



Model Railroad Hobbyist | July 2025

Getting started with realistic ops: How yard limits works

Last time in this column I discussed the importance of using a dispatcher to coordinate train movements and avoid mishaps. While it's true you need a dispatcher to manage overall train movement across the road and to set up opposing train meets, is that always the case across the entire railroad? No, it's not.

Real railroads have a special train movement zone they call "yard limits" designed to allow trains some measure of freedom from having to always talk to the dispatcher before you move anywhere.

Yard limits may or may not have a yardmaster assigned. Regardless, within yard limits, locomotives and trains are allowed to move at restricted speed and to verbally coordinate with other trains nearby to avoid collisions. On certain parts of the railroad, this license to move and do work eases the burden on the dispatcher.

Without designated areas on a railroad allowing the back and forth and short distance movement of trains without special permission, the train crews would need to constantly pester the dispatcher for clearance to move anywhere. That's not a very efficient use of the dispatcher – to bog them down with short distance train movement minutia.

One interesting example of how yard limits solves this problem happened on Andy Keeney's Nashville Road. An industrial area across the aisle from Gresham yard known as North Gresham was originally dis-



1. A train approaches Roseburg yard limits on my Siskiyou Line 1. Note the yellow SP-correct yard limits sign marking the start of yard limits. Trains approaching this sign would contact the Roseburg yardmaster for instructions.

patcher territory. Dispatch was getting pestered a lot to provide train clearance through North Gresham as switchers worked the industries and mainline trains tried to make their way past.

Instead, Andy's guys suggested they make North Gresham yard limits, essentially extending the yard limits around Gresham yard proper out across the aisle past the last turnout off the main in North Gresham. As a result, the dispatcher got some significant relief and all the trains passing through North Gresham just needed to proceed at reduced speed and to coordinate with other traffic there. Worked like a charm!

If the yard limits is coordinated by a yardmaster, then it's considered common courtesy to give the yardmaster a heads up that you're about to enter yard limits and to ask for their guidance.

Once they have a heads up, the yardmaster will often give you instructions on how and where to enter yard limits. They may also alert you about other traffic to watch for. ☑

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Railroad Standard Operating rules and yard limits

My last column on yard limits generated a lot of good discussion as well as some critical comments. In this column and the next one, let's dive deeper into yard limits and provide additional insights for those new to more prototype-based operation.

Several mentioned I should have quoted rule 93 on yard limits by explicitly referencing railroading's *Standard Code of Operations*.

Newbies to realistic operations may not know about this rule book.

During the early years of railroading (1850s -1870s), a lot of railroad operation was conducted with just a few loose rules.

Each railroad developed their own operating rules and as long as the railroads remained regional, they could manage. But by the 1880's, many of the nation's largest railroads had grown to a thousand miles or more. Traffic increased and with it came serious pile ups injuring or killing thousands of people each year in railroad mishaps.

By 1887, the American Railroad Association used its collective wisdom to issue a *Standard Code of Train Rules*. At first, some railroads resisted adopting these outsider-imposed rules, but all the nation's railroads fell in line by the mid 1890s and adopted the rules.

The rule numbers varied across the early editions until they were fully standardized around 1906. These rules lasted until 1985 when sev-

93. Within yard limits the main track may be used, clearing first class trains when due to leave the last station where time is shown. In case of failure to clear the main track, protection must be given as prescribed by Rule 99.

Within yard limits the main track may be used without protecting against second and inferior class, extra trains and engines.

Within yard limits second and inferior class, extra trains and engines must move at restricted speed.

Within yard limits when running against the current of traffic or on a portion of double or three or more tracks used as single track, all trains and engines must move at restricted speed.

Note.—Approach or proceed automatic block signal indications do not supersede the provisions of Rule 93.

non-block signal territory during foggy or stormy weather, protection in accordance with Rule 99 must be afforded against all trains and engines.

EXCEPTION: Unless otherwise authorized, a train or engine must not be moved against the current of traffic within yard limits until provision has been made for the protection of such movement.

93 (A). Second-class, extra trains and engines must avoid delay to first-class trains within yard limits.

94. A train which overtakes another train so disabled that it cannot proceed will pass it, if practicable, and if necessary will assume the schedule and take the train orders and clearances of the disabled train, proceed to the first available point of communication, and there report to the train dispatcher. The disabled train

1. Rule 93 on yard limits from a 1950 edition of the Standard Code of Operating Rules used by many railroads.

eral operating officers from various railroads met and produced the modern General Code of Operating Rules (GCOR).

The GCOR rules have completely rewritten these rules, ending the familiar rule numbers common in the Standard Code and its variations.

This brings us to rule 93, the Yard Limits rule. From the old Standard Code:

Yard limits are sections of main track, typically identified by signs or special instructions, where Rule 93 applies.

Under Rule 93:

- *Trains do not need a train order or dispatcher's permission to operate within yard limits.*
- *Trains must operate at restricted speed, prepared to stop within half the range of vision, unless the main track is known to be clear by a green signal indication. Trains operating under Rule 93 must clear the time of first-class trains.*
- *Trains are relieved of flag protection against other trains and engines.*

Basically, Yard Limits expedites regular switching and movements performed on the main track without requiring direct intervention by the dispatcher for each movement or use. More next month! ☑

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Let's talk about OPs

by JERRY ZEMAN (GUEST)

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Yard Limits: the Rule 93 rabbit hole

For the last two months, Joe Fugate has discussed yard limits, a hot topic on model railroads. Joe asked me to guest write this next column. While Joe provided some bullet points on Rule 93, let's look at the rule book itself.

I like the "Condensed Code of Operating Rules"¹, designed for model railroads and based on the actual railroad "Consolidated Code of Operating Rules."

RULE 93: Yard limits will be indicated by yard limit signs and in the timetable or by train order. Within yard limits, the main track may be used, clearing first class trains when due to leave the last station where times are shown. Protection against second and third class trains, extra trains, and engines is not required.

In Non-ABS [signal] territory, in case of failure to clear the time of first class trains, protection must be provided as explained by Rule 99.

Second and third class trains, extra trains, and engines must move within yard limits at restricted speed unless the main track is known to be clear.

Now, before your eyes start to glaze over, Rule 93 need not be hard to understand. Rather than trying to explain it all myself, I'll share insights from *Model Railroader's* Andy Sperandeo, a passionate model railroad operator (sadly, Andy passed away in 2015).

From Andy's "The Operators" column (Feb 2007² and Oct 2013³):

"Main tracks, not yards. The first point to understand about Rule 93 is

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1. Yard limits isn't just for yards. Any location such as this on Andy Keeney's Nashville Road where you want to trains to work without requiring mainline track approval from dispatch is a candidate for the yard limit designation.

that it applies on the main line and not in the yard. Yards fall into the general category of side tracks, where the rules for mainline train movements don't apply. It doesn't take a special rule to allow for movement as needed in yards. What 93 does is to relax the restrictions on mainline movement over part of the main track ..."

"At stations where a railroad assigns a local switcher, it may establish yard limits to allow the switching crew to work on the main track without requiring special authority from the dispatcher. Sometimes entire branch lines may be designated as within yard limits. At stations where helpers are added to or cut out of trains, yard limits may be established to let engines move on the main as required."

"There's no more reason for us to invent our own operating rules and procedures than there is for us to design our own steam or diesel locomotives. If we want our operations to reflect the prototype roads, it's easier to learn and follow their rules."

Steve Gust and Rick Kang created a great PowerPoint, hosted by the Pacific Coast Region of the NMRA, that simplifies the topic with practical examples: [All About Yard Limits PDF](#)

Notice Rule 93 sneaks in another rule: Rule 99, flag protection. And yes, there are model railroads that use paper cutouts or figures of flagmen to protect their trains. ☑

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² <https://www.trains.com/mrr/magazine/archive-access/model-railroader-february-2007/>

³ <https://www.trains.com/mrr/magazine/archive-access/model-railroader-october-2013/>