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[Prevention of Collision at Sea – Clear The Track – Or Not!](#)

Like automobiles, there are rules about using the horn, or, per Coast Guard rules, the whistle (there are no horns on boats, just like there are no bumpers – whistles and fenders.) Rule 34 is about what are the proper maneuvering and warning signals – how to communicate in the absence of radio or voice signals. I am going to emphasize the Inland aspects of these Rules – for obvious reasons!

What Does Rule 34 Say?

First, let's review the Rule and then we'll apply it. Rule 34, Section A-i, says, "When power-driven vessels are in sight of one another and meeting or crossing at a distance within half a mile of each other, each vessel underway, when maneuvering as authorized or required by these Rules shall indicate that maneuver by the following signals on her whistle:

- one short blast to mean 'I intend to leave you on my port side';
- two short blasts to mean 'I intend to leave you on my starboard side';
- three short blasts to mean 'I am operating astern propulsion.'"

Section A-ii goes on to say that the opposing vessel is either to return the same signal (safe to proceed) or issue the danger signal, i.e. 5 short blasts (No go! Danger ahead for YOU!) Rule 34, Section B, says that you can supplement your whistle signals with corresponding light signals.

Rule 34, Section C-i says, "When in sight of one another, a powerdriven vessel intending to overtake another power-driven vessel shall indicate her intention by the following signals on her whistle:

- one short blast to mean 'I intend to overtake you on your starboard side';
- two short blasts to mean 'I intend to overtake you on your port side.'"

Section C-ii, like A-ii, states that the power-driven vessel about to be overtaken shall, if in agreement, sound a similar signal. If in doubt she shall sound the danger signal.

Rule 34, Section E requires that a vessel nearing a bend or an area of a channel or fairway where other vessels may be obscured by an intervening obstruction shall sound one prolonged blast. Such signal shall be answered with a prolonged blast by any approaching vessel that may be within hearing around the bend or behind the intervening obstruction. Rule 34, Section F requires that when a power-driven vessel is leaving a dock or berth, she shall sound one prolonged blast.

Apply Rule 34 –What Does This All Mean?

If you aren't issuing all these sound signals, are you in violation of the Rules of Navigation? After all, all these rules and sections use the word "shall" again and again – and "shall" means "must!" But can you imagine all the boats in Long Island Sound constantly issuing these sound signals? I can't. But what about when conditions deteriorate? Wouldn't it be great to know how to signal intent? Of course.

Of note, Rule 34, Section F gives us a modernized "out" – "A vessel that reaches agreement with another vessel in a head-on, crossing, or overtaking situation, as for example, by using the radiotelephone as prescribed by the Vessel Bridge-to-Bridge Radiotelephone Act (85 Stat. 164; 33 U.S.C. 1201 et seq.), is not obliged to sound the whistle signals prescribed by this Rule, but may do so. If agreement is not reached, then whistle signals shall be exchanged in a timely manner and shall prevail."

So, you are trailing the Charlie, a hypothetical "head boat" down the Connecticut River and you want to pass her on your way to sea. Here is how you'd do it in a professional fashion:

"Motor Vessel Charlie, ahead, this is the Motor Vessel SeaGoing on your stern."

"SeaGoing, this is Charlie. Pass your traffic."

"Charlie, I'd like to pass you on two whistles."

"SeaGoing, this is Charlie. There is up-bound traffic passing me to port. I suggest you pass me on one whistle."

"Charlie, this is SeaGoing. Thank you, skipper. Passing you on one whistle. Initiating power-up. Have a great day fishing. Motor Vessel SeaGoing, out."

What just happened? In #1, SeaGoing gets Charlie's attention – like she would have by issuing 2 short blasts on her whistle as required by Rule 34, Section C-i-2. In #4, Charlie is issuing 5 or more short blasts – danger ahead for YOU – don't go! Charlie goes one step further in suggesting a safe passage – on one whistle or as prescribed in 34-C-i-1. And SeaGoing does, increasing speed to do so...using more modern technology – a radio – and the language of the sea.

Captain Joe Vojvodich is the Captain of the Port and Sector Commander for US Coast Guard Sector Long Island Sound. Captain Vojvodich is responsible for all active-duty, reservist and auxiliary Coast Guard personnel within the Sector. Vin Pica, Chief of Staff for the First District Southern Region in the US Coast Guard Auxiliary, works closely with Captain Vojvodich and his staff to promote boating safety in the waters between Connecticut, Long Island and 200 nautical miles offshore. Sector Long Island Sound Command Center can be reached 24 hours a day at 203-468-4401.

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the D1SR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you "get in this thing..."