Volunteer Guide to Sailing Race Committee

Running regattas in West Sound

How a regatta works

Sailing has been described as a chess game on a moveable board; the wind and the seas are ever-changing. Understanding how races are coordinated can help you better participate as a volunteer.

The race is organized and run by a Principal Race Officer (PRO). This individual will delegate land-based and on-the-water race activities. The course will be defined in a set of Sailing Instructions which will be referenced in the formal Notice of Race. Since management of the race can spread across a quarter mile or more, VHF radio communication is necessary to coordinate.

You do not need racing experience to help. Each volunteer has one or two simple jobs. The PRO makes the racing decisions. Your part is to do your job carefully, keep an eye out for everyone's safety, and ask when you are unsure.

> ### Three things to remember
>
> 1. **Safety comes first.** Everyone on the water wears a life jacket, volunteers included. Anyone can call for help at any time.
> 2. **The PRO decides.** If you are unsure what to do, ask the PRO before you act.
> 3. **Flags count; horns don't.** Race timing comes from the flags. The horn only draws attention to a flag, so if the horn fails, keep going on time with the flags.

Two documents to know

- **Notice of Race (NOR):** the invitation: describes the event, when it is, who may enter and how.
- **Sailing Instructions (SIs):** the details on the water: the course, signals, radio channel, time limits and scoring. Keep a printed copy on every race committee boat.

Who does what

Even a small regatta needs a few volunteers on the water and a few on shore. The PRO assigns the jobs.

Principal Race Officer (PRO)

The PRO is in charge of the racing. They choose the course, run the starts, and decide when to postpone, shorten or stop racing. The PRO usually rides on the Committee Boat.

Committee Boat

Using our chess analogy, the Committee Boat is the king at the center. It is a stationary boat to start, finish and record the race. The crew should be familiar with flag and sound signals to start, recall and abandon racing. In most regattas this boat will serve as the finish line and the starting line: it anchors at one end of the line, flies an orange flag to mark that end, and flies a blue flag when it is ready to finish boats.

Job on board	What you do
Timer	Runs the clock and calls the countdown out loud: "Ten seconds to the warning … five, four, three, two, one, flag!"
Flags	Raises and lowers each flag exactly on the count.
Horn	Sounds the horn as each flag moves (see Starting signals).
Line spotter	Sights down the starting line at the start and calls out the sail numbers of any boats over the line early.
Recorder	Writes down which boats started, the finishing order and times, and anything unusual.

Mark Set boat

If the regatta is a chess game, the Mark Set function is the queen. It is a mobile boat to place and move race buoys to mark the course. The driver should have a powerboating license (in Washington, a Boater Education Card) and will attach anchors to the marks and place them with instructions from the PRO.

- Carry spare anchors, extra anchor line and a spare mark.
- Use plenty of anchor line. The middle of West Sound is deep, so check the depth sounder before you drop a mark.
- Never anchor a mark in the charted **Cable Area** on the west side of the sound (see Appendix A).

Safety boats

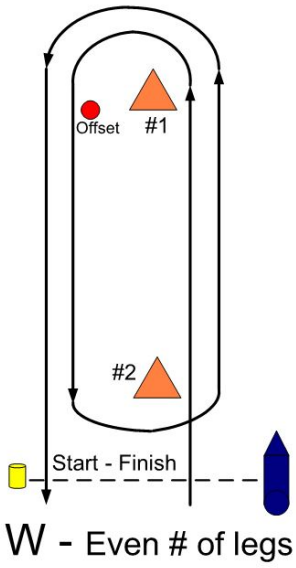
If the Committee Boat is the king and the Mark Set boat is the queen, safety boats are the knights: they move quickly to wherever help is needed.

- Stay near the fleet, a little downwind of the racing, without getting in the way.
- Help capsized or stuck sailors, and tow boats in when needed.
- Put the engine in neutral whenever a person in the water is near your boat.
- Know how many boats are racing. Report anyone missing to the PRO at once.

Shore team

- Runs registration and the **sign-out / sign-in sheet**: every boat signs out before launching and signs back in when ashore.
- Keeps a VHF radio on the race channel and a phone at the clubhouse.
- Knows where the first-aid kit and the Emergency Response Plan are kept.
- Posts notices and results, and meets boats at the dock.

The race course



Most club races use a **windward–leeward course**, shown as "W" in the diagram.

- The **start/finish line** runs between the Committee Boat (blue boat) and a small buoy called the **pin**.
- **Mark 1**, the windward mark, is set straight upwind of the line. The small **offset** mark beside it helps boats spread ou after they round.
- **Mark 2**, the leeward mark, sits just upwind of the line.
- Boats sail up and down between the marks. An even number of legs brings them back down to finish at the line

Setting a fair course in West Sound

- Set the course in the open middle of the sound, well away from shore, rocks and moored boats.
- Point the course as straight into the wind direction as possible. If the wind shifts a lot, the PRO may move a mark (flag C).

- A common rule of thumb: make the starting line about 1½ times the total length of all boats together laid end to end.
- Keep racing well inside the sound, away from the ferry and boat traffic near Orcas Village and the mouth of the sound.

Race day, step by step

The week before (PRO and race chair)

- ☐ Notice of Race and Sailing Instructions written and shared with sailors.
- ☐ A volunteer for every job, with a backup for each.
- ☐ Boats lined up, fueled and checked: Committee Boat, Mark Set boat and safety boats.
- ☐ Gear packed (see the list below).
- ☐ Weather, wind and tide forecasts checked.
- ☐ Emergency Response Plan reviewed, with a printed copy for every boat and the clubhouse.

Gear list

Boat or place	Bring
Committee Boat	Flags (Appendix B) with staffs, including orange and blue · horn and a spare air horn · two watches or timers · VHF radio and a spare · clipboards, score sheets, pencils · copies of the NOR and SIs · binoculars · compass · anchor with plenty of line · first-aid kit · Emergency Response Plan card
Mark Set boat	Marks, anchors and line · a spare mark · knife · VHF radio · GPS and depth sounde · Emergency Response Plan card
Safety boat(s)	First-aid kit · throw bag or rescue line · tow line · knife · paddle · spare life jackets · blanket · drinking water · VHF radio · Emergency Response Plan card
Shore	Sign-out / sign-in sheet · entry list with emergency contacts · first-aid kit · phone · VHF radio · posted Emergency Response Plan

Race morning

- ☐ Arrive at the time the PRO sets.
- ☐ Volunteer briefing: jobs, race channel, today's weather and the Emergency Response Plan.
- ☐ Everyone puts on a life jacket.

- ☐ Radio check on the race channel before leaving the dock.
- ☐ Skippers' meeting, if one is held: the PRO explains the course and any changes.
- ☐ Shore team opens the sign-out sheet.

On the water

- ☐ Committee Boat anchors and raises the orange flag. Mark Set boat lays the pin and the marks.
- ☐ PRO checks the wind and the line, and adjusts marks if needed.
- ☐ Start each class with the countdown (see Starting signals).
- ☐ During the race: watch the fleet, keep notes, and be ready to shorten or stop racing.
- ☐ Finish: raise the blue flag. Write down each boat's sail number and time, in order. Many committees give a short horn as each boat finishes.
- ☐ Between races: fly AP (postponement) while marks are moved and the next race is set up.

After racing

- ☐ Bring in the marks and anchors.
- ☐ **Count every boat and sailor back in** using the sign-in sheet. If anyone is missing, tell the PRO at once.
- ☐ Post results and the protest time limit from the SIs.
- ☐ Put away gear, charge radios and refuel boats.
- ☐ Short debrief: what went well, what to fix, and an incident report for anything that went wrong.

Starting signals

Every start uses the same five-minute countdown (rule 26 of the Racing Rules of Sailing). The flags set the time; the horn only draws attention.

Time to start	Signal	Flag	What happens	Horn
5 minutes	Warning		Class flag goes **up**	1 short
4 minutes	Preparatory		P flag goes **up** (or I, Z, U or the black flag if the PRO chooses)	1 short

Time to start	Signal	Flag	What happens	Horn
1 minute	One minute		Preparatory flag comes **down**	1 long
0	Start		Class flag comes **down**	1 short

- Count down out loud, and move each flag exactly on time even if the horn is late or fails.

When boats start too early

- **Individual recall:** flag **X** with 1 short horn, right after the start, when you know which boats were over the line. Leave it up until they have all gone back, but no longer than 4 minutes.
- **General recall:** the **First Substitute** with 2 short horns, when too many boats were over or you can't tell who. Lower it with 1 short horn; the new warning signal comes 1 minute later.

Delaying or stopping

- **Postpone** races not yet started: **AP** with 2 short horns. Lower AP with 1 short horn; the warning signal comes 1 minute later.
- **Abandon** (stop) races in progress: **N** with 3 short horns. Boats return to the starting area.
- **Send everyone ashore: AP over H** (2 horns) for races not started, and **N over H** (3 horns) for races in progress.
- **No more racing today: AP over A** or **N over A**.

Appendix B shows every flag and associated sounds.

Talking on the radio

- **Race channel:** VHF channel _____ (from the SIs). Channel 16 is for emergencies and for calling the Coast Guard only.
- Do a radio check before you leave the dock, every time.
- Use low power (1 watt) for normal race talk. Switch to high power (25 watts) for an emergency.
- To call, say who you are calling, then who you are: "Committee Boat, this is Mark Boat." Wait for the answer, then give your message in a few words. Say "over" when you want a reply and "out" when you are done.

- Give directions with north, south, east and west or a landmark, not left and right.
- Racers can hear you. Never give them advice about the race on the radio, but always help a sailor in danger.

> ### Sample calls
>
> **Mark Boat:** "Committee Boat, this is Mark Boat. Mark 1 is set. Over."
>
> **Committee Boat:** "Mark Boat, Committee Boat. Thanks. Stand by near Mark 1. Out."
>
> **Safety 1:** "Committee Boat, this is Safety 1. Boat 123 has capsized near Mark 2. The sailor is OK a we are helping. Over."

Staying safe in West Sound

- **Life jackets on** for everyone on the water. If the PRO flies flag Y, racers must wear theirs too.
- **Cold water.** The Salish Sea stays cold all year. A fall overboard can cause gasping and loss of strength within minutes. Get people out fast and keep them warm.
- **Count out, count in.** The sign-out / sign-in sheet is the most important safety tool you have.
- **Know the hazards** (see Appendix A):
  - rocks and shallow water near shore, around Victim Island and Oak Island exiting to the south and around the marina and Picnic Island at the north end;
  - charted Cable Areas near Double Island or exiting West Sound, where no one should anchor;
  - moored boats and docks at the north end;
  - ferry and boat traffic near Orcas Village and the mouth of the sound.
- **Watch the weather.** Wind can build quickly and fog can roll in. The PRO may postpone (AP), stop racing (N) or send everyone ashore (AP over H or N over H). If you see trouble coming, tell the PRO.
- **Thunder means go in.** If you hear thunder or see lightning, tell the PRO and get everyone ashore.
- **Don't become a second victim.** Never put yourself in danger to help. Approach a person in the water slowly, from downwind, and shift into neutral before you get close.

Emergency Response Plan (Draft)

Before this plan is used

This draft follows the Emergency Action Plan card template from the Burgee Program (Brown & Brown with US Sailing). The race committee should fill in every blank, check every phone number, review the plan with Orcas Island Fire & Rescue and the Coast Guard, and practice it each season. Print it, laminate it, and keep a copy on every boat and at the clubhouse.

Emergency Action Plan for:	Sail Orcas club regattas and clinics, West Sound, Orcas Island
Primary address:	876 Deer Harbor Rd, Eastsound, WA 98245
Main phone:	(360) 376-5577 **Race channel:** VHF _____

If someone is badly hurt or in danger

1. **Help the person.** Get them out of the water and onto a boat if it is safe to do so. Stay with them.
2. **Tell the PRO** on the race channel: who, where and what happened.
3. **Call for help:** 911 by cell phone, and a MAYDAY or PAN-PAN to the Coast Guard on VHF channel 16 (scripts below).
4. **Give first aid** and keep watching the person. Keep them warm; treat for cold water.
5. **Prevent more accidents.** The PRO flies **N** or **N over H** (3 horns) to stop racing and **V** (1 long horn) so every boat listens on the race channel for safety instructions. Other boats gather the fleet. Make sure junior sailors get ashore safely.
6. **Send someone to meet** the ambulance or fire crew at the pick-up point (A, B or C) and guide them to the boat.
7. **Hand over** the injured person to the emergency team. Tell them what happened and what first aid was given.
8. **Inform key people:** Commodore, PRO and race chair, the board, the injured person's family, and the club's insurance broker.
9. **Write an incident report** the same day.

Be ready to tell 911 or the Coast Guard

- **Where you are:** "West Sound, Orcas Island, San Juan County, Washington," plus latitude and longitude from a GPS or phone, and the nearest landmark (for example, "half a mile east of Victim Island"). Use north, south, east and west.
- **Which boats** are involved: type, size and color.
- **Your name**, cell number, boat name and VHF channel.
- **Where you will bring the person ashore** (pick-up point A, B or C).
- **How many** people are hurt, and their ages.
- **What happened** and what the injuries are.

On Orcas Island a cell phone can sometimes connect to a Canadian tower. Always start a 911 call by saying where you are.

Radio emergency calls (VHF channel 16, high power)

MAYDAY A life is in immediate danger.	"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY. This is [boat name], [boat name], [boat name] MAYDAY, [boat name]. Our position is [latitude/longitude or landmark], West Sound, Orcas Island. [What happened]. [Number] people on board. We need [the help you need]. Over."
PAN-PAN Urgent, but no immediate danger to life.	"PAN-PAN, PAN-PAN, PAN-PAN. All stations, all stations, all stations. This is [boat name], [boat name], [boat name]. Our position is [position]. [The problem] We need [the help you need]. Over."

Emergency pick-up points

Docks that an ambulance can reach by road. Marked A, B and C on the map in Appendix A and familiar to Orcas Island Fire & Rescue.

	Name / description	Address	Lat / Long
A	Orcas Island Yacht Club dock	876 Deer Harbor Road Orcas, WA 98245	48°37′54.0″N 122°57′35.0″W
B	West Sound Marina	525 Deer Harbor Road Orcas, WA 98245	48° 37′ 47″ N 122° 57′ 22″ W
C	Orcas Ferry Landing county dock	8368 Orcas Road Orcas, WA 98280	48° 35′ 52″ N 122° 56′ 39″ W

Emergency numbers

Who	How to reach	Notes
Emergency: police, fire, ambulance	**911**	Say "Orcas Island, Washington" first.
US Coast Guard	VHF channel 16	MAYDAY or PAN-PAN.
Coast Guard Sector Puget Sound, 24-hour line	(833) 449-0369	Check this number before the season.
Orcas Island Fire & Rescue (business line)	(360) 376-2331	Not for emergencies; weekday office hours. Check before the season.
San Juan County Sheriff (non-emergency)	(360) 378-4151	For emergencies, call 911.
Orcas Island Primary Care (clinic)	(360) 376-2561	7 miles north in East Sound.
Hospital: PeaceHealth Island Medical Center, Friday Harbor	(360) 378-2141	1 mile from Friday Harbor dock; ferry ride or 30 minute trip southwest by powerboat.
Hospital: Island Hospital, Anacortes	(360) 299-1300	

Club contacts

Role	Name	Cell	VHF
Principal Race Officer			
Race committee chair			
Commodore			
Port captain			
Safety boat lead			
Shore lead (clubhouse)			

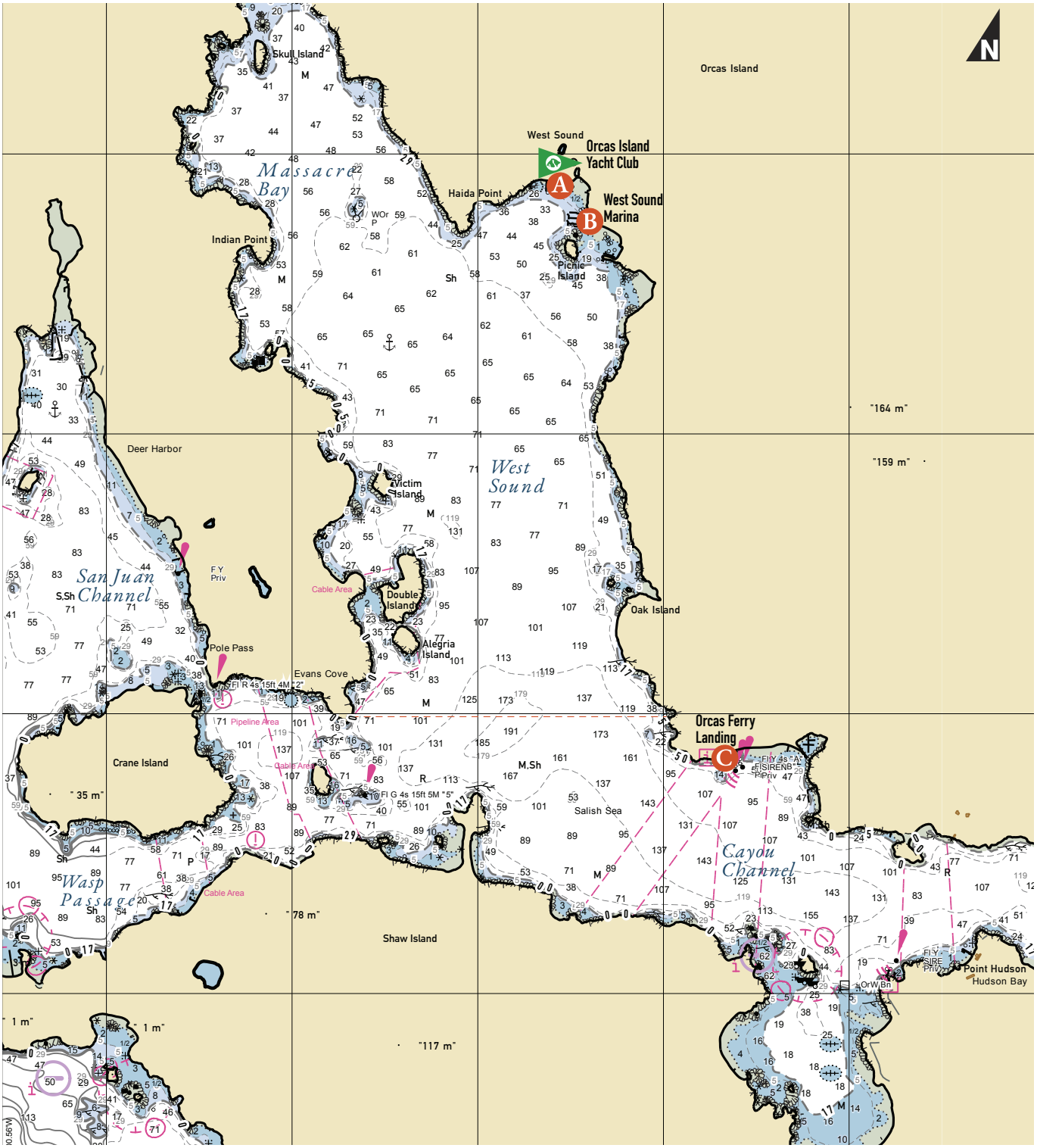
What to do if…

A boat capsizes	Most small boats can be righted by their sailors. A safety boat stands by close checks to verify the sailor is OK, and helps if asked or if the sailor is tired, col or trapped. Count the crew.
A person is in the water away from a boat	Shout "Person overboard!", keep pointing at them, throw something that floats, and call the PRO. Approach from downwind and shift into neutral before you get close.
Someone is hurt on a boat	Move them to the nearest safety boat or the Committee Boat and follow the nine steps above.
A sailor or boat is missing	Check the sign-in sheet and call the shore team. If they are still missing, the PRO flies V, every boat listens on the race channel, safety boats search, and someone calls the Coast Guard right away. Don't wait.
A storm, strong wind or fog arrives	The PRO signals AP over H or N over H. Safety boats help the smallest boat in first. Count everyone ashore.
There is an emergency ashore	The shore team calls 911, gives the club's address (876 Deer Harbor Rd, Eastsound), and then tells the PRO.

Make the plan work

- **Radios:** check them before every use. Keep two people and two radios with an injured person when you can. Say your name and boat every time you talk. Make sure someone ashore is listening on the right channel.
- **Location:** if a person or boat goes missing, drop a GPS waypoint at the spot. Learn the landmarks in Appendix A.
- **One voice:** one person (the Commodore or someone they name) speaks to families and the press. Be accurate, respect privacy, and don't post about the incident on social media.
- **Practice:** run a drill before each season and review this plan every year.

Appendix A — Marine Chart of West Sound



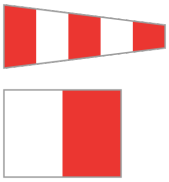
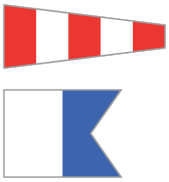
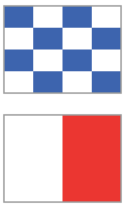
West Sound, Orcas Island. The green burgee marks the Orcas Island Yacht Club at the head of the sound. North is up, and small numbers are water depths. For planning only; not for navigation. Use current NOAA charts on the water.

Appendix B — Race Signals: Flags and Sounds

These are the race signals from The Racing Rules of Sailing 2025–2028, which US Sailing publishes for racing in the United States, with notes from US Sailing's race management guidance. The Sailing Instructions can add or change signals, so always check them.

> **How to read the horn column:** "Up" is when the flag goes up and "Down" is when it comes down. **Short** is a short horn, **long** is a long horn, and **repeated** means several short horns.
>
> **Time comes from the flag, not the horn.** If a horn fails, ignore it and stay on time.

Flag	Signal	Horn	What it means
Starting a race			
	**Class flag** Warning	Up: 1 short	5 minutes to the start. Each class has its own flag (see the SIs). It comes down at the start with 1 short horn.
	**P** Preparatory	Up: 1 short Down: 1 long	4 minutes to the start. Comes down at 1 minute.
	**I** Preparatory, I flag rule	Up: 1 short Down: 1 long	Used instead of P. A boat over the line in the last minute must sail around an end of the line to start (rule 30.1).
	**Z** Preparatory, Z flag rule	Up: 1 short Down: 1 long	A boat inside the triangle formed by the line ends and the first mark in the last minute gets a 20% scoring penalty (rule 30.2).
	**U** Preparatory, U flag rule	Up: 1 short Down: 1 long	A boat inside that triangle in the last minute is disqualified, unless the race is restarted (rule 30.3).
	**Black flag** Preparatory, black flag rule	Up: 1 short Down: 1 long	Like U, but the disqualification stands even if the race is restarted. The committee posts those sail numbers (rule 30.4).
	**Orange flag** Starting line	No sound	The staff flying this flag is one end of the starting line.

Flag	Signal	Horn	What it means
Recalls			
	**X** Individual recall	Up: 1 short	Some boats started early. Stays up until they go back, but no longer than 4 minutes after the start (or 1 minute before the next start).
	**First Substitute** General recall	Up: 2 short Down: 1 short	The whole start is called back. The new warning signal is made 1 minute after it comes down.
Postponing (races not yet started)			
	**AP** Postponement	Up: 2 short Down: 1 short	Races not started are delayed. The warning signal is made 1 minute after AP comes down.
	**AP over H**	Up: 2 short	Races not started are delayed. Go ashore; more signals will be made ashore.
	**AP over A**	Up: 2 short	Races not started are delayed. No more racing today.
	**AP over a numeral pennant 1–9**	Up: 2 short Down: 1 short	Delay of 1 to 9 hours (the number on the pennant) from the scheduled starting time.
Abandoning (stopping races)			
	**N** Abandonment	Up: 3 short Down: 1 short	All races in progress are stopped. Return to the starting area. The warning signal is made 1 minute after N comes down.
	**N over H**	Up: 3 short	All races in progress are stopped. Go ashore; more signals will be made ashore.

Flag	Signal	Horn	What it means
	**N over A**	Up: 3 short	All races in progress are stopped. No more racing today.
During the race			
	**S** Shortened course	Up: 2 short	The race will finish early, at the mark or line where the S flag is shown (rule 32.2).
	**C** Change of next leg	Repeated	The next mark has moved. Shown with a green triangle (moved to starboard), a red rectangle (moved to port), a "–" (leg shorter), a "+" (leg longer) or a new compass bearing (rule 33).
	**M** Mark replaced	Repeated	The boat or object flying M is standing in for a missing mark (rule 34).
	**Blue flag** Finishing line	No sound	The staff flying this flag is one end of the finishing line.
Safety and other signals			
	**V** Safety	Up: 1 long	All boats and support boats listen on the race channel for search-and-rescue instructions (rule 37).
	**Y** Life jackets	Up: 1 short	Everyone racing must wear a life jacket (rule 40).
	**L** Notice / come within hail	Up: 1 short	Ashore: a notice has been posted. Afloat: come close enough to talk, or follow this boat.

Sources: World Sailing, The Racing Rules of Sailing 2025–2028: Race Signals and rules 26, 27, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 37 and 40. US Sailing Race Management Committee, "Important Changes Affecting Race Management" (January 2025). The US Sailing Race Management Handbook covers all of this in more depth. Flag drawings follow the rulebook's Race Signals chart. NOAA Office of Coast Survey chart US5WA1IL.