

## MISTAKES BOATERS MAKE!

By Captain Russ Cohen, BoatBoy Marine Training 7/30/04

“A trailer boater’s outboard engine overheated just half a mile from the ramp. He couldn’t figure out why because it ran fine on the trailer without water back at the ramp! That’s a big mistake this boater made!”

Hello, you can be sure his water pump impeller is in tiny pieces! Never run a marine engine, especially an Outboard or I/O, without water. Boating can be a wonderful hobby, sport and lifestyle. You can’t beat spending a day on the water boating with friends and family, but mistakes happen.

Mistakes can add stress, cost you money and worse yet, be dangerous. We’ve always said there’s a fine line between a small mistake you can laugh at and a costly, dangerous one. We’ll share with you some common mistakes boater’s make and how to avoid them. Mistakes most often seem to occur while at the boat ramp, during docking and when it comes to anchoring, rules of the road and navigation.

Launching and retrieving a boat at the ramp long has been entertainment for some and horror for others. The process isn’t hard and is usually a cost effective way to enjoy boating unless of course, there’s mistakes!

Mistake 1: Not having any idea how to back down the ramp and driving off the edge! Please practice in an empty parking lot prior to the season. You should use small turning movements of the wheel while backing. A little trick is to keep your hand at the bottom of the steering wheel and whichever way your hand moves as you turn the wheel is the direction the back of your trailer is headed. You should know where the ramp ends. Most quality ramps are marked with warnings or ask a local. Watch for low tide when retrieving the boat.

Mistake 2: Forgetting to put the plug in! We’ve all done it. Admit it! Place a sticker or use a marker and write on the winch stand in big letters: “IS THE PLUG IN?” Remember to have 3 bilge plugs. One you normally use, one to keep in your boat’s tool kit and one to keep in your vehicle’s glove compartment. Losing a bilge plug can ruin your day as much as forgetting to put one in.

Mistake 3: Speaking of tool kits, we’re amazed at how many boaters don’t have tools on their boats! At a minimum you should carry basic tools such as screwdrivers, Long nose and regular pliers, wire cutters, channel locks, knives, socket and wrench sets, wire ties and of course Duct tape.

Mistake 4: Disconnecting the winch strap and safety chain before backing down the ramp! Do Not Do this! Last year we saw a 20’ Center Console roll right off the trailer onto the cement ramp. I’m cringing just thinking about it! It was an ugly sight to see! Always leave both the winch strap and the safety chain connected until the boat is ready to be gently pushed or powered off the trailer.

Mistake 5: Forgetting to tilt up your engine and hearing an awful scraping noise as you pull up the ramp! This is the “bilge plug” of boat retrieval. Boaters do this all the time and it can be costly ruining skegs, lower units and props. Again, place a reminder at the helm of the boat, in your vehicle and on the winch stand. Being reminded three times should do the trick. Better yet, before leaving the helm, immediately shut the engine off and tilt it up.

Docking for those of you who do not trailer their boats likewise offers entertainment for some, but usually anxiety and fear for most. By far the most requested training is always close quarter handling and docking. Docking is not difficult, but can be if you make a mistake!

Mistake 1: “I left the spring line on pulling out of my slip and hit the boat next to me!”

Surprise! Do you know how many lines are tied to your boat? Did you pull out way too fast? Did you disconnect the electric cord? (We have pulled boats in with electric cords and have seen pedestals ripped out and explode!) The bottom line: you should always have a pre-departure checklist with everything you need to do in order to pull out safely.

Mistake 2: You had mechanical problems just outside the marina and it cost \$200 to get towed in! This is another Hello! Most mechanical problems can be avoided if you just took the time to do preventative maintenance. Did you check the oil, hoses, belts, gear oil and bilge pump before you went out? Did you run your engine with the hatch up? If you did you might have seen what caused the problem and been able to fix it right at the dock. If you don't have an unlimited Tow Boat/US or Sea Tow membership, join the one that services your area today. It's about \$100-\$120 and well worth it.

Mistake 3: After getting the finger from several boats, you finally see the No Wake Buoy! This is a real pet peeve of ours and we have zero tolerance for boaters who ignore no wake zones. You are responsible for your wake and can be fined and or jailed for any damages or injuries you cause. If we see you out there blowing through a no wake zone, you can be damn sure we'll take your registration numbers and report it to the Coast Guard. Enough said!

Mistake 4: No fenders, dock lines, boat hook and no crew to dock! I know this is basic, but we see boaters all the time who have no clue and are not prepared. Stay off the dock, drift in neutral and set up your dock lines, fenders and order nicely the crew into position.

Mistake 5: “I always dock the same way every time!” That's not good! Before starting your approach, you should know what Mother Nature has in store for you. As mentioned in mistake 1, drift in neutral for a minute and see what the wind is doing and where it's blowing your boat. Generally, most boaters have to deal with wind more than current because most marinas are not built in high current areas.

Mistake 6: Always Docking at the fuel dock with the current! That's Wrong. If you unfortunately dock in a swift current, you should always dock bow into the current in a Parallel T-Dock situation like a fuel dock. If you have to back into your slip, slowly back against the current and try to pivot on the down current piling. One of our sayings is “The piling is your friend”. Once you pivot around the piling, do not let the bow slide off the piling until you are tied. Honestly, this is a difficult docking situation and takes a lot of practice, properly set lines and a good crew.

Mistake 7: Which way is the wind is blowing? Easy, we say the best way to tell wind direction is a four-letter word that begins with “F”. You guessed it, “FLAG”. You can also look at wind vanes on the masts of sailboats, wavelets by your slip and anchored boats around the marina. It is very important to know where the wind is coming from and what it will do to your boat while docking. Another one of our sayings is “God owns the bow”!

Mistake 8: Coming in way too fast! This is a big mistake and probably could be the number one mistake most boaters' make. I'm sure you've heard boats have no brakes, they don't! One more of our famous sayings is “The power of Neutral”! This should be your most used gear while docking. You should be in neutral three or four slips away from yours and deciding how to make your approach. Go in and out of gear slowly and always maintain control. A lot of boaters think they need to be in gear to turn the boat, not true. As long as you have forward momentum, you can turn the wheel in neutral and the boat will turn. Try it, you'll like it!

Anchoring, Rules of the Road and Navigation are as important to boating as it is getting in and out of your slip or launching and retrieving your boat. Let's face it, once you're out, you have to know what to do if the engine fails, how to play nice in the channel with other boaters and last but not least, where the heck you're and where you're going!

Mistake 1: "I threw my anchor out and lost it!" How can I say this, you're an Idiot! Make sure your anchor rode is always tied to the boat and DON'T throw your anchor. Slowly lower the anchor into the water.

Mistake 2: Letting out enough line for the anchor to hit the bottom is not enough line!

Remember that you'll need at least a 5:1 scope in order for an anchor to set properly. That means if you're in 10' feet of water, and your bow is 3' high, you'll need at least 65' of line to set the anchor. Don't forget about tidal changes either. We've seen many a boater high and dry on a sand bar because of low tide!

Mistake 3: Pointing the bow downwind or current to anchor and getting the line caught around the prop! Oh boy! Now you're in big trouble with no anchor and no engine. Always, always anchor with the bow pointing into the wind or current, whichever is stronger. Having your bow into the wind or current will allow your boat to fall away from the anchor and help set the anchor properly.

Mistake 4: Cutting someone off and crossing right in front of them! That's dangerous and stupid. There are specific Rules of the Road and Horn signals everyone should know, but most boaters haven't a clue. The Danger Zone on your boat is 112.5 degrees from the bow to aft of the starboard beam. If this sounds too nautical, try this: Imagine the bow of your boat is 12:00 and all the directions around the boat are like the numbers on a "clock". Most people understand this fairly easily. So, the danger zone is simply 12:00 to 4:00. That means if a boat is headed towards you between 12:00 and 4:00, you are the burdened vessel and must change course to avoid a collision and pass to the stern of the oncoming vessel. Likewise, if a boat is coming towards you from 9:00 to 12:00, you are the privileged vessel and should maintain your course and see if they head toward your stern to pass. In other words, you're in that boat's danger zone if they're coming towards you from 9:00 to 12:00.

Mistake 5: All of a sudden you heard a loud thump and the boat started making a funny sound and slows down! I hate when that happens! You probably hit some debris like a log, seaweed, crab trap or maybe even ran aground (See buoys below!). It is vitally important and the law to always have a safe lookout and never, ever leave the helm while underway. Use the "clock" method of direction and let the Captain know the location of debris, other boats, course heading and anything else a safe lookout sees on the water. Example: Hey Captain, log at 11:00, come about 45 degrees or 2:00 and there's a boat coming up on the port side at 7:00.

Mistake 6: "I passed port to port and sounded one short blast and the guy gave me the finger; what's with that?" That guy is a loser. You did the right thing. Passing port to port (one syllable, one blast) is one short blast and signals the other boater your intentions. Take a guess what passing starboard to starboard is? The Danger signal is five or more short blasts and yes, starboard to starboard is 2 short blasts.

Mistake 7: "I had the red buoy on my right coming from the restaurant and ran aground!" OK, here we go! The phrase Red Right Returning (RRR) originated coming back from the sea, not your favorite restaurant. You must have a chart and know where you are in the channel. Most small channels leading to a marina and up river are RRR once you leave the Intra Coastal Waterway (ICW). It is RRR coming in an inlet from the ocean. Traveling up and down the (ICW), it is Red on your Right heading South and Red on your Left heading North. Remember, each channel is a separate entity. We've left one of our favorite restaurants and headed South on the ICW with Red on the Right, out an Inlet with Red on the Left, in another Inlet with Red

on the Right, North on the ICW with Red on the Left and into our Marina with Red on the Right. See how simple it is!

Mistake 8: “Red is Odd and Green is Even. What’s with the Red & Green Buoy, C’mon”? Confused aren’t you? First, Red buoys are Even numbered and Green buoys are Odd numbered. Second, those Red & Green buoys are called Junction buoys and signify two channels are coming together. Remember in Mistake 4 where we said each channel is a separate entity. Junction buoys help mark these channels and most are marked with letters, not numbers.

Mistake 9: You’re coming up the ICW and lost track of where the channel is into your marina! There is a little round thing called a compass and you should know how to use it! When leaving your homeport, you should always take a bearing with your compass to either a buoy or a landmark. You also need to know the reciprocal course heading back into your homeport. For example: Leaving homeport the red buoy #42 marking the channel is on a course of 160 degrees on your compass. Once in the channel you’re fine. Coming back you will now know to look for buoy #42 and your course heading back into your homeport would be 340 degrees. The simple formula is if your compass reading is under 180 degrees add 180 to find your reciprocal course. If your compass reading is over 180 degrees, subtract 180 to find your reciprocal course. It’s also very important to know this doing Man Overboard drills as well as when you lose your hat!

These mistakes are just a few of the many that can still happen. We’re sure some of these have happened to you and hope you pulled through without any real damage or injury. We hope this article will possibly save you from some of these mistakes in the future and help you enjoy your boat to the fullest. As we said in the beginning, there’s a fine line between a small mistake you can laugh at and a costly, dangerous one. Boating can be a wonderful hobby, sport and lifestyle as long as you’re careful, safe and courteous, and have the proper education. Until next time, we’ll see ya on the water!

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