

What are all those sailboats doing? A guide to the sailing basin of the Charles River.

First, welcome to the Charles River, Boston, and Cambridge. While most people are aware that the Charles is a very active rowing venue with numerous crew boathouses along its shore, collegiate and high school rowing competition nearly every spring and fall weekend, and the Head of the Charles Regatta every October. The the lower basin of the Charles is also one of the busiest sailing venues in the country. It is not uncommon to see more than 100 sailboats plying the water. Between the Longfellow and Harvard Bridges, the Lower Sailing Basin is home to Community Boating (oldest and largest public sailing program in the country), the MIT Sailing Pavilion (birthplace of collegiate sailing), and the Harvard Sailing Center. Community Boating is also the host venue for the Massachusetts Bay League, one of the oldest and largest high school sailing organizations in the country. In addition to this, the Boston University Sailing Pavilion is in the adjacent section of the river, the Upper Sailing Basin, just downstream of the BU Bridge and across the river from the BU Sailing .

With all this activity, there is a lot of demand to use the river for both sailing and rowing, as well as other on-the-water activities (kayakers, power boaters, Duck Boat tours, Charles Riverboat cruises, etc). We all need to share the river and respect each others needs and limitations. The sailing community understands that the basin between the Longfellow and BU bridges provides one of the few extended straight sections suitable for rowing competition and we cooperate with the rowing community by delaying our weekend regattas until after the rowers are finished racing. At the same time, we hope that the river community understands that the lower basin is the only place that we have to sail on the river.

In an effort to promote more effective use of the Lower Basin, here are a few general guidelines.

Q: When is the busiest time for sailing?

A: The peak periods of activity for sailing are any afternoon and weekday evenings. It is wise to give the sailors their space and avoid the lower basin if you can.

Q: I can never predict where those wacky sailboats are going next. What are they doing?

A: One of the first things to understand is that the sailors can only go where the wind let's them. Moreover, it is important to realize that sailboats can not go directly upwind and so must zigzag as they go against the wind. So as a sailboat goes upwind, she is moving at an angle, approximately 45 degrees, to the wind, zigging. When she runs out of room or breeze, she will turn 90 degrees, zagging upwind – sailors call this tacking. To a non-sailor, it may seem that the sailboat is heading away from you at one point (i.e., zigging) and then suddenly the sailboat is heading toward you (zagging). Going downwind, sailboats tend to change direction less.

Q: How can I tell where the sailboat might be going?

A: That's a tough question to answer. Sailors often struggle to anticipate where each other are going to be. If you know where the wind is coming from, you'll be able to anticipate boats that are zig-zagging upwind and boats that are sailing a more constant course away from the wind. To find the direction of the wind, look for the flags on shore at MIT, Community Boating, and

Fenway Park.

Q: How can I avoid a sailboat?

A: In the lower basin, the safest place to be is near the shoreline. The sailboats will tend to be in the middle of the river. If you and a sailboat are approaching each other, aim to pass at the stern (rear) of the other boat. By the time you get there, the other boat will have already moved out of your way.

Q: Are all the sailors doing the same thing?

A: No. Like the local rowing community, there is a wide diversity of sailors in both interest and skill level. With so many sailors on the water, there may be some that are racing, some that are cruising about enjoying the day, and some that are just learning how to sail. Typically, racers and cruisers are experienced sailors that should be aware of other nearby sailboats and rowers, but they can miss seeing you. People that are learning to sail are a different kettle of fish. Learning how to sail, driving the boat for the first several times, can be like riding a horse for the first time - you know that there is a way to control what is happening, but sometimes the boat will do what it wants and not what you want. Giving a wide berth to people that are learning to sail is prudent for both sailors and rowers.

Q: How can I tell who is a novice sailor?

A: A good indicator is that the boat will have only one sail. There will be experienced sailors using only one sail, but people learning to sail don't get to use a second sail until they get more experience. Also, sailors in an on-the-water class will have a safety launch nearby with an instructor or coach.

Q: I see some racers going around buoys. What's up with that?

A: Unlike rowing race courses, sailing race courses are not linear routes fixed in position or geometry. In general, sailing race courses are aligned with the wind so that the start line is downwind and the first turning buoy upwind. On the first leg of the course, the boats are zig-zagging (tacking) upwind toward one or two buoys that they will go around, heading downwind for the second leg of the race. As they go downwind, there will be another buoy or two that they will go around before heading upwind again. The sailboats might go around once or twice. On some race courses, the boats might also go around another buoy that is off to the side of the upwind-downwind line. To figure out where the race course might be, look upwind for the top buoy(s) and then downwind for the bottom buoy(s).

Q: How can I tell which buoys are where?

With four boathouses hosting races and on-the-water classes, there can be a lot of buoys in the water. Each boathouse uses its own buoys, typically 12-18 inches in diameter, and they can be a variety of colors (orange, red, green, yellow, and white are the most common). Since the courses tend to span the center of the river, passing between the buoys and the shore is a good route for rowers to take.

Q: When is the best time to row in the lower basin?

A: The early morning is a good time for rowers to use the lower basin since the sailors are not out yet. The wind has not yet built up for the day and the sailing programs don't open until 9

AM or later.

Q: Can I stop at one of those buoys for a rest break?

A: Only if you're prepared for a big group of sailboats to be aiming right at you as they try to get around their course. As tempting as it is to grab onto a buoy as you take a breather and get some water, please resist the urge.

Q: I've heard that sailors use a countdown sequence for their races. Can you tell me more.

A: While rowers typically start a race from a stationary position, sailors always start while already moving. To do this, we use a 3-minute audible countdown so that we can time ourselves, while trying to cross the start line at the moment of the start but not before. The details of the sequence are 3 minutes (3 long whistles), 2 minutes (2 long whistles), 1:30 (1 long, 3 short), 1:00 (1 long), 0:30 (3 short), 0:20 (2 short), 0:10 (1 short), one short at 0:05, 0:04, 0:03, 0:02, and 0:01, following by one long at 0:00. During this sequence, the sailboats are milling about vying for position and advantage while timing their start.

Q: Who has the right-of-way?

A: Per the US Rowing web site, "Right-of way rules have been developed by the US Coast Guard. Vessels with the least maneuverability have the right-of way, but always play it safe and take action to avoid all other types of boats." In general, human-powered craft have the right of way over sail-powered craft and **both** have the right-of-way over motor-powered craft (i.e., coach boats). But there are exceptions. Vessels near shore or another obstruction should always be given room to avoid the obstruction. Vessels that significantly alter direction and speed should give room for others to keep clear. While a sailboat with wind must yield to a rowing shell, a sailboat without wind has the right of way. The key here is to avoid contact. While we can argue on shore about who had the right-of-way and who may have made a mistake, no discussion is going to repair a hole in a boat or an injury to a rower or sailor. Taking early action to prevent a collision is best.

Q: I had the right-of-way and they did not yield. What's up with that?

A: Maybe you had the right-of-way, maybe there was a good reason the other vessel could not avoid you. Maybe the other boat never saw you. Keep in mind that sailors are often looking for big swaths of white cloth 10 feet off the water, and they might not notice in a quick glance that sleek shell and the rowers sitting low on the water. This is similar to car drivers not seeing bicyclists. Also, from the bottom of the 2000 meter course, or any other rowing lane, the course ahead might appear to be clear, but that can change quite quickly as sailboats (that might or might not be aware of you) zigzag across the river. That said, having the right-of-way does not entitle you to go anywhere on the watersheet that you would like. Any right-of-way should be balanced with seamanship and courtesy. Just because I could do something does not always mean that I should.

Q: We just started rowing up the 2000 meter course and a sailboat crossed our path. Didn't I have the right-of-way?

A: Maybe, but probably not. The sailboat probably saw you initially as a stationary obstruction while avoiding you. As the cox called out the stroke, the shell accelerated quite quickly and unless the sailor happened to be looking in your direction, he or she probably did not see you

start rowing. Moreover, it is unlikely that the sailor heard you since shells move through the water so quietly. This is the reason that vessels that significantly alter speed or course are expected to yield.

Q: I am a crew visiting from out of town. What should I pay attention to?

A: The crews that row on the Charles on a regular basis have gained experience in dealing with sailors and sailboats, sometimes painfully so. For the most part, they have learned how to transit the sailing areas while avoiding trouble. Even so, there have been the occasional incidents between a sailboat and a local rowing shell. Unfortunately, the rowing shell invariably comes out on the short end of any collision. My impression is that many visiting rowers have little experience dealing with sailboats. If your coach and coxswain have little experience with sailboats, my advice would be to limit your time in the basin when there are a lot of sailboats out. None of us want to have a collision.

For those college crews coming in to practice on Friday afternoons for a weekend rowing event, please note that Friday afternoons in the spring are also peak times for sailing. There are high schoolers racing 50-60 boats out of Community Boating, and another 30-40 boats from MIT and Harvard, as well as the BU fleet, out practicing for their weekend regattas. And as the high schoolers finish and return to the dock, 20-30 boats from Community Boating go back out for evening adult racing. We are sympathetic that you are trying to practice on the 2000 meter course, to get your cox and crews used to the course. Please keep in mind that you are likely crossing over one or more of the sailing race courses. Rowers might consider arranging their Friday practice so that they avoid the lower basin while the high school sailing teams are racing, typically 3:30 to 5:30. Keep in mind that all the other sailors will likely be on the water until sunset.

I hope that this information has been helpful and is received in the positive light that it was intended. As coaches and competitors, we all benefit from the jewel that the Charles River is. While the rowing and sailing communities on the Charles have sometimes been at odds with each other, there has been a resurgence of cooperation in recent years. The key for all of us to use the river together is communication. If you're in the lower basin, stop by and introduce yourselves, ask how we can work together.

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