

## SPORTSMANSHIP AND THE RULES

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### RULES - BASIC PRINCIPLE

The article below was written by an American Judge. However, this is a worldwide problem and I hope all of you will read this and at least think about the way we manage things when a rule may have been broken.

The very first precepts established in the Racing Rules of Sailing (RRS) are the Basic Principles and the very first Principle is 'Sportsmanship and the Rules' which says:

**"Competitors in the sport of sailing are governed by a body of rules that they are expected to follow and enforce. A fundamental principle of sportsmanship is that when competitors break a rule they will promptly take a penalty, which may be to retire."**

Therefore, following the rules and enforcing the rules are paramount in the RRS, and are of equal importance. Next, the RRS requires us to police ourselves and to take our penalty when we know we have committed a foul, regardless if we are protested or not.

### FOLLOW THE RULES

- Enforce the rules on yourself and others.
- Take your penalty when you know you've fouled.

Pretty simple stuff.

But, over many years in the sport, I've consistently observed sailing community 'cultural mindsets' which tend to suppress the even enforcement of the RRS across the fleet, by eroding the adoption of this Basic Principle and thus fair sailing in club-level racing.

Some are **attitudes**, others are peer-pressure and misunderstandings, but taken together they combine to suppress the improved understanding and fair application of the rules by inhibiting racers from embracing their responsibility to enforce the rules, not only to their benefit but **more importantly for the benefit of all the other competitors in the race.**

At the heart of these erroneous mindsets, is a **me-centric** point of view in deciding how to handle on-the-water fouls. These racers ask themselves,

"Can I ignore my foul because my competitor let me go by saying, 'You owe me one!'"

"Did the foul affect my score or standing?"

"I am not in contention for silver, so why ruin a top boat's chances?"

"Will I get a reputation if I keep protesting boats that foul me?"

I short-cut the above as:

- I Owe You One,
- Was My Score Affected?
- I'm Not Worthy, and
- Stigma.

### I OWE YOU ONE

I put this one first because it's so emblematic of the me-centric thinking at the heart of the problem. The bottom line is that it is not at the discretion of a fouled-boat to let another boat off the hook. The rules are very clear. If a racer knows they have committed a foul, they must take a penalty

whether they are protested or not. Period. A boat saying "I owe you one" is acknowledging that they committed a foul and their intention to not take a penalty.

On the surface, "I owe you one" might seem 'friendly', but the absence of the fouled-boat's protest, and the fouling-boat's turns, is nothing less than collusion between boats to break the rules.

The two boats are basically forming a rule-breaking compact to benefit each other (to the detriment of all other fleet competitors). When put in these terms, it becomes obvious how corrosive to fair competition for all "I owe you one" is.

## **WAS MY/YOUR SCORE EFFECTED?**

I put the my/your in the title because this question is just as often asked by others as it is to ourselves. We've all had the experience of being asked after protesting,

"Well, did the foul really hurt you?"

The notion underlying this question is that competitors need to rely upon more than the 'Basic Principle' to justify enforcing the rules. That somehow it is incumbent upon us to do a complicated analysis projecting the race forward and to predict if an infraction had a significant effect on only the boats directly involved in the foul.

Again, this is me-centric thinking which totally misses the point. The question is not,

"Was the fouled boat harmed?" but rather it is,

"Was the fouling boat advantaged?"

The answer to that question has to be that the fouling boat is advantaged against all other racers in the fleet, first by committing the foul and then by not taking their proper penalty. We must assume that other boats on the race course are enforcing the rules on themselves and others, so it is unfair for two boats to commit the same foul where one takes their penalty and one does not. **Therefore, fair sailing requires all of us to enforce the rules upon ourselves and upon others regardless of the perceived gravity or impact of the foul upon the boat(s) directly involved, because by doing so we are protecting fair sailing for all boats on the race course.**

## **I'M NOT WORTHY**

I put this one between Was My Score Affected? and Stigma because I feel it incorporates a little bit of both. Boats who are at the bottom of the fleet's standing can feel pressure to not 'ruin it' for the top boats. This stratifies the fleet into sub-classes where the top boats can unfairly gain advantage when interacting with 'lower boats'. Some may think, 'why protest as I know I won't be in the mix anyway'. Others may associate top sailing performance with top understanding of the rules, which results in an improper deference to the top boats during incidents. But these concepts aren't completely self-inflicted, as there can be social pressure on boats that are consistently in the bottom half of the fleet to understand their place and that there are really two races going on — the race between the top boats, and the race between everyone else.

## **STIGMA**

Let's face it, if you are a racer who accepts the RRS's 'Basic Principle - Sportsmanship and the Rules' and accepts what it says, that it is each of our responsibility to enforce the rules to ensure fair sailing for all, you are going to feel peer-pressure to not be (like that).

I've heard it coming from respected sailors suggesting that,

"...you don't want to get a reputation" or

"...you don't want to be that guy".

These are typically from those same top performers that are first to think it's their prerogative to yell, "I owe you one", or be the ones to ask "was your score affected?", or that foul lower-performing boats figuring that they are unlikely to complain.

Sometimes the Organising Authority or Race Committee (OA/RC) can inadvertently support this environment with short-hand statements like, "Let's keep the protests down," at a pre-race briefing, or "We had very few protests," at an awards ceremony, which could be misconstrued that protests should be avoided. Instead, they should be more deliberate and spell it out to support the Basic Principle with something like...

**"Let's have clean racing out there people. Follow the rules and if you know you fouled someone, just do your turns like you are supposed to. Let's reserve the protest hearings for only those incidents where the foul or fault is in question".**

Or after the race, praising the number of turns they saw people do on the race course...

"We saw great sportsmanship out there, we saw boats doing their turns for clear fouls without any fanfare."

Both of these would remind racers of their obligations and help support the correct mindset set forth in the Basic Principles.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

I don't have a silver-bullet to address this, but I think a first step is to shine light on it and start the conversation. There needs to be more emphasis on what the RRS's Basic Principle says, means, and how important it is in club-level racing. Somehow, we need to turn the page on the me-centric thinking and the stigma and flip both 180 degrees on their heads. So that...

- Instead of the one-on-one thinking that "I owe you one" represents, we think about our responsibility to the entire fleet and how unfair it is to all competitors in a race for one boat to let another boat break a rule without penalty.
- Instead of asking ourselves if the foul was significant enough to change my score, realise that no-one can project what advantage the fouling-boat might have gained, as even the smallest change in course might make the difference in that boat's next crossing with another competitor. It's an impossible task to project all those outcomes, so let us just stop.

The realisation must be:

- that a fouling boat has gained an uncalculatable advantage against all other competitors in the fleet and that boat must take a penalty;
- that lower performing boats need to evenly enforce the rules, not to improve their own score, but to ensure a fair race for all racers from the bottom of the fleet to the top; and finally,
- that the stigma and reputational fear of protesting too much disappears and instead that reputational fear and stigma is turned toward its proper target — on those competitors that try to get away with fouling; on those who shirk their responsibility (for whatever reason) to enforce the rules for the benefit of all; and onto those who socially intimidate others from doing the right thing.

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