

TO PROTEST OR NOT TO PROTEST,  
THAT IS THE QUESTION POSED BY  
OFFSHORE YACHTING'S RACING  
RULES OF SAILING EXPERT

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Photography Andrea Francolini

# TO PROTEST OR NOT TO PROTEST



Sailing is a sporting recreation. It can be very relaxing. It can be very challenging and exciting and it is meant to be fun. But for many it has a serious racing element. Some race only for fun whilst others chase the proverbial 'sheep stations'.

Whilst afloat we are governed by the International Rules for the Prevention of Collisions at Sea (IRPCAS) the racing of sailboats has its own set of rules called the Racing Rules of Sailing (RRS). If we are to compete against others then we need to respect these rules and to accept the consequences if we don't. We may also be drawn into another boat's protest.

If we are involved in an incident, must we protest? Where do the rules say we must protest? And what can anyone do if we don't protest? Very little. And how many sailors who are involved in incidents actually protest? A small percentage.

Why don't sailors protest?

Some of my fellow international officials get their noses out of joint about lack of protests. They witness incidents, sometimes collisions and yet no protest. Why?

Many don't protest because they can't be bothered. They come to their club to enjoy their sport. They come to sail on weekends, not to sit around at the club one weeknight just to take part in a protest hearing that may be declared invalid before it even starts.

If it does get heard and there was a collision, there is a chance both boats will be disqualified (DSQ). Seem a bit pointless? Many think so. During the race incidents occur that could cause sailors to protest, but they don't. And nobody can make them. Perhaps the most famous living International Judge (IJ) once said "If you are not aggrieved then there is no incident" That may not be technically 100 percent correct but it is certainly a guiding factor for many.

Other sailors believe in the knock-for-knock principle. They accept that small incidents are a part of the sport; like bumping into other pedestrians as you walk down a busy street or bumping trolleys in the

shopping centre. An apology is mostly enough. Similarly an apology on the water, like "Sorry mate" is often enough. Or "that's one you owe me." A couple of shouts in the bar and all is forgiven and forgotten.

Some don't protest because of lack of knowledge of rules or procedures. Others simply don't trust the Protest Committee (PC) to give a right answer.

Remember that if there is contact and one or other of the boats protests, then, unless the sailing instructions say otherwise, one or both boats will be disqualified. Is it worth the risk? Will the other boat tell his version of the incident in such a convincing way that the PC will believe him?

A very famous and current Australian match racing skipper once said the IJs get it right about 50 percent of the time. We all hope that the percentage is higher than that.

However, remember that IJs can only make decisions based on evidence. Accounts presented in a protest room represent the IJs best estimate of what likely happened. How much worse is the situation when the local Club PCs are made up of one guy who might know a few rules, one who is a sailor from another class whose skipper volunteered him and the third is a reluctant recruit from the club bar?

Now let's examine the possibility that you might one day decide to protest. First you need to carry a red protest flag that you display at first reasonable time after an incident.

One protestor gleefully replied to a PC Chairman that he displayed the flag at first opportunity. When questioned he proudly said that he always carried the flag in his wet weather jacket below deck in bow under various wet sails. He sent a crew member down to fetch it and five minutes later it was flying.

First reasonable opportunity? Guess that depends on how reasonable you are? No way! First reasonable opportunity is normally interpreted as immediately. Carry a flag on your back stay, one on each side stay and one in your pocket.

Hailing 'Protest'

If ever you think there is a possibility that you might want to protest a boat after the race for an incident on the water, then hail 'Protest' immediately and raise flag simultaneously. The hailing of 'Protest' does many things. It can be an expletive that has more meaning than some others you hear on water. And less offensive. Try it on the kids or wife when they annoy you. You will feel better. If you are the road rage type, try it then instead of questioning the parentage of the other driver.

The other very important benefit of hailing 'Protest' is that it tells the other skipper that you are just a little peeved at what just happened. He may have thought that he passed safely ahead of you on port tack, whereas you bore away slightly to avoid him. Now he knows your point of view, he can elect to do two penalty turns and exonerate himself. Case closed.

You can both go ashore and perhaps discuss it over a beer and not in protest room.

So hailing 'Protest' does a few things: It helps get the dirty water off your chest; it allows you to protest later if you wish; and most importantly it allows your mate to do a penalty and get it all over with.

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