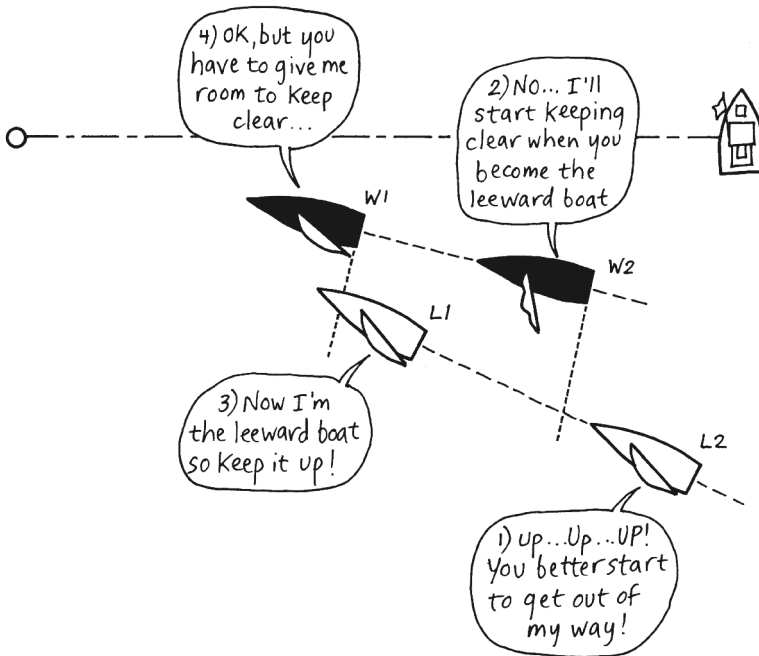


RULE 15 — ACQUIRING RIGHT OF WAY

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.

This rule states one of the oldest and most fundamental principles in the rules, and it makes perfect sense. When a boat takes action that gives her the right of way over you, she must give you the chance to respond and *keep clear* of her. For example, you are sailing on a run on *port tack* with another *port-tack* boat just to windward. As the *leeward* boat, you have the right-of-way (rule 11, On the Same Tack, Overlapped) and everything is under control. You have the “sword,” so to speak, and the *windward* boat must stay out of your way. Suddenly, the *windward* boat gybes. Now she is on *starboard tack* and you are on *port tack*. She now has the right-of-way; i.e., she now has the “sword” (rule 10, On Opposite Tacks), but she can’t just gybe and hit you; her actions are limited by rule 15.

Case 24 describes a scenario where a boat (B) comes up from astern and becomes *overlapped to leeward* of the boat *clear ahead*.



When B becomes overlapped she gains the right of way under rule 11, but also the limitation under rule 15 which “embodies the principle in the rules that when the right of way shifts from one boat to another, the boat with the newly acquired right of way must give the other boat space and time for response, and thus a fair opportunity to manoeuvre to keep clear.” (See also Case 53.)

Note that a right-of-way boat does not have to anticipate that she will lose her right of way. Case 53 is clear on this point: “Allowing adequate time for response, when rights and obligations change between two boats, is implied in rule 15 by its requirement to allow the newly obligated boat ‘room to keep clear.’” Therefore, in the example above, the *leeward* boat need not anticipate her requirement to *keep clear* as a *port-tack* boat before the *windward* boat gybes to *starboard*.

However, the use of the word “initially” clearly states that the protection of “*room to keep clear*” is not continuing. In the old video game *Deluxe Asteroids*, a tiny rocket ship tries to blast apart large rocks that will blow up the ship if they hit her. When there are just too many rocks about to hit, the player can press a button, putting a protective force shield around the ship. At first, the rocks bounce off the shield, but after a few seconds the shield begins to fade and disappear.

The room to respond to a newly acquired obligation to *keep clear* is a temporary “shield” for the new keep-clear boat. It is very strong initially, but fades in strength as the seconds go by. Also, for you to be entitled to the protection of the ‘shield’ you must, at the moment you become the keep-clear boat, make a prompt and careful attempt to begin to get clear of the right-of-way boat. If you delay at all, you lose the protection of “*room to keep clear*” and you run the risk of fouling the right-of-way boat.