

# Newspaper Article 3: Avoiding Collisions

(Part 1)

OK, it's a nice day; you and your family are out in your new boat for a relaxing day on the lake. As you are playing the role of Captain Horatio, you notice an approaching motor boat in front of you and on your right side. It would appear to be crossing your path.

If one of you doesn't do something a collision is possible. So, who has the right-of-way?

Technically, neither one of you does, as in maritime law; no one has the right-of-way. Each boater has the responsibility to avoid a collision. Carried to its extreme, the two boats could take separate actions that would cause a collision. Obviously, there needs to be a rational rule to assist both boaters.

And there is! One boat is the 'stand on' boat and will maintain its course and speed. The other boat is the 'give way' boat and will take early and substantial action to keep well clear of the 'stand on' boat.

Clear? Well not quite. How do we determine who is 'stand on' and who is 'give way'? It's easy! First, picture your boat as if it were a horizontal clock, with 12 o'clock being straight ahead, 3 o'clock to your right, 6 o'clock behind you and 9 o'clock to your left. What is called the 'danger zone' for you is all the water on your right side between 12 o'clock and about 4 o'clock. YOU are the 'give way' boat to any other boat in that wedge area. So YOU must take action to avoid a collision. Usually that means to slow down and turn to your right so as to pass well astern of the other boat.

Now, just one more catcher! If the 'stand on' boat on your right sees that you are not going to take appropriate action (I know, I know, Captain Horatio would never do that!), then that boat (the stand-on guy) must take whatever action is necessary to avoid the collision.

Clear? Well, I hope at least a little clearer and perhaps something you had never heard of. There are lots more 'rules of the road' you will need to become familiar with to keep your status as Captain of your family's boat.

Attending a safe boating class sponsored by the Coast Guard Auxiliary, US Power Squadrons and the Army Corp of Engineers is a good way to learn. Their next class is on May 10th at the Thurmond Dam Visitors Center. Give me a call, or e-mail, for details and to enroll.

(Part 2)

Here comes another boat! Which way do I turn?

In our last article, we talked about which boat will take what action when crossing each other's path. You will recall there are two actions: the give-way boat that takes action to prevent a collision with all other boats from dead ahead to about the four o'clock position on the right side. The other boat is the stand-on boat which maintains speed and course until it is obvious that the give-way boat is not taking action. The stand-on boat then takes independent action to avoid a collision.

Today let's look at what actions should be taken when two boats meet head-on and when one boat wants to pass another.

First, the head-on situation. You and your family are out on the lake in your power boat and cruising in one of our many narrow passageways. You see another power boat coming directly toward you – head on! In this case both boats have give-way status. That is, both boats must take "early and substantial" action to avoid a collision. All well and good, but what action should be taken.

The preferred action is for both boats to turn to their right (to starboard for those who want their language to be really nautical!). In addition, both boats should have been cruising as far to their right side of the channel as is safe and practical. Often this alone will prevent a collision situation.

What would you do if you see that there are rocks on your right and you do not want to go there? You could turn to your left, but then the other boat would turn to its left and would be going onto the rocks! This is a situation where there is “doubt and danger” involved no matter what each boat does.

Five short blasts on your whistle (horn) warns the other boat of the danger. All things being equal, probably the best course of action, in this situation, is for both boats to slow to idle speed and pass close to each other well out of danger from the rocks or each other. This is one of the many decisions boaters must make where ‘common sense’ rules the day.

Now, how do you pass another boat in a narrow channel? Since you are the boat doing the passing (the overtaking boat) you are always the give-way boat. It is up to you to take actions that will result in a safe pass. You select which side seems safer, let’s say it is the right side, and turn in that direction and slowly, with as much clearance as is possible, make the pass. Remember you are responsible for your wake, so don’t rock and roll the other boat! You could also give one short blast on your horn – but we will talk about signals on another day.

The boat being passed, the overtaken boat, is the stand-on boat and maintains speed and course. Well, if the overtaken boat Captain is really courteous, she will slow down to make the passing smoother and quicker.

Yep, there are more rules and a whole slew of safe operating practices. To learn more, attend a boating safety class, and bring the whole family! The next Coast Guard Auxiliary/ Corps of Engineers Columbia County class will be on May 31st.. Call or e-mail me for details and to enroll.

(Part 3)

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(Part 4)

Beware the Bottom and Other Hard Stuff

We have looked at the issue of collisions between boats and, while that is very important, the thing we are most likely to hit is the lake bottom and/or things attached to the bottom.

Our lake now provides us with great opportunity to "go aground" and the prudent boater will take extra precautions to reject this opportunity.

There is the old saw that there are just two kinds of boaters – those who have gone aground and those who will! Pretty true, but there are some ways to prevent grounding, and then there are some ways to recover.

First, prevention. We do need to pay attention to the environment. That is, the lake levels and where the shallow areas and protrusions (trees, rocks and shallows) are located. Local knowledge is king! Ask other boaters what they have found and then mark your chart accordingly. When you discover danger areas, mark them and report your observations to your marina and fellow boaters.

If you do not have a depth finder – get one. These inexpensive (compared to a damaging grounding) instruments are very accurate. You do need to know what parts of your boat extend below the depth finder's sensor's location.

For instance, on my boat, which draws one foot, the sensor is on the rear bottom of the boat. My outboard extends down another foot. I now know what the depth is from my sensor to the bottom (the actual depth of the water will be one foot more). I also know that, as far as my boat is concerned, I need to plan on the depth being one foot less than the depth finder reading due to my propeller's depth.

Most depth finders also depict trees on the bottom. Right now this is REALLY good information.

Keep a good lookout. Have someone dedicated to looking at the water directly ahead of the boat. Often the use of Polaroid sunglasses and binoculars is helpful. To make the lookout effective, slow speed is called for.

Be aware of the aids to navigation (ATONs). Stay in the channel. If you are boating on the northern part of the lake, stay really close to the mid-channel markers (white buoys with black vertical strips). Also be aware that they are sometimes off station due to winds or broken anchors. If it doesn't look right, it probably isn't, so a very slow speed may be called for. Remember, you are now an explorer into an undefined environment.

No matter what you do, you still may run aground or hit a submerged object. What to do. First, of course, come to a stop – if you haven't already done that the hard way! Next, have everyone put on their life jacket. Then examine your hull and the engine lower unit(s) for damage.

If you are truly stuck, here are some maneuvers that can help:

Find out what part of the boat is stuck, if it is the engine raise it and see what that does. You then may have to get out and push the boat away from whatever you are grounded on and then restart your engine.

If the bow (the pointy end) is stuck, move everyone to the stern, thus raising the bow. The reverse works if it is the stern that is stuck.

Ask for help by radio, cell phone or hand signal. A good pull, either forward or astern, may solve the problem.

In any event, there are two things not to do. Don't panic! Unless your boat is taking on water, you are probably safe and can await help. Secondly, do not try to swim to shore unless it is really close. (You may be able to just walk to shore with our lake like it is.)

On September 28th, an Auxiliary Coxswain and crew did an ATON inspection patrol from Hickory Knob Park to the Russell Dam. Things are not good! Above buoy 130, the buoy system is unreliable due to the wrong location of many of the buoys. The most extreme condition was that buoy 113 is SIX MILES off-station!

Due to budget cuts, it is unlikely the Corps of Engineers will be able to restore the system in the near future. When they do, we will let you know.

The patrol also found many new sandbars, hills and trees broaching the surface or just below the surface.

Make no mistake about it, our lake is still a paradise and the prudent boater can still find much enjoyment. The key word is prudent!