Preparation – before the Start

Before the race, the committee will publish sailing instructions (SIs). The SIs will include a description of the marks, the starting and finishing areas and information on the course to be sailed. Information relating to the organisation of the racing may also be detailed in the Notice of Race (NOR) also published by the race committee. Make sure you read and understand both the NOR and SIs prior to racing and preferably carry a copy of each onboard.

For offshore races the actual start line may be stated – for example the Royal Yacht Squadron Line off Cowes, which is denoted by transits and is a constant line.

For inshore races, the start line is usually set perpendicular to the wind so that the first leg is upwind.

Classes

Each yacht is assigned a racing ‘class’. Class splits may be defined in the NOR, SIs or announced just a few days before the race. They are usually based on the boat type or the IRC rating of the entered yachts, so they may wait until a certain number of yachts have entered in order to make the classes as fair as possible and to encourage exciting racing.

You may race in the same race in different years but each year be in a different class. Make sure you are flying the correct class pennant.

Events with a large number of fleets (such as Cowes Week) may define additional class flags eg Pink.

Starting Sequences

Different starting sequences may be used – this will be stated in the SIs, as well as stating which class starts at what time and what the interval is between starts - so make sure you know which class you are racing in and what the sequence is!

A typical inshore start sequence is 5-4-1, other sequences include 10-5-1

- 5 minutes before the start – Warning signal - Class flag hoisted
- 4 minutes before the start – Preparatory signal - either P,I,Z or Black flag hoisted
- 1 minute before the start – Preparatory signal lowered
- Start - Warning signal lowered

Each visual signal is accompanied by a sound signal / horn / gun. You should set a countdown timer on your watch and check that the sound signals tie in with your countdown. In this way you can be sure exactly when the race starts.

You should keep a close eye on which flag are shown, as these are used to notify competitors of changes in rules, changed in VHF communication channel, delays or even cancellations. The SIs will advise you which flags may be used and the actions to take if it’s flown.
Start Sequence Flags

The Warning Signal – The Class Flag/Numeral Pennant
The class flag (see page 1) is flown to denote the Warning signal (5 minutes or as specified in the S Is)

Preparatory Signal.
One (or more) of the below flags will be hoisted to advise any special starting rules in operation. This flag will be lowered 1 minute before the start.

P Flag
P Flag is the normal preparatory flag and means that no other special starting rules apply. During the start sequence the boat can cross the start line as long as she returns back to the start side before the start signal, or if she is over the course start (OCS) she can return fully to the start side and re-cross the start line without incurring any penalty.

I Flag Rule (India)
The Round-an-End Rule 30.1 will be in effect.
A boat (or any part of her hull, crew or equipment) over the line during the minute before the start must sail to the pre-start side of the line around either end before starting. If they fail to do this they will be scored OCS. Please note returning boats must keep clear of other boats. (Imagine the black dot is the pin – go round the pin!)

Z Flag Rule (Zulu)
The 20% Penalty Rule 30.2 will be in effect.
No part of a boat’s hull, crew or equipment shall be in the triangle formed by the ends of the starting line and the first mark during the last minute before her starting signal. If a boat breaks this rule and is identified, she shall automatically receive a 20% Time Penalty. (Imagine the red triangle = no go area)

Flag I & Z may both be flown together, in which case both rules apply – she must go back around the ends and will also receive a 20% time penalty, or she will be scored OCS.

Black Flag Rule
The Black Flag Rule 30.3 will be in effect.
No part of a boat’s hull, crew or equipment shall be in the triangle formed by the ends of the starting line and the first mark during the last minute before her starting signal. If a boat breaks this rule and is identified, she shall be disqualified.

Postponements

AP Flag (Answering Pennant).
Denotes a postponement in racing for races not yet started. The warning signal will be made 1 minute after the AP is removed (Imagine striped pyjamas – could have stayed in bed longer!)

If the AP is shown over a class flag, the pennant number represents the number of hours delay. Example - Races not yet started will be postponed for 1 hour.

AP over A denotes, racing postponed – no more racing today

2 toots are made when these flags are raised.
Recalls:

**X flag - Individual Recall**
One or more boats did not start correctly and must return back and do a proper start. The X flag is displayed until the earliest of: all boats over the line early have returned correctly, 4 minutes from the start or until one minute before the next start.

A sound signal is also made when this flag is hoisted – so you hear the start gun, followed by a second blast you know someone was over the line – was it you??!

**1st Substitute - General Recall**
All boats are to return and then a new start sequence will begin. This flag is used (rather than flag X) when it is not possible for the committee to identify the boats which were over the line or subject to one of the starting penalties, or if there has been an error in the starting procedure.

2 sound signals are made for a general recall. The new warning signal for the recalled class will be made 1 minute after the 1st substitute is removed.

Course Changes

**S flag – Shortened course**
When displayed at a rounding mark the finish is between the nearby mark and the mast displaying the S flag. When displayed at a line that boats are required to cross at the end of each lap the finish is that line. When displayed at a gate the finish is between the gate marks.

**C flag – Change of course / next mark**
Displayed at a mark if the next mark has moved/ been changed. The direction to the new mark is denoted with one of these signs ->

(Imagine go faster stripes – you’ll have to go faster to do the new course!)

Racing Abandoned

**N flag – Race Abandoned**
All races underway are abandoned – return to the start area. The first warning signal will be 1 minute after flag N is removed. (Imagine go home and play chequers!)

When N is flown over A – racing is totally abandoned. No more racing today.

3 sounds signals are made when N is raised

Other signals

**L flag – follow me!**
Typically flown by the committee boat when relocating to a new area, for example if racing has been abandoned in one area due to unstable or lack of wind, the committee may move the racing to another area to find better wind.

**M flag – replacement mark**
On a boat or mark, this denotes a replacement mark. (Imagine X ‘marks’ the spot!)

**Y Flag – wear a lifejacket / buoyancy aid**
(Imagine red & yellow = danger. Wear lifejacket)

**B Flag – Committee Boat in position on the finish line**

All of the above information and more can be found the Racing Rules of Sailing which is well worth reading!