Umpire Decisions and Signalling.

Submission 103-16 was a proposed Team Racing Call regarding the signalling of decisions by umpires. Following discussion the submission was withdrawn. However, a Call remains required and that Call must be consistent across all umpiring disciplines unless the discipline rules prescribe otherwise. The purpose of this paper is to table the background and to summarise the discussion in order that consistent and best umpiring practice can be adopted based on opinion expressed by IUSC/ROC and RRC.

The purpose of umpiring is to make to correct decisions on the water while racing is in progress and to signal those decisions. Both the decisions and signalling are governed by the RRS. The distinction between making a decision and signalling that decision is important and is a clear distinction in the RRS. There are three principle sets of rules governing umpiring – Appendix C, Appendix D and Addendum Q. Each of these requires the umpire to signal the decisions they have made.

Many sports, especially those with high media attention, are making more and more effort to ensure that decisions are correct and that the consequences of incorrect decision are minimised. Many of these sports have the advantage that a whistle stops the game, giving the officials the opportunity to communicate with each other and review information available to them, often aided by technology. It is quite common for original decisions to be changed during that stoppage and sometimes the consequences of a field of play decisions (such as an automatic suspension from a number of future matches) are changed. In general, sports do not change the outcome of ‘the game’ on review of a field of play decision even when it is shown to be incorrect.

Sailing is different from almost any other sport in that the whistle does not stop the game. Umpires need to move on rapidly from one incident to the next and this significantly reduces the opportunity to communicate with each other or to review decisions. However, this should not prevent umpires getting to the correct decision when practical to do so.

Sailing also differs from many sports in that many of our rules interact with each other. Most field sports are different. In soccer, the offside rule is quite independent of the personal foul rules. It follows that the decision making process in sailing is somewhat different and potentially more complex and more liable to error. In many sports, different officials monitor different rules when resources permit.

In sailing, the decision making process is well established to be best achieved by the umpire(s), either jointly or alone, constantly making decisions and then responding to a protest or initiating a penalty as appropriate. Trying to look back at an incident to decide what happened is a very unreliable process. It is also a time consuming process that severely limits the umpires’ ability to move on from the incident and keep up with the race. Re-thinking a decision potentially compromises the overall service provided by the umpires.

Communication within an umpire boat between two umpires generally works well. Even though misunderstanding is possible, a difference of opinion is soon exposed provided the umpires are constantly talking to each other. However, communication between umpire boats relies on either hand signals or radio. Both have severe limitations.

When observing a situation from different umpire boats, they will inevitably have a different view and consequently a different set of facts on which to base their decision. Particularly in multiple boat situations, in fleet or team racing, there is no certainty umpires in different boats are deciding the same issue.

Questions and Answers

Q1 After the umpires in a boat have made a decision, may they change that decision?

A1 There is no rule that prevents umpires from changing a decision but it is very undesirable to do so. Such a decision is unlikely to be more reliable than the first decision and may compromise the next decision. Only in the event of a clear misunderstanding between the umpires should they consider changing a decision.

Q2 After the umpires make a decision they make a signalling error. Should the umpires correct that decision?

A2 Yes. The rules require umpires to correctly signal their decisions. When they signal incorrectly, they have not signalled their decision and they should make another signal to correctly implement their decision as soon as possible. However, the umpires may not remove or cancel a signalled penalty, as there is no rule to provide for this.
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Q3 In a race with multiple umpire boats, in response to a valid protest, one umpire boat decides that a ‘no penalty’ signal is appropriate and makes that signal. May another umpire boat signal a penalty in response to the same protest?

A3 Yes. A ‘green and white flag’ signal does not mean ‘No rules have been broken’. It means ‘This umpire boat has no facts to justify giving a penalty’. It is quite possible that another umpire boat has seen something different and they may be judging a different incident. Nothing prevents another umpire boat from deciding a boat broke a rule and signalling a penalty accordingly.

Q4 If a boat racing observes a ‘green and white’ signal and then a ‘penalty’ signal, may they ignore the penalty signal?

Q5 No. Whenever a boat is signalled by the umpires to take a penalty, she is required to do so.