

ABOUT THE UNIVERSAL RULE 1903

Yacht designer Nathanael Herreshoff devised the rule in 1902 as the “Herreshoff Rule”. It was later accepted by the New York Yacht Club as the 1903 Universal Rule. Herreshoff had designed winning America’s Cup yachts which fully exploited the Seawanhaka rule, which was based only on a yacht’s upright waterline length and sail area, to create narrow boats with long overhangs. This reached its peak with **Reliance**, the defender of the 1903 America’s Cup, which was described as a “racing freak”, suitable only for certain conditions. This prompted Herreshoff to propose a rule which also took into account the displacement of the boat.

The Rule is intended to calculate a rating for yachts, which can then be used to calculate its Time Correction Factor (T.C.F.) in order to have disparate yachts racing against each other. The first boat said to be built under the Universal Rule was Herreshoff’s **Doris** built in 1905. The Universal Rule determined a yacht’s eligibility to race in the America’s Cup and other classes and the J Class yachts were built to this rule to compete for “the Cup” between 1930 and 1937.

After 1937 smaller boats were desirable, and so the International Rule gained popularity in the 12 Metre Class and smaller, to the detriment of the J Class, M Class and Q Class yachts. The 6, 8 and 12 Metre Classes (and from 1948 on the 5.5 Metre) were the most popular and the 12 Metre was used for the America’s Cup until 1987, the last year the America’s Cup was sailed in 12 Meter yachts.

The “variables” for measurement in the Universal Rule were determined as:

- L** – Rated Boat Length, definition tweaked from year to year by the New York Yacht Club
- S** – Measured Sail Area, up to 1923 to British Navy method, then amended for $\frac{3}{4}$ mast-height jibstay and foresails, after the 1928 IYRU London Conference same as Metre-boats of the International Rule and $\frac{5}{6}$ mast height for the Universal Rule beginning 1931
- D** – Dead Weight by Designer’s Declaration, later by weighing, no sails no provisions, converted by formula to the equivalent cubic feet of seawater
- R** – Rating

The numerator contains a yacht’s speed-giving elements, length and sail area, while the retarding quantity of displacement is in the denominator. Also the result will be dimensionally correct; R will be a linear unit of length (such as feet or meters). Sailing craft are thus rated when their R rating falls within a certain range. J Class boats, for example, are any single-masted craft with an R between 65 and 76 feet (adjusted upward from original to allow British yachts under the International Rule to compete).

The yachts were divided into Development Classes.

This listing is for single mast boats.

CLASS	RATING	MAXIMUM WL
I	88 ft	100.40 ft
J	76 ft	87.08 ft
K	65 ft	75.20 ft
L	55 ft	64.40 ft
M	46 ft	54.68 ft
N	38 ft	46.04 ft
P	31 ft	38.48 ft
Q	25 ft	32.00 ft
R	20 ft	26.60 ft
S	17 ft	23.36 ft

