



The Professional Captain

Collision Avoidance – Part II Power Boat meeting Sailboats and Commercial Shipping by Captain Don Fleming

For the power driven pleasure boat the basic rule of thumb is simple; Stay out of the way! This may seem to contradict last month's discussion, but remember I was talking about pleasure power boats meeting other pleasure power boats then.

Now, the bad news is that the pleasure power craft, barring a few limited exceptions discussed later in this article, are on the very bottom of the right of way totem pole.

Rule 18 of the COLREGS sets the order.

"A power-driven vessel underway shall keep out of the way of.

- i) a vessel not under command " Usually a vessel drifting due to engine or steering difficulties.
- ii) a vessel restricted in her ability to maneuver." Usually due to the nature of the work being performed such as dredging, laying or repairing cables and pipelines or engaged in towing operations that severely restricts the towing vessel and her tow in their ability to deviate from their course. Assume this last part to be the case almost anywhere on the Hudson River.
- iii) a vessel engaged in fishing". This only applies to true commercial fishing vessels with nets, lines, trawls and other apparatus that restrict their maneuverability. It does not include vessels with trolling lines or drifting with rods and lines.
- iv) a sailing vessel". This included any vessel under sail, from a windsurfer or dinghy to a tall ship, provided that propelling machinery, if fitted is not being used. A sailboat or motor sailer using sail and power or power alone is, of course, a power driven vessel.

Another part of the same rule warns to keep out of the way of "a vessel constrained by her draft." This vessel would display a single black cylinder in her rigging by day and 3 red vertical lights by night. Bear in mind that many of the "deep water" channels in the Hudson and many popular harbors in other cruising areas like Long Island Sound create a borderline situation for many deep draft commercial vessels. The last part of Rule 18 states that a seaplane, which is considered a power driven vessel must keep clear of all vessels and avoid impeding their navigation. If the pleasure power boat skipper keeps in mind that just about the only vessel over which he or she has right of way is a sea-plane (not that I am suggesting anyone force this issue with a low flying aircraft). This will help keep the situation in perspective. There are various day shapes and special light signals to identify each of these special privileged vessels, but these are beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say here that all of the day shapes are various combinations of black balls, cones, cylinders and diamonds about 2 feet in size; and that most of these special privileged vessels are fairly obvious to even the most casual observer. For those readers interested in more precise details, I would once again recommend the United States Coast Guard publication Navigation Rules: International - Inland, which is available from the U.S. Government Printing Office and from most local marine supply stores.

Maneuvering Around Commercial Vessels

Now that we know who they are, what do we do with them? First and foremost, let's all stay out of the way of any approaching commercial vessels. This includes head-on meetings, crossings and overtaking situations. Let's give these guys a break! After all, they are out here earning their living, while we are out enjoying ourselves. Secondly, the most common concern of the power driven pleasure boat skipper is how to properly overtake a large commercial vessel or ship that is moving slower and may also be maneuvering in what for it may be a narrow channel. This could also include a blind turn. The safest and most practical way to overtake this commercial vessel or ship is to contact it on VHF channel 13, "the navigational-bridge to bridge channel," where bridge refers to draw-bridges as well as "the bridge" or steering station of a ship. This channel is limited to one watt of power only, and you will immediately notice your radio automatically lock on to its low power output signal. This is done to prevent long range broadcasts on a channel intended for vessels within a mile or two of each other. The best thing to do is to get the name of the ship or tug through your binoculars and contact them directly on channel 13 by calling their name three times followed by your vessel's name once. When the ship or tug replies, and they will because they are required by law to do so, give them your description and location (for example, " I am the 35 foot white and red pleasure craft 500 yards off your starboard quarter") and ask for permission to overtake them by specifying the side, port or starboard, on which you intend to overtake them. Wait for a reply as to whether or not this is safe. Most commercial captains and pilots will be happy to oblige you in these circumstances. Your radio call takes the place of your whistle signal requirements under the Rules and you are assured of a safe passage, on the safest side, of the large ship. This is especially important when rounding a blind turn, when you never know if another large ship is approaching from the other direction. In fact it is an excellent idea to monitor channel 13 whenever you are navigation in busy harbors like New York; narrow channels; or blind turns like "Worlds End" between West Point and Cold Spring. Most skippers set their radios to "dual watch" or "scanning function" so that their sets will lock on either channel 16 or 13 whenever voice traffic is received. By doing this

you can be aware of commercial vessels and large ships in your area as they are all required by law to announce their positions any-time they leave a dock or approach one another or a blind turn. You may even get a laugh as you hear them warning each other of "kamikaze" approaching from one or two o'clock. That's right, in the radio--lingo of commercial ship channel 13 power driven pleasure boats, that are not yielding the right of way as described in this article are referred to in this fashion by these captains because of their reckless tendencies.

Maneuvering around Sailboats

The safest and most practical way to handle maneuvering around a sail-boat is to go behind its intended track, rather than cut across its bow. Remember our discussion of closing speeds last month and remember that although you have the speed advantage, a sailboat unsure of your intentions may make an abrupt turn at the last minute and throw off your judgment. Even when maneuvering behind a sailboat, leave as wide a berth as is practical because the sail-boat has the right to make a sharp turn whenever it desires to do so, except of course when this will result in an immediate collision. In fact, sailboats maneuver up wind by "tacking" or crossing through the wind. You will notice them "strapped down" with sails sheeted in tight and with a heavy degree of lean or "heel" on them as they pound up wind. In this condition, a sailboat is very likely to "tack" or turn 90° through the wind to sail up the other side. Also, most sailboats have a deeper draft than most powerboats and may need to "tack" in order to avoid shallow water sooner than a powerboat.

Sailboats giving right of way to commercial vessels and power boats

Any vessel less than 20 meters (65.6 feet) in length, including a sailboat, must yield the right of way to larger vessels that are restricted to navigating in a narrow channel. These same "smaller vessels", sail or power, must not cross a narrow channel in a manner that will impede the progress of a vessel that must stay within that channel. I have seen this rule broken by pleasure boats, both power and sail, on far too numerous occasions in local areas like Haverstraw Bay and Tappan Zee where the navigable channel is a narrow one when viewed from the bridge of a large ship or tow-ing vessel. Most of the time this occurs out of ignorance but ignorance is not an excuse, especially when violations of this rule results in a penalty of \$5000! Not to mention the lives at stake.

Finally, the most often asked question: Is there any time when a sail-boat has to yield right of way to a power drive pleasure craft? The answer is a surprising "yes". The one circumstance where this is true is the overtaking situation. Although not a common situation because of the usual speed difference; a sailboat, under sail or power or both must yield the right of way to a power driven pleasure craft when that sailboat is overtaking, the powerboat.

Also, it should be understood that a sailboat, under sail does not have the right of way over commercial fishing vessels, vessels "not under command" or vessels "restricted in their ability to maneuver", be they commercial or pleasure craft. Many boaters, I dare say, may not realize these points and I hope they are reading this column.

Because it is my personal experience "rivalry" between power and sail is mainly due to the lack of understanding on both sides of their legal rights and obligations, as well as their natural limitations; and an appreciation of each other for what they are, as well as an appreciation of the natural beauty of the waters we all love so much. Amen.

Captain Don Fleming is a licensed USCG Operator with over 25 years experience in sail and power vessels up to one hundred tons in both local area as well as ocean voyaging and racing from Maine to Grenada. He is well know throughout the area for his hands-on training programs that range from close-quartered docking and maneuvering to navigation, electronics, and ocean passage making skills. Questions or inquiries to Captain Don may be addressed to: Don Fleming Yacht Services Inc., 506 Eagle Bay Drive, Ossining, N.Y. 10562 914-941-3998. Copyright 1992 By Captain Don Fleming