

OBSTRUCTION

An object that a boat could not pass without changing course substantially, if she were sailing directly towards it and one of her hull lengths from it. An object that can be safely passed on only one side and an object, area or line so designated by the sailing instructions are also *obstructions*. However, a boat racing is not an *obstruction* to other boats unless they are required to *keep clear* of her or, if rule 22 applies, avoid her. A vessel under way, including a boat racing, is never a continuing *obstruction*.

An *obstruction* can be **anything** on the race course including a moored boat, dock, breakwater, cruising boat, iceberg in the racing area or another boat in your race, large enough to qualify it as an obstruction. In determining whether the object can be considered an obstruction, the definition offers three criteria:

- 1) The object must be large enough to require you to change course substantially **if** you were aiming right at the largest part of it, regardless of whether you **actually** are or not. In other words, it is a hypothetical test. An object does not become an *obstruction* or cease to be an *obstruction* based on where you are actually aiming at the time in the race. (See Cases 11 and 125.)
- 2) The amount of course change required is determined from a point one of your boat's overall lengths away from the object. This strongly suggests that you keep a lookout for anything ahead of you, as opposed to suddenly finding yourself about to hit something right in front of you and needing to slam your tiller over to miss it.
- 3) The size of the course change must be "substantial;" i.e., a large course change. In a twenty-foot boat, a course change of 10 degrees moves the bow about three and a half feet. Done when one boat-length away, a 10-degree alteration will clear a seven-foot object on either side. **As my general rule** I would say that a course change less than 10 degrees is not "substantial;" i.e., a stationary object clearly less than one-third your boat's length would not be an *obstruction*, though a moving object will require a larger alteration to get around it. Obviously, a lobster pot or an average-size channel marker is not going to require you to change your course "substantially," but a race committee boat, a breakwater or another sailboat in a race will.

A powerboat can be an *obstruction* if it's large enough. When a race committee decides to use a powerboat as one end of the starting line, the powerboat becomes a *mark* also. Notice that it doesn't cease to be an *obstruction*. It is always an *obstruction*, but now it also happens to be a *mark*.

The sailing instructions can make other objects (i.e., objects that do not otherwise qualify to be an *obstruction*), areas (e.g., an area marked by keep-out buoys) or lines (e.g., a starting or finishing line) an *obstruction*, but they need to specifically state that the item is an *obstruction*.

If the sailing instructions merely say something like "boats cannot cross the starting line when sailing to the leeward mark," that does not make the starting line an obstruction.

"Can you clarify the times when a boat in a race can be considered an 'obstruction'?"



Sure. A boat in a race, either your race or another race, is an "obstruction" when either:

- 1) it has the right of way over at least two boats in the situation; or
- 2) it is capsized or has not regained control after capsizing; or
- 3) it is anchored or aground; or
- 4) it is trying to help a person or vessel in danger.

Otherwise, boats in a race are not considered *obstructions*.

Furthermore, when *obstructions* are boats under way, including boats that are *racing*, they are never considered "continuing" *obstructions*. This pertains to the application of rule 19.2(c) (Giving Room at an Obstruction).