiguity.

On the matter of urgency, the US Sailing Racing Rules Committee is split. Shown below are the reasons given by those on each side of this issue.

Here are the reasons given by those who consider this an urgent matter and are in favour of making the proposed change take effect on 1 January 2018:

Current rule 18.3 creates significant ambiguity at the windward mark in situations that are likely to occur very often in fleet racing. Making the proposed change on 1 January 2018, with appropriate publicity, will clarify this important and frequently applicable rule for competitors for the next three years. Competitors will find the change easy to remember because it changes the wording back to wording that was in rule 18.3 from 2001 through 2016.

Here are the reasons given by those who do not consider this an urgent matter and prefer making the proposed change take effect on 1 January 2021:

It is strongly preferable to avoid mid-term rulebook changes whenever possible. Changing rule 18.3 would instantly make all printed rulebooks (and other published rule references) out-of-date.

Even with the best publicity, many sailors would not be aware of this change.

The proposed change is a sensible improvement to rule 18.3, but it is not nearly urgent enough to offset the problems described above. Even in its current form, rule 18.3 is a sufficiently strong deterrent to tacking inside the zone. The scenario where a boat tacks to starboard in the zone and then luffs past head to wind happens very infrequently because it carries a lot of risk.