

Prevention of Collision at Sea

Speed, Baby, Speed - What's Safe and Where?

Vincent Pica - District Captain, Sector Long Island Sound/South, D1-SR • United States Coast Guard Auxiliary

Who hasn't been out on our bays and creeks and experienced another boat's overtaking you at such a speed that you grumbled, "What is that moron thinking?!" Without any ambiguity, Rule 6 - Safe Speed - is all about determining what is a safe speed, condition by condition. And while many readers of *Long Island Boating World* will head out to the canyons for the great pelagics - sharks of many stripes and sizes - I feel safe in saying that the majority of our readers fish in the creeks, bays and inlets of Long Island. And Rules 7, 8 and 9 are about that. Taken together, Rules 6 through 9 are about what is safe - and where.

What Does Rule 6 Say is a "Safe Speed"

"Every vessel shall (must!) at all times proceed at a safe speed so that she can take proper and effective action to avoid collision and be stopped within a distance appropriate to the prevailing circumstances and conditions." Admiralty and maritime boards have consistently applied the rule that a safe stopping distance is operating at a speed that allows you to do so in half the distance that you can see ahead. So, perhaps that guy that blew by you at 40 knots when visibility is to the horizon is traveling at a safe speed? Unlikely... Read on.

Rule 6 goes on to define factors "that shall (must!) be among those taken into account" by

all vessels...

- 6(a)(i) the state of visibility (OK, to the horizon covers him here...)
- (ii) traffic density (well, maybe you were the only other boat in sight...)
- (iii) maneuverability (hmm, can turn on a dime...maybe still OK...)
- (iv) at night, background (broad daylight... still OK...)
- (v) lighting (beautiful day... still OK... hmm...!)
- (vi) sea and weather (draft versus water BINGO! No way high speeds can be justified when any small deviation from the channel will ground you at any moment.

And we all know that channels can silt over after a storm or heavy sea state.

Even though the courts have applied the above-mentioned rule of thumb of "safe speed equals safe stopping in half the range of visibility", this fails when the hazard is below the surface. Visibility on the night of April 14, 1912 was excellent when Sixth Officer James Paul Moody shouted "Iceberg Ahead...!"

With or without alcohol present, breaking Rule 6 can have life-time consequences. After

losing 46 souls when the T/N Andrea Doria collided in the fog with the M/V Stockholm on July 25, 1956, the Andrea Doria's captain was heard to mutter, "When I was a boy, and all my life, I loved the sea; now I hate it..."

Rule 7 - Determining the Risk of Collision

Have you ever walked across an office lobby or a plaza and, out of the corner of your eye, you see someone whom you can just tell is going to collide with you unless either you or he speeds up or slows down? How can you "just tell"? Well, you weren't just born yesterday - you could tell because everything in the background and around you was changing except the angle between you and the other person! Child's play! So why do boats collide?

In close quarters, it is easy to see that the angle between you and another person is a constant. On the open water, it may be a considerable distance to other points of reference such as a point of land behind the other boat. When distances are great, measuring the angles in your mind's eye is just too unreliable to be of any value. But you don't need to use a distant object! Use your boat! Sight the other vessel over an object on your boat - a stanchion of the bow rail is pretty handy. If the other boat keeps a constant relationship - a "constant bearing" in

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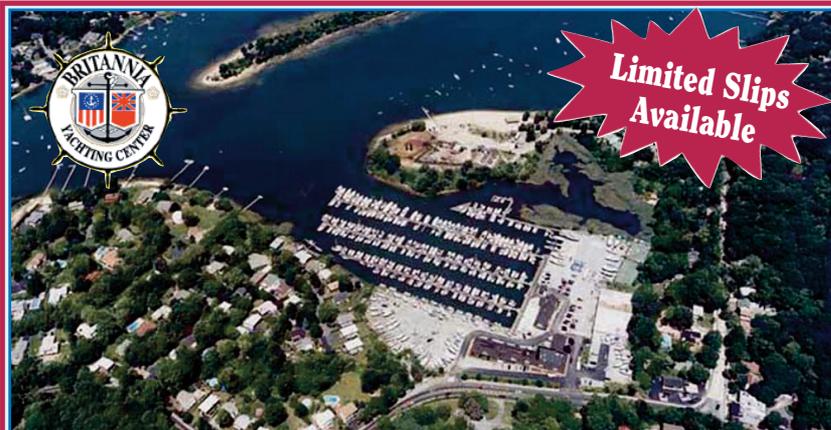
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maritime lingo – collision is absolutely certain! Rule 7 specifically says that you must use “all available means” to make that determination. If you have radar, use it. But a simple bow-rail stanchion will be as reliable as any computer or radar on the market – “constant bearing” means collision certainty!

Rule 8 – Action to Avoid Collision

How many times in your life have you walked up to someone who was walking exactly in the opposite direction and you both did the “stutter step” – you turn to your right just as they turn to their left so you both stop – and then you both reverse course simultaneously, again... and again... and again? Finally, you both stop “stutter stepping” and wave the other past.

We've written earlier about the “stand-on” (hold course and speed) and “give-way” (take early and substantial action to keep clear) vessels. Rules 13 (overtaking), 14 (head-on) and 15 (crossing) are all about these obligations. In fact, those rules are so important that we'll write about them again and again. So, what is Rule 8 about? You're stand-on and collision is still possible – now what??

The give-way vessel must take “early and substantial action” to keep clear. Given that,

changing course is easier to “telegraph” as a move versus just slowing down. Unless you come to a dead-stop (bow wave flattens, the bow itself dips down/forward and the boat settles on her waterline), the stand-on skipper may not be sure of your intentions. But, imagining that you are the stand-on vessel and the give-way is not telegraphing a proper action to avoid a collision, you must assume one is imminent and, having applied Rule 7 in your mind's eye, you start to take your independent action.

You never hesitate to use your horn in the car. Why do you hesitate on your boat? You may give 5 or more short blasts that might just get that skipper to port (you are on his right) to wake up and at least throttle back. You may take any action yourself re: the boating's heading – except turning towards port when the offending vessel is on your port side (see “stutter step” above!). If collision seems imminent unless you do something, you must do something (remember Rule 2 from June's edition!). Blast away on the horn and “take the most effective action” to avoid the collision now upon you. Dead stop may be best. Turning so as to be going in the same direction, but, hopefully, only parallel to the offending boat may be best. Use judgment. I like dead-stop as a first try since the combined velocity is lessened if both of us aren't going 20 knots at crunch time.

Rule 9 – In a Narrow Channel

(Are there any others on Long Island?)

A channel is defined as “narrow” when boats in it are severely limited in room to maneuver. So, stay as far to the starboard side of the channel as possible. If both skippers do that, it opens up a safe passage, normally. Do NOT anchor in a narrow channel. (In any event, it is a violation of Federal Regulations to anchor in any channel or tie up to any federal buoy.)

Do not cross the channel if it will interfere with a vessel that, by the nature of its draft, is confined to it. Rule 9(b) specifically states that “a vessel less than 20 meters (~60 feet) in length shall not impede the passage of a vessel which can safely navigate only within the narrow channel or fairway.” In contrast, a large vessel should not try to pass a smaller vessel in a narrow channel as the hydrodynamic effects caused by the larger displacement and the suction of her propellers will pull the smaller vessel into the larger one. (Remember the May column on “Breaking All the Rules” and the collision between RMS Olympic and the HMS Hawke?) That would be a very bad day...

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux2010@aol.com or go direct to John Blevins, who is in charge of new members matters, at FSO-PS@emcg.us and we will help you “get in this thing...”



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