

Fueling, Anchoring & Rigging

July 12, 2011

By Chris Edmonson

One of the favorite moments in sailing for most sailors is when we turn the motor off. That is when we are actually doing what we came to the boat to do. At first when I got on a boat larger than 15 feet I was a little intimidated. All that area to negotiate to get out of the typical marina was full of unfriendly things to bump into and things don't work the same in water as they do on land. It all took time to get used to how it was supposed to work. The whole time near the dock was spent with a motor on and being the primary source of propulsion it was nerve wracking.

Over time I got so used to sailing that I starting going to the fuel dock under sail. I sailed away from the dock, I sailed off the anchor and I contemplated just forgetting I had an engine. Of course there were those times when stormy weather made me glad that I had something other than sail to fall back on. It also made it easier in unfamiliar places to motor in and out of the slip. When I had a boat with a diesel the fuel challenges were mostly of the sort that had me occasionally checking if we had fuel but with 100 plus gallon capacity I didn't think it about it more than once a year; and then only if I had to motor for long periods. At about 2/3rds of a gallon use per hour I could go quite a ways before getting concerned. Then, too, even running the engine for generating electricity reasons it took only an hour or two once a week to keep a charge up with a wind generator and a solar panel backup. It was here that I realized I wasn't dealing with fuel fumes or similar issues. When I've had or used boats with gasoline engines it seemed that I was constantly messing with fuel issues and challenges.

If we could invent a hazard for our boats that is more obvious I cannot imagine what it would be. Do you think when they were designing boats in, say, the late 1950's or 60's they said out loud, "Well, let's put in a gas motor so we scare the daylights out of the owners periodically!"

Gasoline is explosive nasty stuff.

There was a time at the fuel dock in Santa Barbara that we had a problem taking on diesel.

We were coming back down the coast after a hard slog to windward (San Diego to San Francisco) and we had heard the weather report say there would not be much wind the rest of the way to San Diego. My theory was that we had used up the entire wind quota on the way north! It made sense to stop in and make sure we could do the rest of the trip without running out of fuel. We put the hose into the filler tube and busied ourselves with dockside running around while one of us stayed on board to negotiate the process. It turned out we were all needed on board.

Most of us are familiar with the automatic stop feature of the gas pumps we use all the time. It almost never fails that that the “auto” feature is missing from the marine pumps and when the fuel hits the top of the filler tube it just keeps coming. Diesel is some nasty stuff that is slow to evaporate and it clings to everything and smells strongly, to say the least. When we got back to the boat it was to help clean up the environmentally unfriendly fuel spill that had the dock abuzz with negativity. Gads, but this was a mess! It turned out that although we had easily gotten access to the fuel dock without a wait there was a line of boats waiting for us to leave by the time everything was ship shape again. It was clear that we had tested the patience of the three or four boats standing in line to get fuel.

The next time we needed fuel we had absorbent tubes near-by and two of us were paying attention to the sounds of the fueling operation. It turned out you could HEAR the special sound of the filler tube becoming over loaded!

It is easy to make a mess of anchoring if you don't do it very often. A friend of mine had asked me one time why experienced sailors with lots of ocean miles under their belts wouldn't know how to anchor? “Going somewhere is not the same as stopping somewhere,” would be my reply today.

By starting to sail in small boats I never had to anchor for the first half year I sailed. By graduating to boats based at the docks in San Diego I put off learning to anchor for a while longer. Then came judgment day.

If you sail in the Arizona lakes you actually do have to learn to anchor if you are going spend much time there and that is where I finally learned the anchoring drill. I started spending weekends between races at the lake. Sometimes with crew but often I would drop the crew off at the dock with a prearranged time for picking them up the next day and I would go off on my own to find a nice place to spend the night. Often times I would find another bunch of boats already anchored and I would be encouraged to raft up with them instead of anchoring. When that happened I sometimes wasn't getting any practice anchoring until around midnight when the wind kicked up and the one or two anchors attached to the boats would start dragging and it would be mass chaos to break the raft apart and have everyone anchor on their own in the dark. A little adrenaline can do wonders for you skills but it is hard to go back to sleep once you are wide awake listening to the wind scream through the rigging.

My real test came when I took my then 22 footer to Lake Roosevelt for ten days. I was single handing and it was late when I got there that day. That first night I found myself in the company of a boat with a bunch of small children on board and since I didn't know the lake very well had decided it would be okay to tag along with that boat and raft up that night. This turned out to be a boon for the kids because it expanded the play area by quite a bit to have two boats to jump around on. Since I have always been okay with kids I did the same thing the next night after sailing in company off and on with that boat that next day. Then the weekend was over and I had the whole lake to myself for a week. I got to where I could sail into a cove and get the anchor down pretty much where I wanted it. In fact, I never used the motor for the rest of my time there. It became easy to sail on or off the anchor... or up to a dock to get ice when needed. It was the ongoing practice that made this ease happen.

I chose the north side of the lake to anchor every night and my reward was watching the deer, coyote and other wildlife come down to the

waters edge while I ate dinner or breakfast. By the end of ten days I hadn't said more than a few words and had gotten into a routine that mimicked a lifestyle I found again later when cruising. Swimming, fishing, sailing here and there... that was what I came for and that was what happened. The practice I got without realizing it made later encounters with the need to anchor in difficult circumstances a lot easier.

Looking at your rigging is a really good idea. That is almost too simple a statement that we don't always practice. It can be hard to get anything out of just "looking" at the rigging. You can't always see hairline fractures. You can't always tell that there is a problem until you stress the rigging.

Everywhere you look on a boat's rigging there are stress points. Every time you tack you are loading up the rigging with potential breaking force. If you use rigging tape you are hiding the possible source of a dismasting. The top of the mast may be inaccessible much of the time... what do the connections look like up there? When was the last time you replaced your running rigging or any of your standing rigging? The pins are held in place by cotter rings or pins and can come loose of their own accord. The tension of the rigging has a lot to do with how long it will last and the forces it can stand up to... when was the last time you checked the adjustment?

Recently I had reason to go over to my favorite rigger's shop in San Diego. One of the things I notice when I am there is a tray of the stuff that he takes off of boats he is working on. It doesn't matter what the part is made of; brass, stainless steel or plastic, it is interesting to see how it broke or is about to break. He has shown me things broken in ways that make you shudder. The scariest ones are the ones that don't look broken at all. He handed me a stainless fitting that looked whole and asked me what was wrong with it? It didn't appear to have any issues. He had given it to me so that I took hold of it a particular way. He said, "Now, put it in your other hand... in the palm." As soon as I did it fell apart! You couldn't tell that there was even a crack in it when it was together.

A story for later is the one where we had the forestay break on our way windward and had to get turned around before everything came

crashing down. But I'll save that excitement for another day. Be safe out there and help each other be safe.