

## RULE 20 — ROOM TO TACK AT AN OBSTRUCTION

### RULE 20.1 — HAILING

A boat may hail for *room* to tack and avoid a boat on the same *tack*. However, she shall not hail unless

- (a) she is approaching an *obstruction* and will soon need to make a substantial course change to avoid it safely, and
- (b) she is sailing close-hauled or above.

In addition, she shall not hail if the *obstruction* is a *mark* and a boat that is *fetching* it would be required to respond and change course as a result of the hail.

### RULE 20.2 — RESPONDING

- (a) After a boat hails, she shall give a hailed boat time to respond.
- (b) A hailed boat shall respond even if the hail breaks rule 20.1.
- (c) A hailed boat shall respond either by tacking as soon as possible, or by immediately replying 'You tack' and then giving the hailing boat *room* to tack and avoid her.
- (d) When a hailed boat responds, the hailing boat shall tack as soon as possible.
- (e) From the time a boat hails until she has tacked and avoided a hailed boat, rule 18.2 does not apply between them.

**RULE 20.3 — PASSING ON A HAIL TO AN ADDITIONAL BOAT**

When a boat has been hailed for *room* to tack and she intends to respond by tacking, she may hail another boat on the same *tack* for *room* to tack and avoid her. She may hail even if her hail does not meet the conditions of rule 20.1. Rule 20.2 applies between her and a boat she hails.

**RULE 20.4 — ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR HAILS**

- (a) When conditions are such that a hail may not be heard, the boat shall also make a signal that clearly indicates her need for *room* to tack or her response.
- (b) The notice of race may specify an alternative communication for a boat to indicate her need for *room* to tack or her response, and require boats to use it.

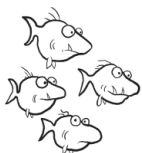
This is the rule that is used when calling for “sea-room” or *room* at a shore, breakwater or dock. However, it is also commonly used when two *port-tack* boats are sailing side-by-side up a beat and are converging with a *starboard-tacker*. It is a “safety” rule. The purpose of the rule is to permit a close-hauled boat caught between another boat on the same *tack* and an *obstruction* to avoid the *obstruction* without loss of distance when a substantial change of course is required to clear it.

Notice that rule 20.1 does not apply to boats on opposite *tacks*. Case 43 describes a situation where a *port-tack* boat (P) is sailing close-hauled as close to shore as possible. A *port-tack* boat to leeward (S) tacks to *starboard tack* onto a collision course with P. S hails “Starboard” and P hails for “sea-room.” In Case 43, the Appeals Committee said, “P is subject to rule 10 and must keep clear...S establishes right of way over P when she tacks onto starboard, but must observe rules 13 and 15. S meets rule 13’s requirement by not tacking so close that P has to take avoiding action before S reaches her close-hauled course. After S acquires right of way over P under rule 10, S complies with rule 15 by initially giving P room to keep clear.” Therefore, P is not entitled to hail for *room* to tack since rule 20.1 applies to two boats on the “same” *tack*. So, in this situation P must slow down or bear away and pass astern of S.

When all the conditions in rule 20.1 are met, a *leeward* boat or one *clear ahead* will be able to call for “*room* to tack” from a nearby boat that is otherwise preventing her from tacking.

Here is how rule 20 works:

- 1) For a hail to be a legal hail under rule 20.1, the two boats must be on the *same tack* and approaching an *obstruction*, the *leeward* boat (L) or the boat *clear ahead* (A) must be sailing close-hauled or above, and L or A must soon need to make a substantial course change to avoid the *obstruction* safely (rules 20.1(a) and 20.1(b)).
- 2) Rule 20.1 is intended for the use of L or A when she is about to hit, or be hit by, an *obstruction*, e.g., a sandbar, a dock, a fishing boat, or a *starboard-tack* boat that is *racing*. When there is any doubt as to whether L or A actually is in imminent danger of colliding with an *obstruction*, I would always expect the protest committee to give L or A the benefit of the doubt, and I would encourage sailors on the water to do the same.
- 3) Rule 20.1 only provides a boat enough *room* to tack without fouling a nearby boat. Let's say the boats are on *starboard tack*. L or A hails for *room* to tack and the windward boat (W) or boat *clear astern* (B) responds, "You tack." If the course of L or A is sufficiently to leeward of W's or B's course such that after tacking onto *port tack* she has *room* to immediately bear away and pass astern of W or B, she is required to do so, since she has the *room* she needs to tack and avoid the other boat. (See Case 35.)
- 4) Rule 20.1(a) prohibits L or A from hailing the other boat for *room* to tack unless safety requires L or A to make a "substantial change of course" to avoid the *obstruction*. Here, the course change is simply that needed not to hit the *obstruction*. In this case, as my general guideline, a course change of less than 10 degrees is not very "substantial." That's only 3 feet, 6 inches, in a 20-foot boat. Therefore, in a 20-foot boat, if L or A can bear away and miss an *obstruction* that she would otherwise hit only 3 feet from its downwind edge, it is questionable whether she is entitled to hail under rule 20.1. But if she needs to tack to avoid the last 3 feet of its upwind edge, then that's more "substantial." (See Appeal 15 and Case 11.)



*"What happens if a boat hails for room to tack, and the boat being hailed doesn't think the hailing boat is approaching an obstruction or needs to make a substantial course change to avoid the obstruction?"*

First of all, the boat that was hailed **must respond** to the hail by tacking or replying "You tack" (see the following discussion on rule 20.2(b)), even if the

hailed boat does not see any *obstruction* in front of the hailing boat. This is for safety. Perhaps the hailed boat can't see the rock in front of the other boat; or perhaps the other boat was mistaken that there was a rock. Having responded, the hailed boat (or any boat) can protest the hailing boat for breaking rule 20.1(a). If the protest committee finds that the hailing boat was not approaching an *obstruction* or did not need to make a substantial course change to ensure her safety, or if "safety" was not an issue, the hailing boat will be disqualified. Note the word "shall" in rule 20.1(a), "*However, she shall not hail...*". (See Cases 10 and 33.)

Note, if a sailor tried to take advantage of this situation by intentionally calling for room to tack when there was no *obstruction*, that would be a clear breach of rule 2 (Fair Sailing).

*"Is there anything I should know about the hail itself?"*



Well, first of all the hail must be **adequate**, which implies that it must be loud enough for the other boat to hear it above the wind and noise of the boats, and it must be absolutely clear as to what the hail means. I personally try to turn my head toward the other boat, use their helmsman's name if I know it, and say to the effect, "I have a dock or a *starboard-tacker* coming up; I need *room* to tack." (See Case 54.)

Secondly, the hailing boat must give the hailed boat **time to respond**; i.e., she cannot hail and tack simultaneously. Appeal 45 reads, "PL was at fault [by] ...hailing and tacking simultaneously, contrary to rule 20.2(a)." The purpose of this is to provide time for the specific response called for under rule 20.2(c) (to tack or reply 'You tack'). This requires boats to keep a good lookout so they are not "surprised" by an *obstruction*. Furthermore, it requires boats to be aware of the hailed boat's ability to respond as well. Obviously it will require more time if the hailed boat will have to subsequently hail a boat or boats to windward of them, as permitted in rule 20.3 (see Case 113).

Though the failure of a hailed boat to hear an adequate hail does not relieve her of her obligations under rule 20, before she is hailed a boat is under no obligation to anticipate that another boat is going to hail for room to tack. Appeal 45 reads, "[The finding] that PW should have been prepared to respond is unwarranted." Therefore a boat does not have to anticipate that another boat might be approaching an *obstruction*; and if the other boat does not adequately hail in time and subsequently runs aground or fouls a *star-*

*board-tack* boat, she cannot blame the hailed boat. Therefore, a boat must not sail into a position, before hailing, where she cannot allow sufficient time for a response.



*“I thought that when two port-tack boats were approaching a starboard-tacker, it was whoever hailed first that got to tell the other what to do.”*

No! Rule 19.2(a) reminds the right-of-way boat that she has the right to choose on which side she will pass the *obstruction*. And if she wants to tack, rule 20.1 gives L or A the right to call for *room* to tack whenever she will have to make a substantial course change to avoid the *obstruction*; and requires W or B to respond to L or A’s hail. When two port-tack boats (PW and PL) are approaching a *starboard-tack* boat (S), Appeal 24 says, “PW established an inside overlap on PL when the two boats were several lengths from the obstruction. However, this fact alone did not give PW right to room under rule 19.2(b)...Therefore, PL was under no obligation to give PW room to pass astern of the obstruction if in fact PL desired to tack.”

If PL chooses to pass astern of S and PW wants to pass astern of S also, then Case 11 reminds PL that, as an outside boat passing an *obstruction*, “under rule 19.2(b) PW was entitled to room to pass between PL and the stern of S.” But if PL chooses to hail for *room* to tack under rule 20.1, PW must comply by tacking or replying “You tack” and giving PL *room* to tack even when PW would rather duck.

### **When L or A adequately hails, rule 20.2 tells W or B how to respond.**

So when L or A adequately hails, W or B is required to respond, even if L or A’s hail breaks rule 20.1 (rule 20.2(b)), and she has only two choices for a response: either tack **as soon as possible** or **immediately** reply “You tack” (rule 20.2(c)). W or B does not have the option of disputing L or A’s judgment about her need to hail. When W or B feels L or A’s hail is not proper (e.g., she is not really near an *obstruction* or she will not soon have to make a substantial course change to avoid an *obstruction*) she nevertheless must respond. She can then protest under rule 20.1 claiming L or A hailed when she was not permitted to do so.

Notice that if you choose to reply “You tack,” you must make that hail **immediately**; i.e., without delay. Note also that you must use those **exact two words** in your hail.

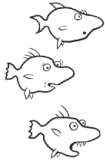
However, if you choose to respond by tacking, you need only do that “as soon as possible.” The reason is that sometimes it will **not** be possible for W or B to respond by tacking “immediately” after hearing a hail. Examples would include: (a) when there are several boats to windward of W or B that need to be hailed; (b) when coming in on *port tack* to a windward *mark* where the boats already going downwind are so close that tacking is impossible; (c) when PW is still ducking one *starboard-tacker* when PL hails for *room* to tack at a second *starboard-tacker*; or (d) when some object in the water such as a log or the windward *mark* momentarily restricts her ability to respond. When it is not possible for W or B to respond by tacking immediately, it is good seamanship for them to inform L or A.

Notice also that it makes no difference whether the hailed boat (W or B) can “fetch” the *obstruction* herself (unless it is also a *mark*; see rule 20.1). If the hailing boat (L or A) cannot clear the *obstruction* without tacking or bearing away sharply, she is entitled to hail and to get a response, regardless of whether the hailed boat can clear the *obstruction*.

Now let’s say that you are L and have hailed W for *room* to tack because of a converging *starboard-tacker*. Upon hearing your hail, W tacks. You must begin your tack as soon as you can without hitting W. In other words, you must put your helm down within a couple of seconds after W puts hers down. You break rule 20.2(d) if you continue another couple of boat-lengths before tacking, or if you don’t tack at all.

If W responds to your hail with the reply “You tack,” again you must put your helm down and tack as soon as it is possible, which normally will be immediately. If you don’t, you break rule 20.2(d). Once W hails “You tack” she assumes all the obligation to give you *room* to tack and clear her; so if you hear her reply and immediately put your helm down and hit her, she is wrong under rule 20.2(c) and you are exonerated (freed from penalty) for breaking any Section A rule, or rule 15 or 16, by rule 43.1(b) (Exoneration). And if you have to stop your tack or otherwise change course before completing your tack in order to avoid W, she is wrong as well under 20.2(c).

Note: It is not uncommon, when PL and PW are approaching a *starboard-tacker* (S), for PW to respond “You tack” but then be happy to let PL delay her tack so she can tack close to S (lee-bow tack). This gives PW two good options: tack close to PL (lee-bow tack) or duck S.



*“Could you discuss the situation where two port-tackers (PW and PL) are sailing close-hauled side by side on a converging course with a starboard-tacker (S). PL hails PW for ‘room to tack,’ gets no response, and ultimately S must change course to avoid hitting PL. Who should be penalized?”*

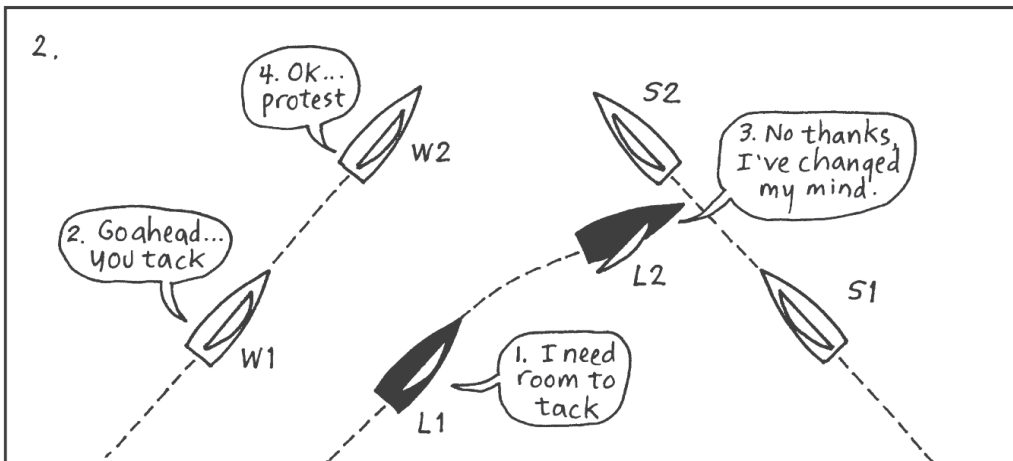
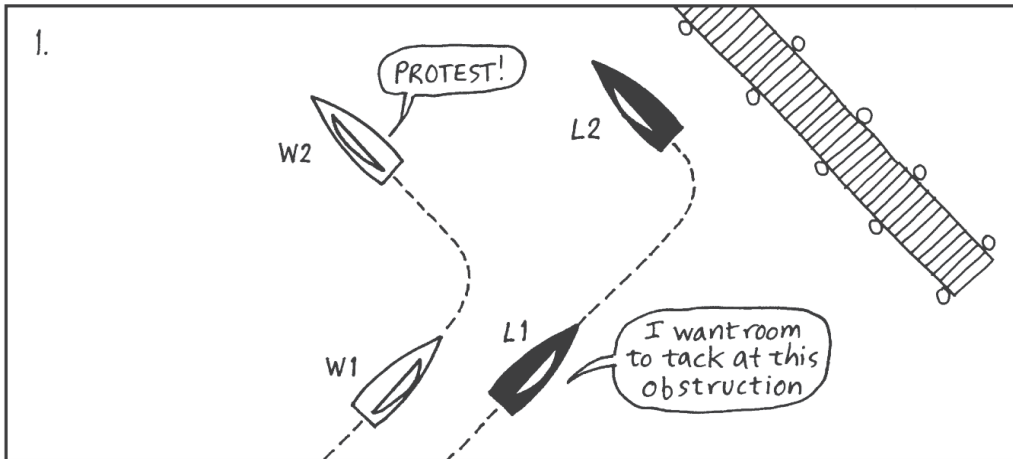
The answer will depend on the protest committee’s judgment as to whether PL hailed adequately and gave the hailed boat enough time to respond.

Case 3 states, “Having decided to tack and having hailed for room to do so three times, PL was entitled by rule 20.2(c) to expect that PW would respond and give her room to tack. She was not obliged to anticipate PW’s failure to comply with rule 20.2(c). PL broke rule 10, but she is exonerated as the innocent victim of another boat’s breach of a rule by rule 43.1(a).”

Appeal 19 is another good example of how PL fulfilled her obligation to adequately hail, but then was forced to foul S by PW’s failure to respond. “FACTS: [PW and PL] were close-hauled on port tack. S, which was to leeward and ahead of both PW and PL, tacked to starboard. S completed her tack in compliance with rule 15 (Acquiring Right of Way). Twice, PL hailed PW to tack, so that she also could tack and avoid S. By the time it was clear that PW would not respond, it was too late for PL to make any alternative maneuver without interfering with the oncoming S. PL called to S that she could not respond, whereupon S tacked back to port to avoid a collision.

“DECISION: Inasmuch as PL would have had to make a substantial course change to pass astern of S, even if she had borne away instantly when S tacked to starboard, PL’s hail did not break rule 20.1 (Room to Tack at an Obstruction: Hailing). PW did not respond to PL’s hail as required by rule 20.2(c) and was properly disqualified. However, she did not break rule 10 because at no time was she failing to keep clear of S. By the time it was clear that PW was not giving PL room to tack as required by rule 20.2(c), it was too late for PL to keep clear of S by bearing away. Therefore PL was compelled to break rule 10 as a consequence of PW’s breaking rule 20.2(c), so PL is exonerated by rule 43.1(a).”

However, PL must remember that her primary obligation is to *keep clear* of S under rule 10 (On Opposite Tacks). In Appeal 2, the protest committee found that after realizing PW was not responding to her hail, PL could have borne away and passed astern of S. Instead S was required to luff to avoid contact with PL. The Decision reads, “When PW failed to respond to PL’s hail



In situation 1, L breaks rule 20.2(d) by delaying her tack to starboard. After W tacks in response to L's hail, L must tack as soon as possible.

In situation 2, L breaks rule 20.2(d) by not tacking as soon as possible after W replies "You tack."

for room to tack, PL was faced with the necessity of taking alternative action to avoid S. This raises the question of whether she is exonerated by rule 43.1(a) as the innocent victim of another boat's breach. We think not, since the protest committee found that she could have gone astern of S. A boat breaking a rule is not exonerated by rule 43.1(a) unless she was compelled by another boat to break a rule."

The key to all this is that L or A must keep a good lookout and begin hailing in time for W or B to hear and understand the hail and then respond. If L or A waits until the last second to hail, and then immediately fouls S, she cannot blame W or B. But if after several clear hails W or B does not respond, L or A must make a reasonable effort to *keep clear* of S. If she cannot *keep clear* she is



exonerated by rule 43.1(a), and W or B should be penalized for breaking rule 20.2(c). If, however, L or A did have enough time and space to *keep clear* of S after getting no response from W or B but failed to make an effort to use it, she should also be penalized under rule 10 (On Opposite Tacks).

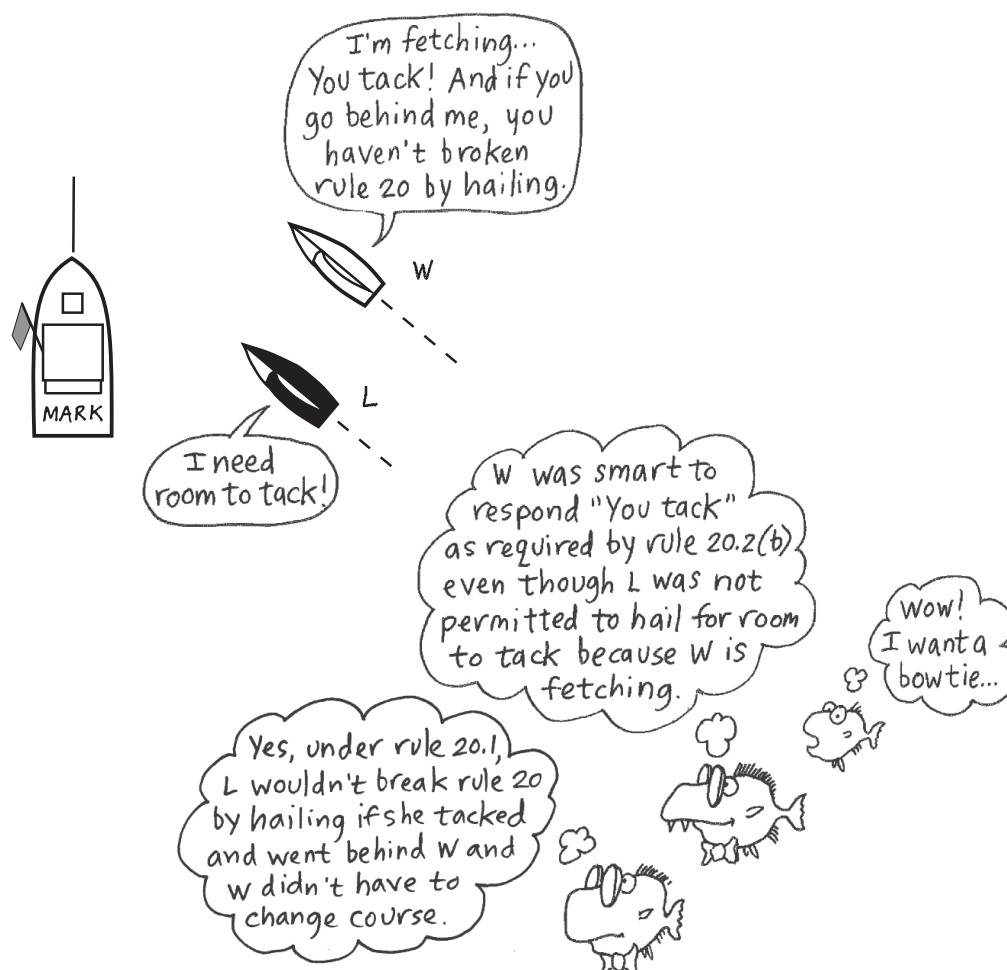
This situation commonly occurs at the windward *mark*. Note that when PW and PL are in the *zone*, PW is entitled to *mark-room* from PL under rule 18.2 (Giving Mark-Room). But from the moment a boat hails for room to tack until she has tacked and avoided the hailed boat, rule 18.2 does not apply between them (see rule 20.2(e)). So if PL wants to tack to avoid a converging S, she can hail PW for “*room to tack*,” and as long as it is possible for PW to respond, PW must do so, even if it means sailing to the wrong side of the *mark* (see Appeal 2).



“What about when the obstruction is also a mark; can I still call for room to tack?”

Good question. The answer is in the preamble to Section C and in rule 20.1. Notice that the preamble to Section C says that none of the rules in Section C (which includes rule 20) apply at a “starting” *mark* surrounded by navigable water or at its anchor line once a boat is approaching them to *start* until the boats have passed them. When rule 20 does not apply, none of the hails in rule 20 have any meaning under the rules. Therefore a call for “*room to tack*” at a “starting” *mark* when you are about to *start* or have just *started* places no obligation on other boats. This situation usually develops when there is a race committee boat anchored as the port or “leeward” end of the starting line. A *leeward* boat is truly in “coffin corner” if she sails into a position where she can’t clear the race committee boat or its anchor line without tacking, and she can neither tack without fouling the *windward* boat nor bear away and pass astern of the race committee boat.

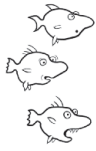
But if any other *mark* is a boat or other object large enough to qualify as an *obstruction*, then rule 20 applies. However, rule 20.1 says that a boat shall not hail if “*the obstruction is a mark and a boat that is fetching it would be required to respond and change course as a result of the hail.*” Let’s say you are approaching a *mark/obstruction* and cannot pass it on its required side without tacking, and that you want to tack but can’t without colliding with the boat just to windward of you (W). First you must check to see if W is *fetching* the *mark/obstruction* (able to pass it without passing head to wind). If



she is, then you are not allowed to hail for *room* to tack (rule 20.1). In this case you are going to have to gybe or bear away and tack around to try it again. If *W* cannot *fetch* it herself, then you can hail *W* for “*room* to tack” under rule 20.1.

However, let’s say you think you could tack and duck *W*; i.e., you could tack without making her change course to avoid you. If you choose to call for *room* to tack, and *W* responds by saying “You tack,” and you don’t require her to change course to avoid you, then you have not broken rule 20.1. But if *W* does need to change course to avoid you, you have broken rule 20.1.

Finally, it is important for *W* or *B* to remember that even if they are “*fetching* the *mark*” and would be required to change course to avoid *L* or *A* if they hailed, if *L* or *A* hails for *room* to tack, *W* or *B* **must respond** to the hail by tacking or hailing “You tack” (rule 20.2(b)), and then they can protest *L* or *A* for breaking rule 20.1 if they have to change course as a result.



*“What if it’s so windy or the boats are far enough apart that it is likely the hailed boat will not be able to hear a hail for room to tack or ‘You tack’?”*

Rule 20.4(a) says, *“When conditions are such that a hail may not be heard, the boat shall also make a signal that clearly indicates her need for room to tack or her response.”* Examples of such signals include arm signals, whistle or horn blasts or even a hail on the radio. Note also that the notice of race may specify an alternative communication for a boat to indicate her need for *room* to tack or her response, and require boats to use it (rule 20.4(b)). In that case the alternative communication takes the place of the hail “You tack” in rule 20.2(c). (See Case 54.)



*“Now do I know everything there is to know about room at marks and obstructions?”*

Yes!