

In 1965 the rule writers took a creative step. Realizing that there ought to be some “cutoff point” after which a boat *clear astern* could not obtain an inside *overlap*, they devised a safety zone now simply called “the *zone*,” which has proved to work very effectively. And because the “point” can be in any direction from the *mark*, the *zone* is an imaginary area with the *mark* in the center and having a radius of three of the nearer boat’s hull lengths; for in-stance, 72 feet in a Melges 24 (see the definition *Zone*). Note the fact that it is the nearer boat’s hull lengths; this becomes important when the boats are different sizes.

The second sentence in rule 18.2(b) says, “*If a boat is clear ahead when she reaches the zone, the boat clear astern at that moment shall thereafter give her mark-room.*” So the game ends at the *zone*. If you are catching up from astern but don’t get the inside *overlap* before the boat ahead of you gets to the *zone*, then you are not entitled to the rights in rule 18.2(b) and must give the boat ahead *mark-room* under rule 18.2(b). If you do get the inside *overlap* before she gets to the *zone*, then you are entitled to the rights in rule 18.2(b). So often the race is not to the *mark*... it is to the *zone*!



“What if I physically can’t give room to the boat that just obtained the inside overlap on me?”

... is the second exception to rule 18.2(a) and 18.2(b). When a boat obtains an inside *overlap* from *clear astern*, the boat ahead has a “protective shield” if she needs it. When a boat gets an *overlap* on you just before you reach the *zone*, she becomes entitled to *mark-room* under rule 18.2(b) as an inside boat. However, you are not required to anticipate her arrival. There are times, though rare, when you may be physically unable to give her the *room* she needs to round or pass the *mark* from the time the *overlap* began, based on your situation at that moment. Rule 18.2(f) says, “*If a boat obtained an inside overlap from clear astern or by tacking to windward of the other boat and, from the time the overlap began, the outside boat has been unable to give mark-room, she is not required to give it.*” In this situation, she is not entitled to *mark-room* and the applicable rules of Section A and B apply. If she becomes the right-of-way boat, she must comply with rule 15 (Acquiring Right of Way) which means she won’t get inside at the *mark* because if the outside boat could have created enough room to do so, she would have done so in the first place. And if she is a keep-clear boat, she must keep clear.

One example of where this situation might occur is a tightly packed *mark* rounding in light air where a boat astern gets an inside *overlap* on a boat that is three-and-a-half boat-lengths from the *mark*, but there's just no way the outside boat can get everyone else outside of her to move away from the *mark* in time to create *room* for the new inside boat. Another example is when two boats are going so fast that by the time the outside boat can react to her new obligation and make the *room*, the inside boat is already past the *mark* on the wrong side. Twelve knots of boat-speed equals about 20 feet per second, so on a windy reach a Hobie 18 will chew up three boat-lengths in less than three seconds!

A similar situation is when you are approaching a starboard-hand windward *mark* on *starboard-tack* and you tack in the *zone*. Rule 18.3 (Passing Head to Wind in the Zone) does not apply (see the discussion of rule 18.3). If a *port-tack* boat becomes *overlapped* with you from *clear astern*, it is entitled to *mark-room* under rule 18.2(a) unless you are physically unable to give her *room*, in which case she is not entitled to *mark-room*.

Another similar situation is when you are approaching a starboard-hand windward *mark* on *starboard-tack*, and a *port-tack* boat crosses you in the *zone* and tacks to *windward* of you, or ducks you and then tacks into a *wind-ward overlap*. Rule 18.2(a) requires you to give them *mark-room* unless you are physically unable to do so from the moment the *overlap* began.