

TWO TOOTS AND NO BELLS

For several years, we have been members of the Great Loop “subscriber e-mail list” <great-loop@lists.samurai.com> where we have learned a lot and also passed on to others our boating knowledge and experience. A recent thread (e-mail lingo for a series of messages on the same topic) prompts us to write about overtaking and passing protocol.

One would naturally assume that everyone who is on the America’s Great Loop Cruise are seasoned boaters with years of boating experience and education behind them but this is not necessarily so. If you have read Ron and Eva Stob’s excellent book “Honey Let’s Get A Boat” you would know that lots of people cast off without much cruising experience -- buy and read the book, particularly if your first mate has any trepidation's. To their credit, the Stob’s took a basic boating course, joined the United States Power Squadrons and took several more courses before attempting their America’s Great Loop Cruise adventure.

When Overtaking or Passing another vessel, particularly in narrow channel areas (rivers, canals and narrow intercoastal waterways, etc.) on the Great Loop Cruise -- there is a protocol which should be followed for both the sake of Safety and Courtesy. Safety relates to the Rules of the Road and Legal Responsibility while Courtesy relates to Manners and Common Sense.

PASSING SITUATION (bow to bow). Normally both vessels approaching one another will be on their right side of the channel. In this case, the normal pass will be Port to Port. The VHF radio transmission should be: (name of vessel and location) wishes to pass the (direction of other vessel) on HIS Port side and requests confirmation of intent by the other vessel. If there is no response, the vessel should then sound One blast of its horn indicating that he will pass on HIS Port side. The other vessel should respond with a single horn blast to confirm (agree) or give 5 or more blasts to disagree. If 5 or more blasts (danger or disagree signal) are sounded, both vessels are required to slow and/or stop to avoid a danger or collision situation. The second vessel should then sound the appropriate horn signal indicating the side he wishes to pass the approaching vessel. If a Starboard to Starboard pass is desired, two blasts of the horn should be sounded by both vessels.

OVERTAKING SITUATION: (one vessel in front of the other with the faster vessel passing the slower vessel). Normally both vessels should be on the right side of the channel or the middle. The vessel being overtaken and passed is the “stand-on” (privileged) vessel and the faster vessel overtaking the slower vessel is the “give-way” (burdened) vessel. The normal pass will be to the Port side of the stand-on vessel and the Starboard side of the give-way vessel. The overtaking vessel initiates the VHF radio call and states that he wishes to pass on HIS Starboard side and the other vessels Port side. The vessel being passed confirms in the affirmative if he agrees. If there is no response on the radio, the overtaking vessel should sound Two short blasts of his horn to indicate his intention to pass on his

Starboard side and the other vessels Port side. Common courtesy is for the vessel being overtaken to move to the right side of the channel and slow to idle speed, allowing the passing vessel to move toward the left side of the channel and pass at a slow low or no wake speed. If there is insufficient room for a safe pass on the Port side of the vessel being overtaken, then One blast of the horn is sounded and the vessel is passed on its Starboard side and the overtaking vessel's Port.

EASY TO REMEMBER: Remember that horn signals are always in relation to the boat sounding the horn or whistle signal. One blast for Port (a single syllable word) and Two blasts for Starboard (a two syllable word). Five or more blasts (I disagree with your signal OR a dangerous situation exists). Three blasts for I'm In Reverse (three words) and One Long Blast for Departing or Leaving (one long word).

COMMUNICATING WITH COMMERCIAL VESSELS: It should be pointed out that towboat operators and other commercial vessel operators are usually in enclosed, soundproof and air conditioned pilot houses and/or their engines are too loud and must be communicated with by radio because they can not hear the loudest horn signals.

Proper communications by radio should be for the overtaking vessel to tell the vessel being passed what it intends or wishes to do and then ask for approval / confirmation or a disagreement / danger reply. However, if YOU ASK the towboat captain which side He wants You to pass Him on, his reply is supposed to be the equivalent of a horn signal, and therefore be in relation to HIS rig - not Your pleasure craft. Many of these operators have their own short, terse, cryptic language so a reply message like: 'I'll See Ya On Tha ONE" or TWO (one or two blasts of His horn) may leave you wondering which side to pass his huge towboat / barge rig. What the towboat operator SHOULD be telling you is that HE wants a "One whistle pass" or a "Two whistle pass" -- NOT where he will see you!

In a meeting situation, a "one whistle pass" means the two vessels will pass Port to Port and a "two whistle pass" means the two vessels will pass Starboard to Starboard.

In an overtaking situation, a "One Whistle pass" means that the overtaking (give-way) vessel should pass with his Port side to the other (stand on) vessel's Starboard side. A "Two Whistle pass" will mean that the overtaking (give-way) vessel should pass with his Starboard side to the other (stand on) vessel's Port side.

Confusion arises when it is unclear who is giving the Whistle or Horn Signal, particularly in an Overtaking situation. Therefore, it is always wise to confirm your intentions and the towboat's preference by stating very specifically how you will pass His rig, i.e. on Your Starboard side and His Port side, etc. Keep in mind which vessel is the "give-way" (burdened) vessel and which is the "stand on" (privileged) vessel and the other unwritten rule: Size Rules!

PLEASURE CRAFT SHORTHAND: Several years ago while going South from the Chesapeake Bay down the ICW, a common radio transmission was: “(Name of vessel being overtaken), this is the (your vessel’s name) behind you -- TWO TOOTS AND NO BELLS” - and then pausing for an affirmative response. This simply meant that: We are overtaking your vessel on OUR Starboard side and if you move to the right side of the channel and slow down we’ll give you a slow pass and not Ring Your Bell. While not correct, we learned that this phrase was used, not just because it’s short and cute, but because it eliminated the need for the lengthy but proper process of establishing contact on Channel 16 and then switching to a Working Channel merely to communicate a desired passing procedure; particularly in areas where the Coast Guard is super sensitive to superfluous talk on Channel 16.

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