

Proper Course

John Ball

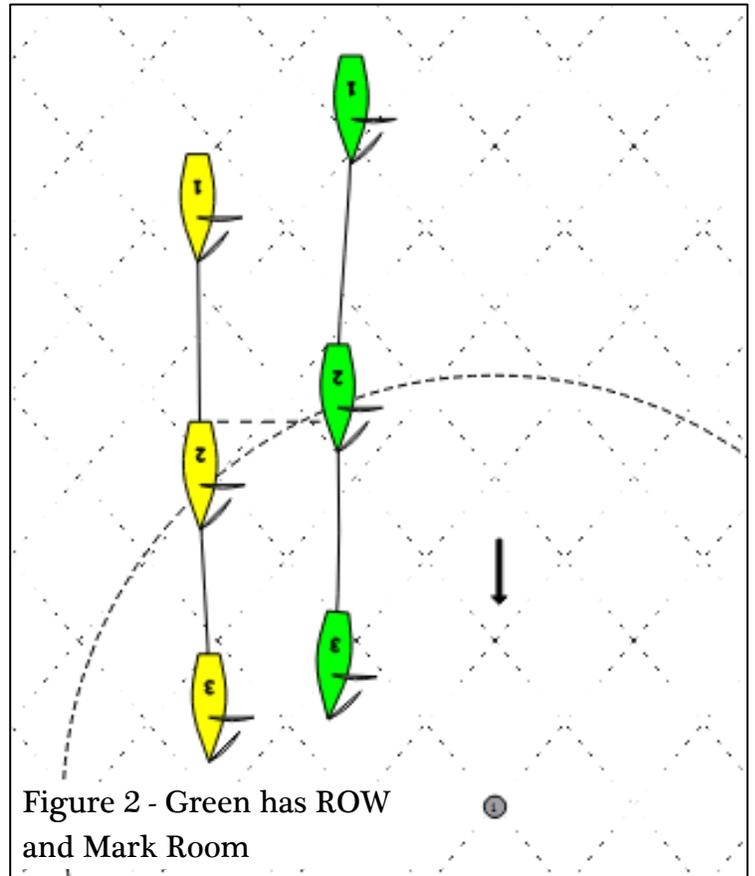
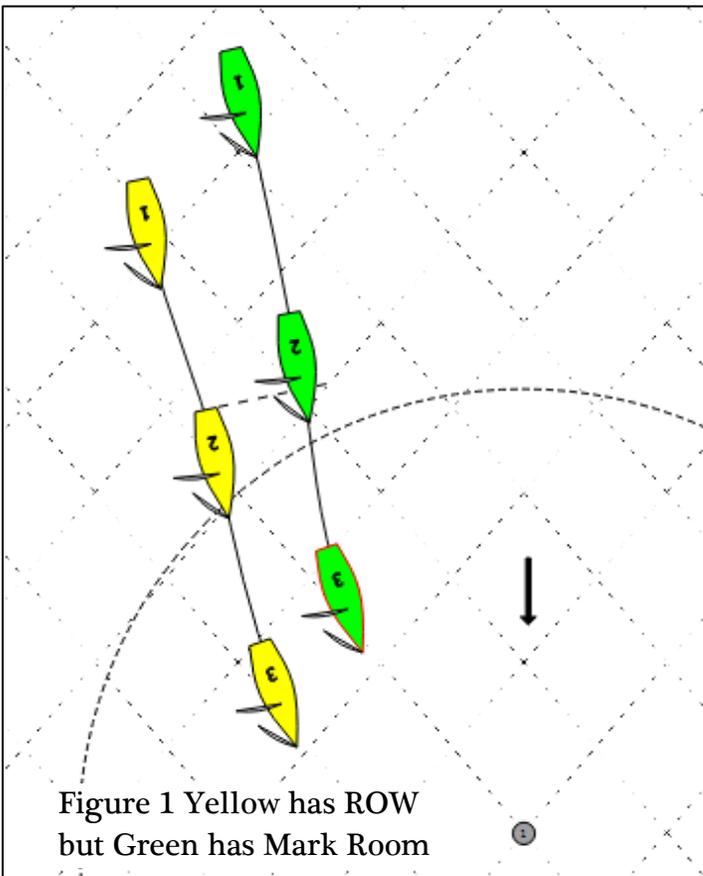
How many times has another skipper yelled at you (or have you yelled at them) to “Sail your proper course!”? It may surprise you that there is no rule in the Racing Rules of Sailing (the RRS) that requires a boat to sail her proper course! There is a rule that says that you should not sail higher than your proper course (R17). There are rules that require you to allow the other boat to sail her proper course (parts of R18) – but no rule to actually require you to sail your proper course. So when you are racing, you can sail wherever you want – however, there may be situations where a rule requires you to keep clear of, or give room to another boat – but that is nothing to do with proper course!

Right of Way vs. Mark Room vs. Proper Course

Before discussing Proper Course, the first thing to get our heads around is the difference between having Right of Way (ROW), having Mark Room, and sailing your Proper Course.

If you have **ROW**, the other boat must **Keep Clear**. However, if you are entitled to **Mark Room**, then even a ROW boat must allow you enough room to round the mark **AND** with **Mark Room**, if your **Proper Course** from your current position would be to sail close to the mark, that room includes room for you to sail close to the mark.

So, you can be ROW and have (or not have) Mark Room, and conversely, you can be the Keep Clear boat and have (or not have) Mark Room. If you have Mark Room, then you may sail close to the mark if your proper course from your current position, would be to sail close to the mark.



In Figure 1, approaching a downwind mark to be rounded to port, Yellow and Green, both on port, are overlapped as they reach the Zone, with Yellow to leeward having ROW under R 11(W/L), but Green as overlapped inside boat, is entitled to Mark Room under R 18.2.b. Yellow, with ROW controls how wide or tight Green is allowed to round the mark. In Figure 2, again a downwind mark rounded to port, Yellow and Green, both on stbd, are overlapped as they reach the Zone. Green has ROW under R 11 (W/L) and has Mark Room under R 18.2.b. Green as ROW, gets to control how wide they approach the mark, so Green gets to do a wide in/close out 'tactical' rounding.

So what is Proper Course anyway? - Some Definitions from the RRS

When you read the rules, some words appear in *italics*. That means that those words are defined words – i.e. they have a special, precise meaning when used in a rule. The **Definitions** section is right up front in the rule book, the RRS. Let's look at a couple of the Definitions in the RRS where Proper Course is mentioned.

Definitions

Proper Course A course a boat would sail to *finish* as soon as possible in the absence of the other boats referred to in the rule using the term. A boat has no **proper course** before her starting signal.

The definition 'Proper Course' describes what Proper Course is, BUT also limits its application to situations where a rule specifically invokes 'Proper Course'. It also says that before the Starting signal; even those references do not apply.

The (now defined) term Proper Course also appears in the definition of Mark Room.

Mark-Room Room for a boat to leave a *mark* on the required side. Also,

(a) *room* to sail to the *mark* when her **proper course** is to sail close to it, and

(b) *room* to round the *mark* as necessary to sail the course.

However, *mark-room* for a boat does not include *room* to tack unless she is *overlapped* inside and to *windward* of the boat required to give *mark-room* and she would be *fetching* the *mark* after her tack.

In this definition, if a boat has Mark Room, she is allowed pass the mark on the correct side and to sail close to it, if her proper course from her current position would be to pass close to the mark. So the message here is "Don't ever get between the mark and a boat that has Mark Room, if her proper course would be to sail close to the mark".

How the Rules are organized

To better understand the difference between ROW and Mark Room, we need to look at how the RRS are put together. There are only four ROW rules (so it should be easy to learn and apply them). They are found in the RRS, **Part 2- When Boats Meet**. Then Part 2 is further divided into sections.

Section A contains the **Right of Way** Rules. Briefly, the four ROW rules are:

R 10 Port keeps clear of Stbd,

R 11 Windward keeps clear of Leeward,

R 12 Clear Astern keeps clear of Clear Ahead, and

R 13 Tacking Boat keeps clear.

Section B contains four **General Limitations** on the ROW boat. These are
 R 14 Avoid contact, and includes exoneration for breaking R 14,
 R 15 Give room when acquiring ROW (i.e. when ROW changes from one boat to another),
 R 16 ROW boat altering course gives room, and
 R 17 Same Tack Overlap: Proper Course that we will review shortly.

Section C covers **Marks and Obstructions** and includes
 R 18 Mark Room,
 R 19 Room at Obstructions,
 R 20 Hailing for room at Obstructions, and
 R 21 With Mark Room or Room, exoneration for breaking a ROW rule of Section A, R 15, R 16 or R 31.

It is important to note that R 18 (and R 19) do not grant nor take away ROW. Rather they sometimes require a ROW boat to give Mark Room (or room) to a Keep Clear boat. In addition, when a boat sails within the Mark Room (or room) to which she is entitled, and there is a contact with another boat or with the mark (R31), then the boat with Mark Room (or room) may be exonerated under R 21 – HOWEVER, if she gets greedy and take more than the Mark Room (or room) to which she is entitled, R 21 will not protect her and she is subject to the ROW rules of Part A and the Limitations of Part B (see Figure 10).

Understanding Proper Course

Rules and ISAF Cases

There are only three rules in the RRS that include the defined term *Proper Course*. They are R 17, R 18 (several times), and R24. We'll look at each separately. I have copied parts of each rule from the RRS, and then listed some ISAF Cases from the Case Book that relate to that rule. First, we will look at what happens when a boat is overtaking from clear astern and to leeward and how R17 and Proper Course apply.

R 17 ON THE SAME TACK; PROPER COURSE

If a boat *clear astern* becomes *overlapped* within two of her hull lengths to *leeward* of a boat on the same *tack*, she shall not sail above her *proper course* while they remain on the same *tack* and *overlapped* within that distance, unless in doing so she promptly sails astern of the other boat. This rule does not apply if the *overlap* begins while the *windward* boat is required by rule 13 to *keep clear*.

Applying R 17

In Figure 3, Yellow and Green are on the same tack, and Green is overtaking to leeward from astern. At P1, Yellow is ROW (R12 Ahead/Astern). At P2, they become overlapped and ROW changes to Green under R11 (W/L). However, in this case, as ROW changes, we must also look at R 15 which says

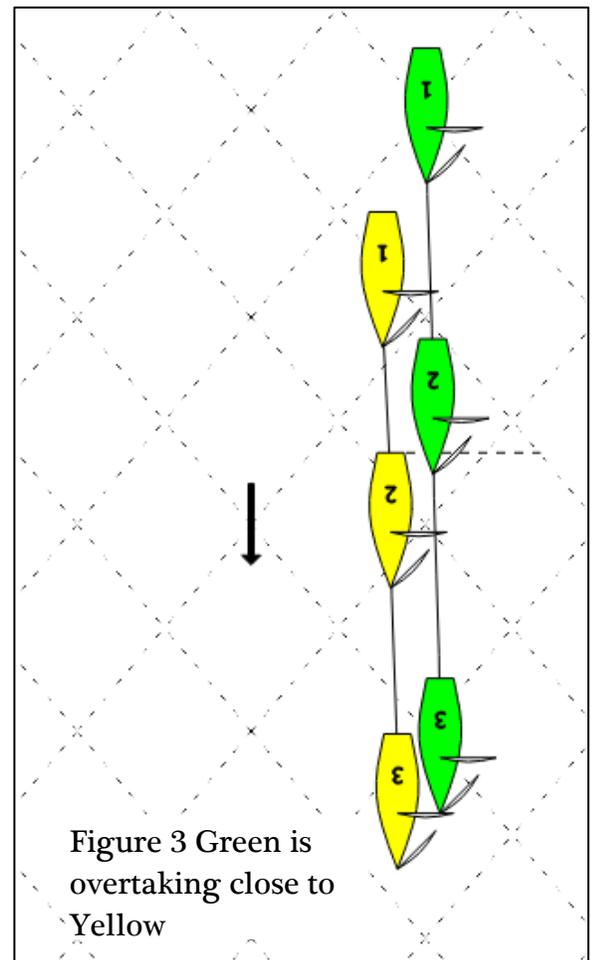


Figure 3 Green is overtaking close to Yellow

R15 ACQUIRING RIGHT OF WAY

When a boat acquires right of way, she shall initially give the other boat *room to keep clear*, unless she acquires right of way because of the other boat's actions.

Now in Figure 3, Green has created a problem for herself because she established the overlap so close to Yellow that she has failed to give room for Yellow to keep clear, even though there is no contact! The definition of '*keep clear*' requires that Yellow be able to alter course without hitting Green. At P2, if Yellow puts her helm down to head up, her stern will swing to leeward and contact Green! Throughout the overlap, Green may not sail above her proper course, which in this example appears to be straight on, so Green cannot luff up Yellow.

See ISAF Case 7 which says "When, after having been clear astern, a boat becomes overlapped to leeward within two of her hull lengths of the other boat, the windward boat must keep clear, but the leeward boat must initially give the windward boat room to keep clear and must not sail above her proper course."

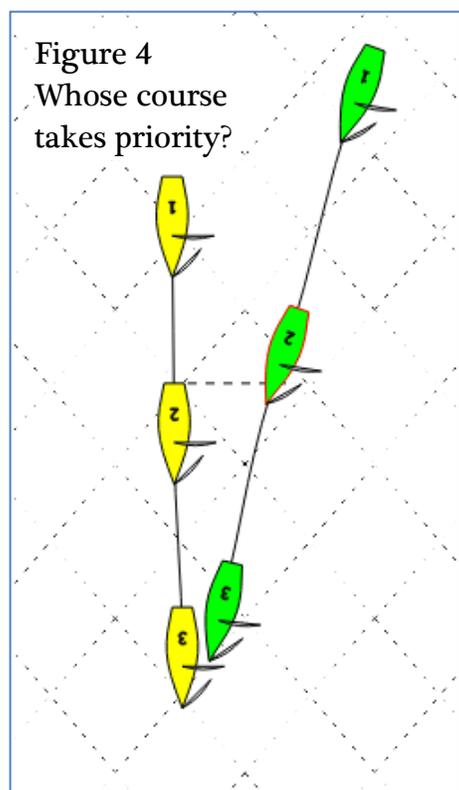


Figure 4
Whose course
takes priority?

But what if Green has a higher Proper Course ?

Compare Figure 4 with Figure 3. In Figure 4, Green gives plenty of room to Yellow at P2 when the overlap starts and ROW changes, so Yellow can begin to keep clear as required by R 11 (W/L). In this example, Green does not break R 15.

But Figure 4 raises a new question – "Whose course takes priority, Yellow or Green"? Looking at Figure 4, Yellow is on a dead run, while Green is sailing a hotter/higher angle and is going faster than Yellow. So Green can claim (to a Protest Committee) that her faster course will get her to the next (downwind) mark sooner, and so it is her proper course. So Green is not breaking R 17, and Yellow MUST keep clear.

Also of interest in this example is that Green does not alter course – she is sailing straight, so R 16 (ROW Altering Course), does not apply.

ISAF CASE 46. A leeward boat

is entitled to sail up to her proper course, even when she has established a leeward overlap from clear astern and within two of her hull lengths of the windward boat.

Establish overlap more than two hull lengths away

Now let's look at Figure 5. In this example, R 17 does not apply as the overlap at P2 was created greater than two hull lengths away, so Green is allowed to luff and Yellow must keep clear under R 11 W/L. At P3, Green is subject to R16 Altering Course, but does so far enough from Yellow that Yellow has lots of room to respond.

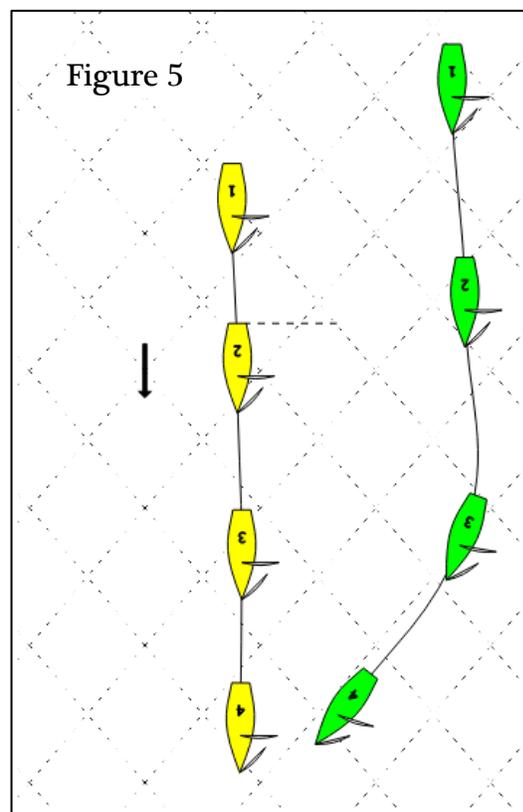


Figure 5

R 17 does not apply before the starting signal.

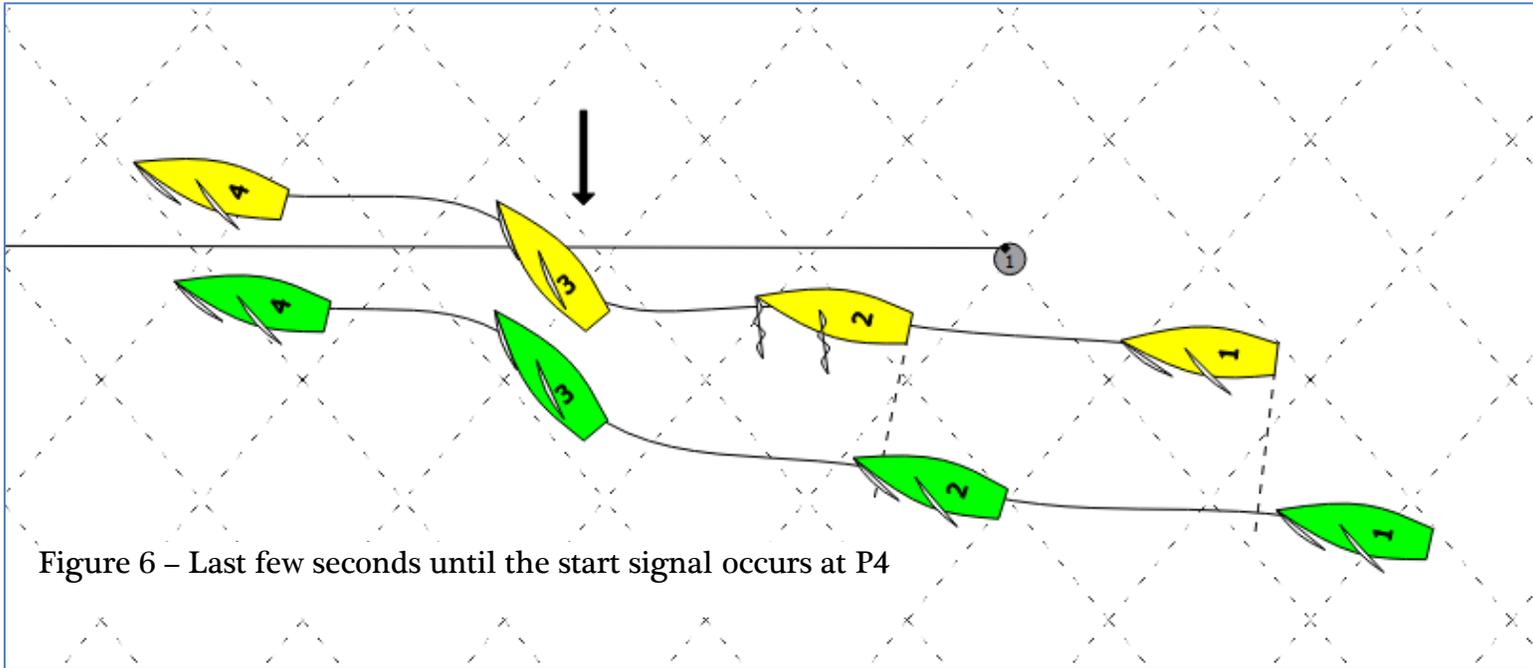


Figure 6 – Last few seconds until the start signal occurs at P4

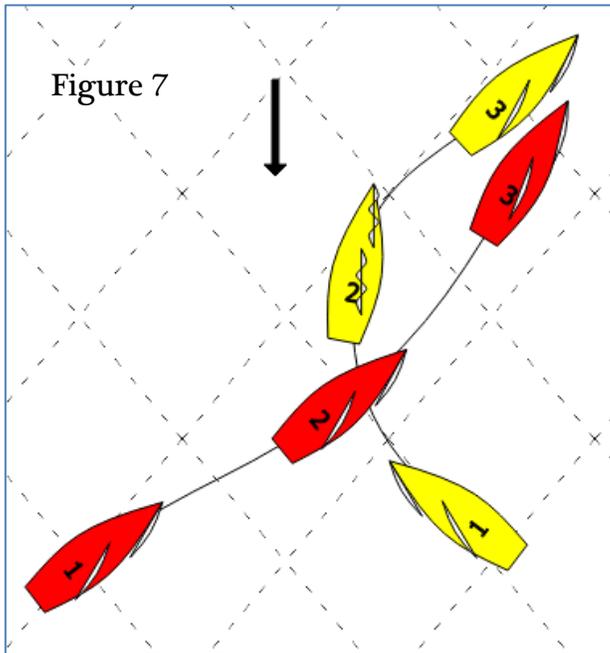
Figure 6 shows Green luffing and pushing Yellow over the start line before the starting signal which happens at P4. The wording in the definition of Proper Course says that prior to her starting signal, a boat has no proper course, so even though Green establishes an overlap to leeward from clear astern, R 17 does not apply as there is no proper course here. And without that limitation of R 17, a leeward boat may luff a windward boat, as long as she gives room as required by R 15 and/or R 16.

ISAF Case 13 - Before her starting signal, a leeward boat does not break a rule by sailing a course higher than the windward boat's course

Working through the situation in Figure 6, at P1, Yellow has ROW under R 12 (Ahead/Astern). At P2, they become overlapped and ROW changes to Green, under R 11 (W/L). As ROW changes, R 15 briefly applies – but is not an issue here, as Green gives Yellow lots of room. At P3, Green alters course, and has to give room to Yellow under R16 (ROW changes course), and Yellow has to start to keep clear under R 11 (W/L). Yellow luffs up to stay clear, but crosses the start line before the starting signal!

A word of caution to Green – this tactic of trying to push another boat over early frequently backfires, and Green ends up 'over early' too. Prior to the start, going slow and holding position usually leads to a good start – but to push Yellow over, Green has to accelerate – and once Green has speed, it can be hard to slow down again, without going over the line, or without getting close to another boat to leeward who in turn luffs up a bit, pushing Green over the line before the gun!

R 17 does not apply when overlap begins while windward boat is tacking



Imagine that you are sailing Yellow and are approaching the port lay line of the weather mark and need to go to the right. You want to tack to throw a tight cover on Red. So far, so good, but tacking to weather of an oncoming boat can create a situation where the last phrase of R 17 applies.

From the end of R17...

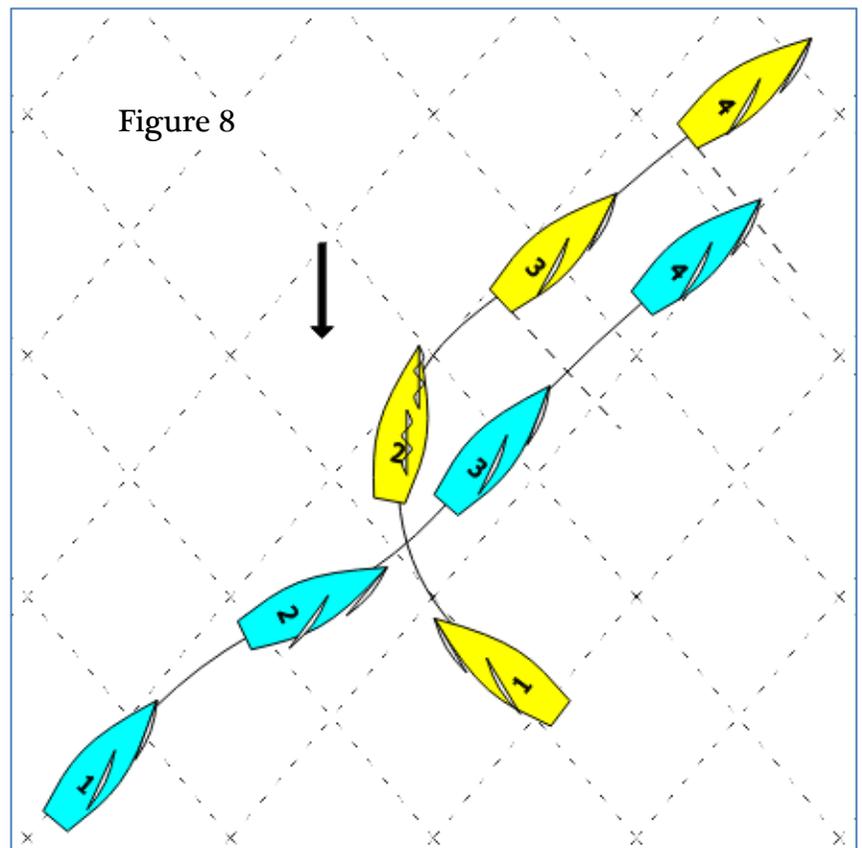
This rule does not apply if the *overlap* begins while the *windward* boat is required by rule 13 to *keep clear*.

In Figure 7, Yellow is tacking to weather of Red and is subject to R 13 (Tacking) when the overlap is established at P2. In this case, Red is allowed to luff up and there is no proper course restriction on Red as R 17 says that it does not apply. Yellow becomes windward boat and must stay clear under R 11 W/L.

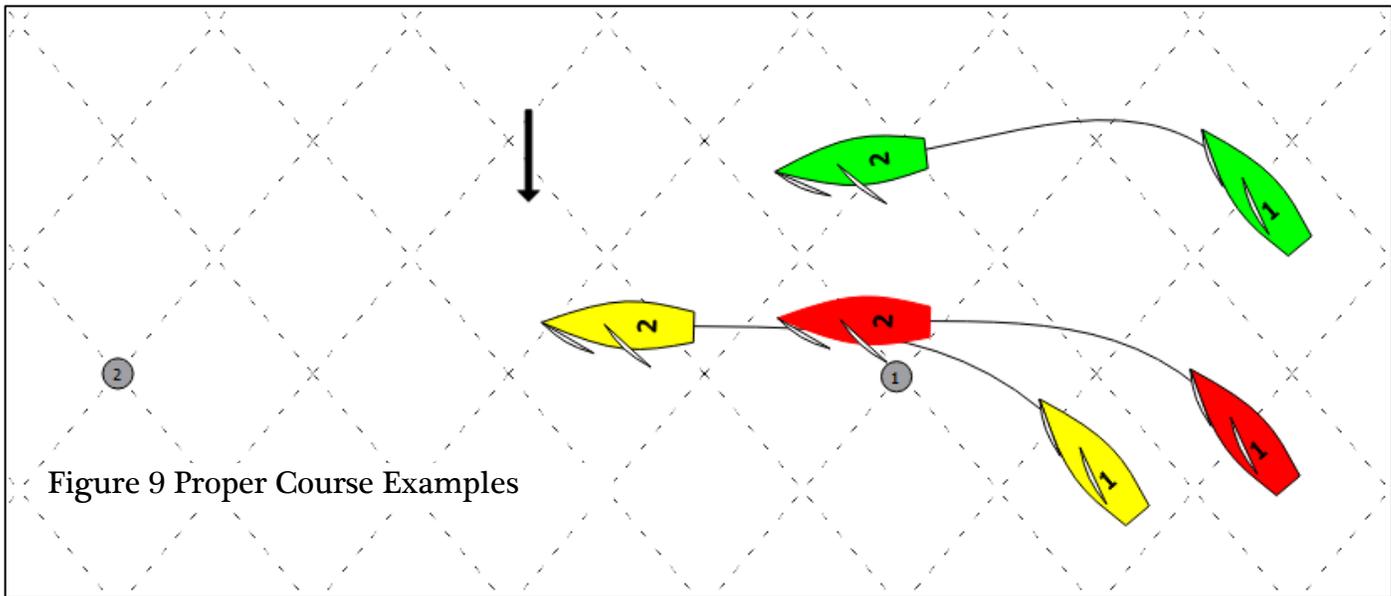
In this example, at P2, the 'give room' requirement of R 15 (Acquiring ROW) does not apply either because Red gains ROW due to the action of Yellow (Yellow tacked). At P3, if Red, now ROW under R11 (W/L) wants to luff, she is only subject to the 'room' requirement of R 16 (ROW Altering course).

Now look at a similar – but different – scenario in Figure 8. In this example, Yellow has completed her tack at P3, before Blue establishes an overlap from astern at P4. So in this example R 17 applies, and Blue is restricted from sailing above her proper course during the life of the overlap. The 'give room' obligation of R 15 (Acquiring ROW) applies to Blue when the overlap is created from astern, at about P4.

Enough on R 17 for now – let's move on to R 18 and Mark Room and see how Proper Course may apply.

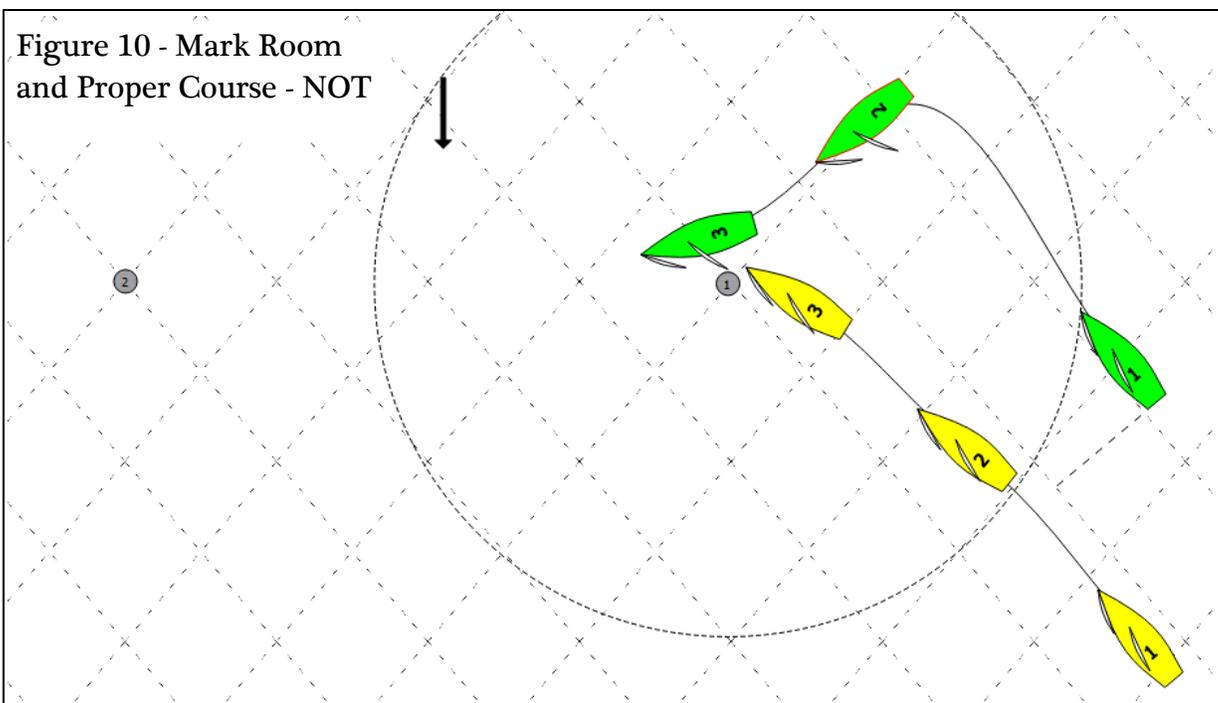


R 18 Mark Room and Proper Course



In Figure 9, look at each boat at P1 as if the other coloured boats were not there. Let's say that Yellow is clear ahead of any trailing boats at the zone, and so has Mark Room. From Position 1, her proper course would be to sail close to the mark to go to the next offset mark. Now look at Red – the same words may be used. Now look at Green. Green has sailed beyond the Weather Mark and her proper course would be to sail towards the Offset Mark, and not to sail close to the Weather Mark, which is well to leeward of her position.

In Figure 10, Green and Yellow are approaching the Weather Mark. Green is clear ahead at P1 when she reaches the



zone and has Mark Room (R 18.2.b). But from her position P2, she cannot close the door on Yellow, as her Proper Course at P2 is to sail to the Offset Mark, and not towards the Weather Mark. In this case, Green by sailing beyond

what Mark Room permits, would not be exonerated under R 21, and may be penalized under the applicable ROW rule, in this case R 11 (W/L), for failing to stay clear of Yellow.

Now let's look at some extracts from R 18, where Proper Course is referenced. The first is in R 18.1(b) which refers to a situation where R 18 says Proper Course DOES NOT APPLY.

18 MARK-ROOM

18.1 When Rule 18 Applies

Rule 18 applies between boats when they are required to leave a *mark* on the same side and at least one of them is in the *zone*. However, it does not apply

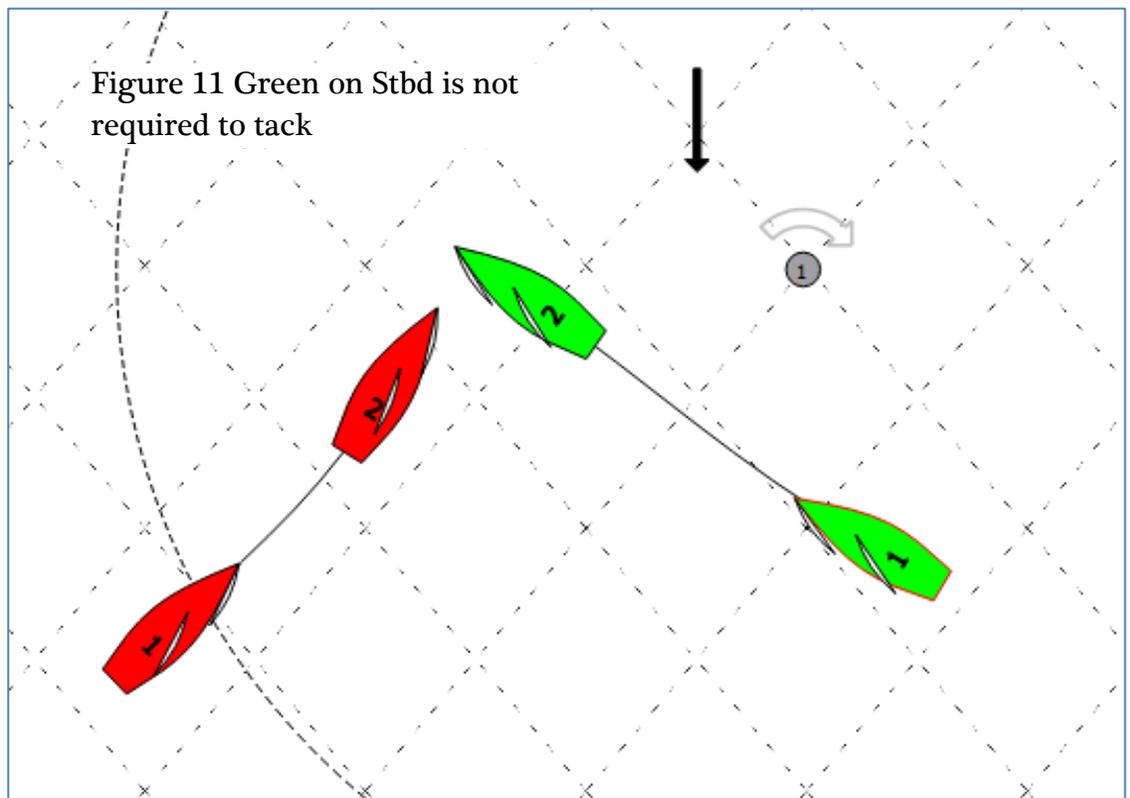
(a) between boats on opposite *tacks* on a beat to windward,

(b) between boats on opposite *tacks* when the **proper course** at the *mark* for one but not both of them is to tack,

I can find only one situation where R18.1(b) may apply and it is shown in ISAF Case 9 which says - "When a starboard-tack boat chooses to sail past a windward mark, a port-tack boat must keep clear. There is no rule that requires a boat to sail a proper course".

Figure 11 shows the situation. The mark is to be rounded to Stbd. Port is fetching the mark, but Green needs to tack to lay the mark. This case asks the question "Can Red, on Port ignore Green on Stbd because the proper course for Green would be to tack to round the mark?"

The answer is No! R 10 P/S applies and Case 9 says that Green on Stbd is not required to tack to sail her proper course around the mark and Red on Port must stay clear. Also remember that Green cannot 'just' tack at P2, in front of Red as she would break R 13 Tacking.



Next, we will look at the parts of R 18 where one boat must allow the other boat that has Mark Room to sail her proper course. This is the most familiar part of R 18 and occurs in every race and at almost every mark rounding. The important thing to remember is that while the 'other' boat has Mark Room, she is allowed to sail close to the mark if her proper course would be close to the mark. However, if something happens that 'turns off' R 18 (like passing head to wind), then the proper course requirement also ends. There are probably lots of possible examples, but we will look at just a few. R 18.2.b is the main section that grants Mark Room, but R 18.2.c kicks in if things change in the zone – like a late change in the overlap for example.

R18.2.

(c) When a boat is required to give *mark-room* by rule 18.2(b),

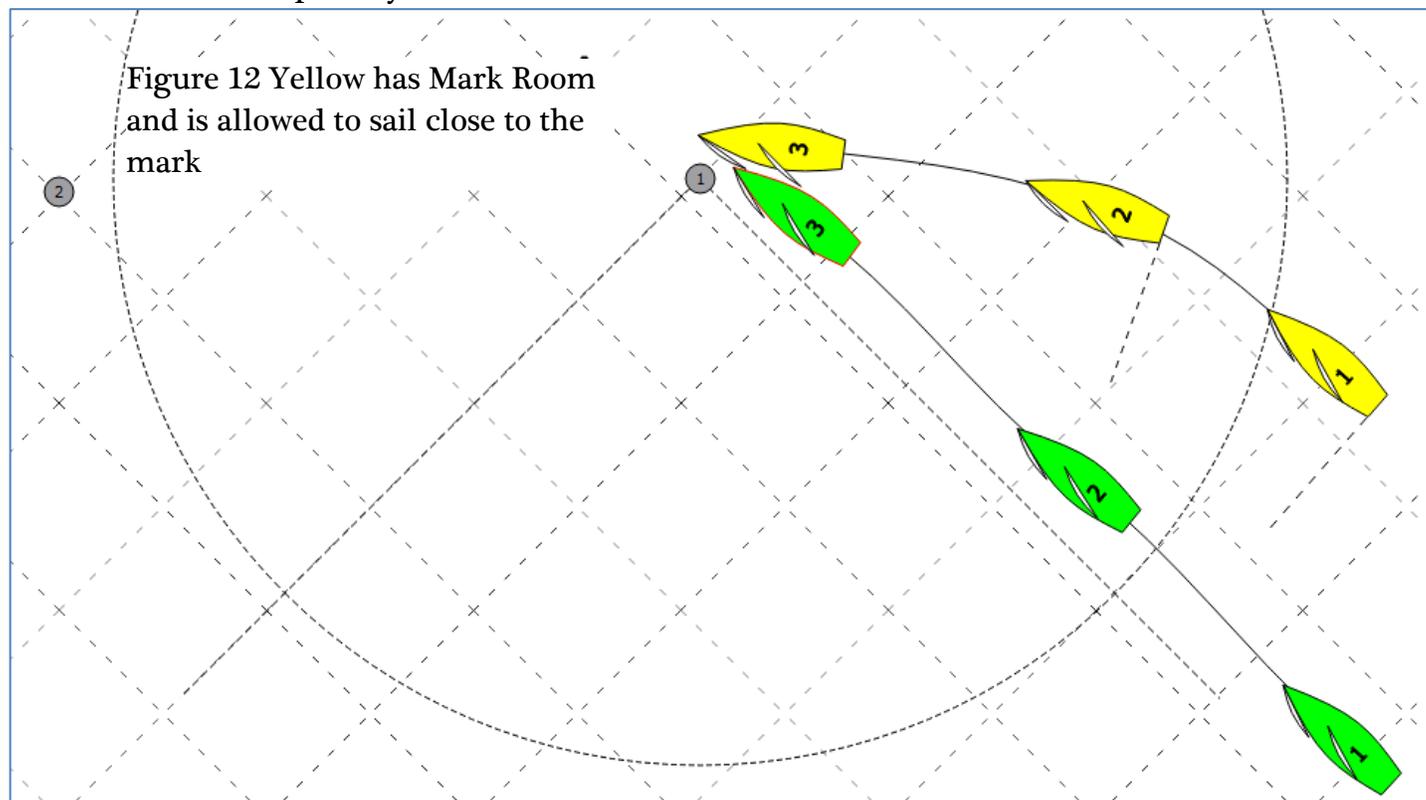
(1) she shall continue to do so even if later an *overlap* is broken or a new *overlap* begins;

(2) if she becomes *overlapped* inside the boat entitled to *mark-room*, she shall also give that boat *room* to sail her **proper course** while they remain *overlapped*. However, if the boat entitled to *mark-room* passes head to wind or leaves the *zone*, rule 18.2(b) ceases to apply.

First, look back at Figure 10. That was an example where a boat entitled to Mark Room, sailed beyond what Mark Room allowed, and becomes 'at fault' for breaking a ROW rule – R11 W/L in that example.

Now we will look at probably the most common examples of R 18, Mark Room and Proper Course.

Figure 12 shows Marks to Port and at P1, Yellow has over stood the lay line, but is clear ahead of Green at the zone, so under R 18.2.b Yellow has Mark Room. At P2, a new overlap is created as Yellow bears off towards the mark. With Mark Room and from her position P2, Yellow is allowed to sail close to the mark, as her Proper Course from P2 is to sail close to the mark. Green is at fault for preventing Yellow from sailing close to the mark. If there is contact, Yellow breaks R 11 (W/L) but is exonerated under R 21 as she was sailing within the Mark Room to which she was entitled and Green is penalized under R 18.2.b and R 18.2.c.1 and especially R 18.2.c.2.

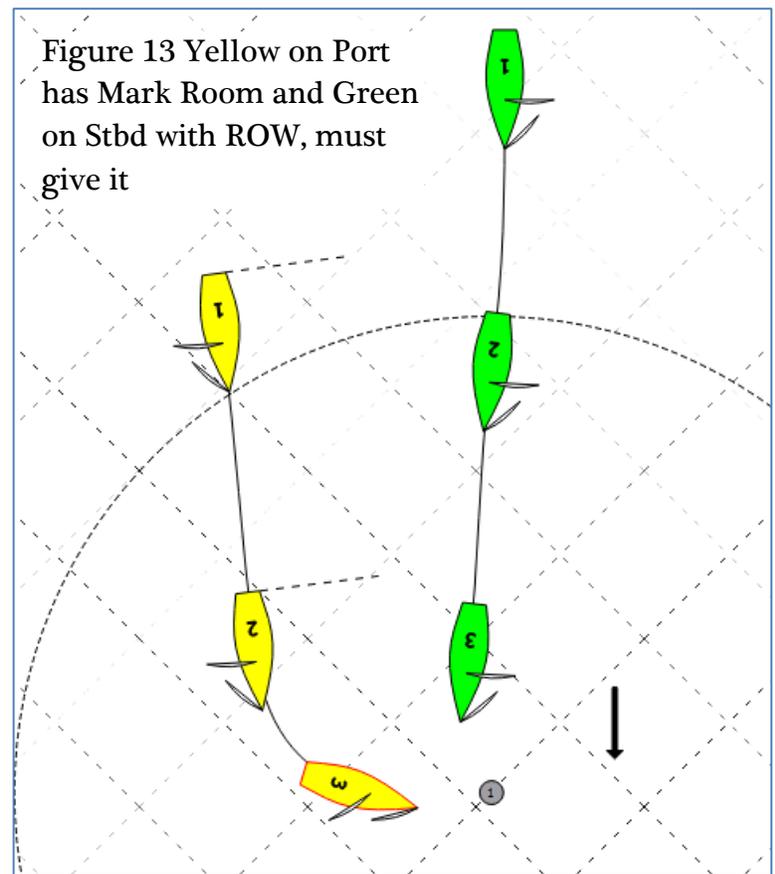


At P1, if Green continues straight, she does so at her own risk (of breaking R 18.2). Green needs to bail out – she should expect that Yellow, with Mark Room, may pass close to the mark – so Green should start to head up a bit to pass astern of Yellow, or even pass the mark on the wrong side to avoid the foul.

While it is well established that you need not anticipate that another boat may break a rule, it is common sense to anticipate that a boat may sail as allowed by the rules, and move to avoid her – the best skippers avoid problems before they develop.

Now look at Figure 13 – a downwind mark to be rounded to Port. At P1, Yellow on port, is clear ahead of Green on stbd at the zone, so Yellow is entitled to Mark Room under R 18.2.b. In this case, Green has ROW under R10 P/S, but R 18 places an obligation on Green to allow Yellow, with Mark Room, to sail close to the mark as that would be her Proper Course.

From her position at P2, Yellow is allowed to sail close to the mark, as her Proper Course at P2 is to sail close to the mark. Green would be at fault for preventing Yellow from sailing close to the mark. If there is contact, Yellow breaks R 10 (P/S) but is exonerated under R 21 as she was sailing within the Mark Room to which she was entitled, and Green would be penalized under R 18.2.b and R 18.2.c. As early as P1, Green must expect that Yellow may pass close to the mark – so Green should start to head up a bit to pass astern of Yellow and get to the outside and avoid the problem.

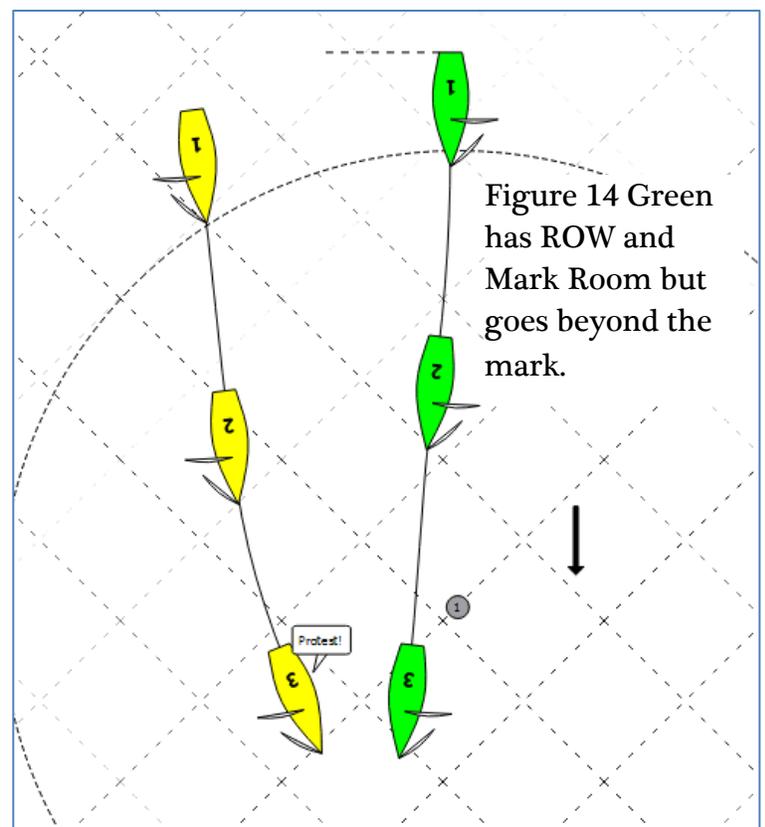


The final reference to Proper Course in R18 appears in R 18.4 Gybing. Refer to Figure 14 – a downwind mark to be rounded to Port.

18.4 Gybing

When an inside *overlapped* right-of-way boat must gybe at a *mark* to sail her **proper course**, until she gybes she shall sail no farther from the *mark* than needed to sail that course. Rule 18.4 does not apply at a *gate mark*.

In Figure 14, Green has ROW under R10 P/S and as inside overlapped boat at the zone, is entitled to Mark Room under R 18.2.b. In this case, Green goes further from the mark than needed to sail her proper course. Yellow protests Green for breaking R 18.4. Green is entitled to room to gybe, but at a gybe mark, until she gybes, she shall sail no farther from the mark than the room needed to sail that course. We probably see this protest more frequently in Big Boat racing than RC racing as they do not have the depth perception issues that we have, so in RC Racing, this may be harder to call unless it is obvious that Green has gone well beyond the mark.



Rule 21 Exoneration – May the Force be with you!

21 EXONERATION

When a boat is sailing within the *room* or *mark-room* to which she is entitled under a rule of Section C, she shall be exonerated if, in an incident with a boat required to give her that *room* or *mark-room*,

- (a) she breaks a rule of Section A, rule 15 or rule 16, or
- (b) she is compelled to break rule 31.

I have made various references to R 21 Exoneration throughout this article, so it is worth taking a look at its wording as it is fundamental to protecting Room and Mark Room rights. Look back at figure 13 on the previous page; Yellow on port is turning to round the mark, and Green comes barreling in on stbd and they collide. Because of R 21, Yellow, sailing within the Mark Room to which she is entitled, is exonerated from breaking R 10 P/S and even though Green is on stbd with ROW, she is penalized under R 18.2.b and R 18.2.c for preventing Yellow from passing close to the mark. That's the power of R 21 Exoneration.

Rule 21 Exoneration contains some very important concepts – It says that if you are sailing within the Mark Room or Room to which you are entitled and you have an incident with a boat required to give that Mark Room or Room, then you will be exonerated – even if you break a ROW rule (of Section A) or R 15 Gaining ROW or R 16 ROW altering course (from Section B), or are forced to hit the mark (R31).

But the converse is also true – don't get greedy and take more than the Mark Room or Room than your proper course allows, or you will not be protected by R 21 and you will fall under the normal ROW rules of Section A and the Limitations of Section B. To see this in action, look back at Figure 10 on Page 7.

Non- Interference !

The final appearance of Proper Course is in R 24.2. Basically this says, “Don't sail off your proper course to interfere with a boat taking a penalty, or a boat sailing on another leg of the course”.

24.2 Except when sailing her proper course, a boat shall not interfere with a boat taking a penalty or sailing on another leg.

That sounds so simple that it should not even need a diagram. Let's mention a couple of examples –

a) You are on a beat and sailing on stbd tack. Another boat has rounded the weather mark and is sailing back downwind. R24.2 says in essence, “don't bear off or luff up in order to interfere with the other boat”; i.e. don't go 'Hunting' for the other boat. However, if you sail on, close hauled, you are sailing your proper course and the other boat will have to keep clear of you as you will have ROW, either under R 10 P/S or R 11 W/L.

b) A boat hits the weather mark as she rounds, and on the short reach to the offset mark, she sails low of the rhumb line and starts her penalty turn. You follow around the weather mark – so don't sail below your proper course i.e. low of the rhumb line, to interfere with her as she does her penalty turn. ISAF Case 126 covers this rule – especially read the 3rd example.

CASE 126

For the purpose of determining whether rule 24.2 applies to an incident, a boat is sailing on the leg which is consistent with her course immediately before the incident and her reasons for sailing that course.

Additional Reading – The ISAF Case Book

The ISAF Case Book may be downloaded for free (and save it on your computer for reference) <http://www.sailing.org/documents/caseandcall/case-book.php>. Here are some cases that discuss Proper Course. I have used some of them above.

CASE 7

When, after having been clear astern, a boat becomes overlapped to leeward within two of her hull lengths of the other boat, the windward boat must keep clear, but the leeward boat must initially give the windward boat room to keep clear and must not sail above her proper course.

CASE 9

When a starboard-tack boat chooses to sail past a windward mark, a port-tack boat must keep clear. There is no rule that requires a boat to sail a proper course.

CASE 13

Before her starting signal, a leeward boat does not break a rule by sailing a course higher than the windward boat's course.

CASE 14

When, owing to a difference of opinion about a leeward boat's proper course, two boats on the same tack converge, the windward boat must keep clear. Two boats on the same leg sailing near one another may have different proper courses.

CASE 46

A leeward boat is entitled to sail up to her proper course, even when she has established a leeward overlap from clear astern and within two of her hull lengths of the windward boat.

CASE 75

When rule 18 applies, the rules of Sections A and B apply as well. When an inside overlapped right-of-way boat must gybe at a mark, she is entitled to sail her proper course until she gybes. A starboard-tack boat that changes course does not break rule 16.1 if she gives a port-tack boat adequate space to keep clear and the port-tack boat fails to take advantage of it promptly.

CASE 76

When a right-of-way boat changes course she may break rule 16, even if she is sailing her proper course.

CASE 126

For the purpose of determining whether rule 24.2 applies to an incident, a boat is sailing on the leg which is consistent with her course immediately before the incident and her reasons for sailing that course.