

Rules Time  
“Backing”  
P/C John McLendon, JN

Consider this situation: A power-driven vessel is backing, that is “operating astern propulsion.” Another power-driven vessel is making way more than 22.5° abaft the beam and on the port side of vessel 1. The vessels are heading on courses that will eventually result in a collision with each other if neither takes action. In other words, the relative bearing between the two vessels remains constant.

Note that in the situation proposed, there are no other external factors considered, e.g. one of the vessels is backing from a dock or more than two vessels are present. In those particular situations, all vessels are considered to be give-way vessels.

It has been asserted that when a vessel is operating astern propulsion and making way through the water, it’s bow and stern are considered to be reversed. A degenerate situation occurs when two power-driven vessels are both backing while approaching each other so as to involve risk of collision from more than 22.5° abaft the beam of both vessels, as can occur around docks and anchorages. Of particular interest is the special situation where the vessel is inherently reversible, i.e. can travel equally well in either direction, e.g. a ferry which loads from either end. The question for each of these situations: what signals are sounded in each of these situations?

Consider the following statement from Knight’s Modern Seamanship, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1941.

"An interesting and important point arises when one of two crossing vessels is going astern instead of ahead. It is the practice of seamen to consider such cases that the rules apply with reference to the direction of motion of the ship so that for the time being, the starboard side becomes the port side and the port side the starboard side. This practice has been sanctioned by several decisions of the courts, and may be regarded as fully established. In other words, we must consider the pilot of a backing vessel to be facing aft toward the direction in which his ship is moving. He must then keep clear of a vessel on his right hand as if that were his starboard side. And his whistle signals must correspond. Similarly, the vessel which

is crossing him must regard the stern of the backing steamer as if it were the bow, etc.”

But how is this possible? If the vessel moves sideways due to wind, does the amidships become the bow? If the vessel is blown backwards does the stern become the bow? Are vessels to be fitted with rotating navigational lights that point in the direction of travel? Further, if a vessel’s bow becomes it’s stern when moving in reverse, exactly what is the purpose of the three short blasts signal? Indeed, at what point does the bow become the stern: when the vessel is making way or when the vessel engages reverse propulsion? Clearly, assertions such as the one in *Knights Modern Seamanship* add uncertainty upon uncertainty, ad infinitum. One can never know which end is the bow and which is the stern upon approaching a power-driven vessel more than 22.5° abaft the beam of the vessel being approached.

“The genius of the Rules for Prevention of Collision is their certainty.” *Hess Shipping Corp. v. S. S. Charles Lykes*, 417 F.2d 346, 351 (Brown, J., dissenting). The unofficial position of the U.S. Coast Guard National Maritime Center in the interpretation of the situations listed above was that a literal observance of the rules was required and that the bow and stern of a vessel do not change position once the keel is laid (personal correspondence).

But consider further that Rule 21 clearly details the positioning of a vessel’s lights. The manufacturer of a vessel is required under this section to clearly delineate the bow and stern of a vessel. No provision is made for switching the position of the lights while underway. One can further note that Rule 14 defines the head-on situation in terms of the lights of a vessel. Clearly then, the bow of a boat is the pointy end as chosen by the manufacturer and the stern is the other end and this situation does not change whether the vessel is operating astern propulsion or not.

Thus a power-driven vessel operating astern propulsion under the International Rules must sound 3 short blasts whether meeting, crossing, or overtaking in accordance with the rudder change concept– Rule 34 (a). She must sound three short blasts when reverse propulsion is engaged and she must sound one or two short blasts when her rudder is changed to alter course to her port or starboard.

A power-driven vessel operating astern propulsion under the Inland Rules when in a meeting or crossing situation, must sound three short blasts when approaching within 1/2 mile of another power-driven vessel. She may, after sounding three short blasts and hearing a one or two short blast proposal from the other vessel as required under the Inland Rules, if she agrees with the proposed maneuver, answer with a like signal. Although a vessel operating astern propulsion may propose a manner of passage by sounding one or two short blasts after sounding three short blasts, the lack of a one or two blast proposal from the vessel being met or crossed is indicative that doubt exists as to the situation and five short blasts may be a more appropriate signal.

Under the Inland Rules only, a power driven vessel, when overtaking another vessel (of any type) while operating astern propulsion is required to indicate her intentions under Rule 34 (c)(i), specifically, she is required to sound one or two short blasts indicating her proposed maneuver. While it may seem appropriate that she sound three short blasts, this signal is not allowed under the Inland Rules in this situation. Furthermore, the Inland Rules do not specify a distance at which the signal indicating the proposed manner of passage is to be made. However, vessel overtaking other should sound the signal in good time so as to avoid any possibility of collision.

Thus in all of the situations in which a power-driven vessel is operating astern propulsion, she is required to sound the proper signal under the appropriate rules (International or Inland). Any vessel (of any type) approaching any other vessel (of any type) from more than 22.5° abaft the other vessel's beam is required to give way. Indeed, Rule 13 "Overtaking" overrides all of the other articles in Section II of the Rules and contains the solemn warning that if there is any doubt about the situation, then the vessel is required to assume they are overtaking the other vessel and to give way. Furthermore, any vessel is required to sound the danger signal whenever she fails to understand the intentions or actions of another vessel or there is a danger of collision.

These situations listed above are most likely to occur when departing, maneuvering near, or approaching docks or anchorages. Vessels operating around docks, piers, and the like are in special circumstances because it is a situation not covered under the Rules. When operating under special circumstances, all vessels involved are give-way vessels and are further obliged to take whatever action necessary to avoid collision. Vessels departing docks are required to sound one prolonged blast under the Inland

Rules. The vessel should repeat the prolonged blast at least until she has a clear view of the waters at the end of the fairway.

Nevertheless, a vessel operating astern propulsion is simply a vessel operating astern propulsion. The bow does not ever become the stern on a vessel because of the direction of thrust applied to the propellers.

Fair seas,  
John...