

A Bang-Up Experience

No matter how fetching one's fenders appear to be, they all seem to do a lousy job of protecting the boat.



“What in the damnfoolery are those?” my mother asked at a volume that rattled the windows.

The year was 1958, I was 13 years old, and I had an 8-foot sailing dinghy that had been purchased after we returned to California after a long, parched spell in Arizona. My father—who had run away to sea as a young man, and in whose veins flowed salt water—stood off to one side, with the expression of a man trying not to laugh aloud in front of his wife. And losing.

My mother was pointing at my newest acquisitions: two fenders from the local marine hardware store. I'd gotten them to protect the turquoise-green gelcoat on the hull, not to mention the glossy varnish on the caprails that I had laid on so lovingly.

But it was not the fenders that were the problem. It was their shape: They were mermaids. Quite obviously naked mermaids, with detailed flippers and scales. And they had, ever so faintly, nipples.

I thought they were the coolest things I'd ever seen. I couldn't wait to hang them over the side when I cozied up to the waterfront restaurant on Alamitos Bay for my usual burger. I was trying to picture how I could angle my dinghy, regrettably named *Chris' Craft*, so that everyone in the restaurant could see that I had naked mermaid fenders.

Instead, my parents and I came to an understanding that I would only use these fenders on the dock side, where they couldn't be seen. I gave my word, and I kept it.

Recently, though, I was glancing through a marine hardware catalog. Lo and behold, there were the mermaid fenders, still available. They weren't the \$4.99 I remembered from 1958, though. Now they were \$63.

The price made me think about how far fenders have come in the past six decades or so.

Nowhere.

Fenders remain one of the most uselessly designed pieces of equipment on a modern yacht. Most are round, some with ridges for some reason, others smooth. All absorb the color of the dock or piling against which they rub, and they cling tenaciously to that color. The fenders on my current boat (some of which came from previous boats) bear the color of fresh green creosote from new pilings. Others

have a reddish tinge from the “Do Not Dock Here” signs against which I always moor.

I've tried everything: acetone, paint thinner, Windex, metal polish. Nothing gets the stains out of the once-bright-white fenders I once carried from the marine store so proudly. I've started thinking about fenders as the badly crumpled World War II “50-mission caps” that combat pilots wore as their badge of honor. My fenders have been to war, too.

But modern fenders beg for a redesign. The round ones roll nicely out of the way, leaving your glossy topsides unprotected against the barnacles and loose nails in the dock. In my boating travels, I see more flat fenders nowadays. They were obviously designed not to roll out of the way; instead, they slide out of the way. Barnacles, meet paint.

We've made huge progress in everything from the shape of anchors to life jackets (oops, PFDs). Anchors now hold in every bottom from grass to muck, and PFDs are finally comfortable to wear. But fenders just keep failing to protect our hulls, despite our cat's cradle of lines attempting to hold them in place. Perhaps one of the boating associations could offer a tidy grant to design a fender that actually fends.

I have a friend who, after owning a long series of ocean racing sailboats, made the transition to a trawler and swore he was never going to put the boatyard painter's kids through Harvard again. He uses 50-cent paint rollers from a big-box store, and, as far as I know, house paint to cover his topsides. Yes, it looks like hell. On the other hand, he doesn't even own a fender. If that paint gets a barnacle or nail scratch, out comes the cheapo roller and *voila*, the hull looks as bad as ever.

He does say that ditching all the useless fenders has freed up an immense amount of locker space around his boat. Point taken.

My mermaid fenders did protect my dink, so perhaps one of these days, I'll see an absolutely stunning trawler with dark blue or black topsides and rows of mermaids for protection.

In the meantime, I continue to be sad that just a day after I got those mermaid fenders as a kid, I discovered that the nipples had disappeared. They'd been sanded away smooth and then waxed so those chest bulges disappeared.

I suspect my father, but he never came clean. ❁

Boat Test Blues

The gig is more workaday than champagne and caviar, and sometimes the harbor patrol saves our bacon.



It was just another boat test, this time on a 50ish-foot trawler from the proud builders who were aboard to make sure I got my story right.

I'd been up in the pilothouse sharing ex-Coastie stories with the captain, a grizzled former U.S. Coast Guard chief. I decided to go aft as we headed out of the inlet. I was partly across the salon, which was carpeted by a plush and, I assumed, expensive carpet, when I noticed something odd: My Top-Siders were making the same sort of *squirk* sound as when I'd accidentally stepped on a Twinkie.

Just as I realized the carpet was melting, I heard one engine stumble. Everything at the helm went off: lights, alarms and, judging by the speed with which the skipper spun the wheel toward the harbor, perhaps an electric cattle prod in his helm seat. We had an engine-room fire.

The short version of this story is that the harbor patrol put out the fire quickly—an inverter panel had torched everything—and we were soon tied up at the dock. Sadly, the interior designer had put her Louis Vuitton purse next to her salon seat. When she tried to pick up the bag, it was welded to the carpet.

That melted carpet story is just one of my boat-test blues.

Readers often think that being a boating journalist is right up there with being the taste-tester for Ben & Jerry's ice cream, or the sampler for Moët & Chandon. There are visions of days spent lolling on boats before returning to legendary quays in Saint-Tropez or St. Barts, where we stay in five-star suites.

Au contraire, mon ami.

What we actually do is climb into hot, cramped engine rooms designed for miniature engineers. Inevitably, a patch of

our bare skin fuses to the one red-hot spot on the engine, generator, whatever. We then get a smear of indelibly black oil on our khaki shorts, which becomes a telltale sign for other boat-testers: "Oh, I see that you've tested the Mugwump 42 and found that oil filter."

Another reality of testing boats is that some blood must flow. The razor edge of a too-long hose clamp reaches out to slice. The sharp bolt on a grab rail can come out on the other side, directly under a thumb.

The first-ever boat-tester may have been aboard *Vasa*, the Swedish warship built in a hurry by King Gustavus in the 1600s. It capsized just a few hundred yards into its maiden voyage. For me, it was a 25ish-foot cruiser being launched in Marina del Rey, California. The trailer backed to the water, and the lines were released. The boat slid smoothly off the trailer and, well, just

kept going. It sank so fast that everyone, including the proud builders, were speechless. Seems someone drilled a through-hull hole for the depthsounder and, oops, forgot to install the equipment.

There was also the big motorsailer being touted as a round-the-world cruiser by the builders, who were taking it to its first boat show. We were sailing along nicely in a 10-knot breeze. Right up until the mast fell over.

Actually, it didn't so much fall over as it seemed to faint. The mast didn't break, and the rigging didn't snap. The whole tree, with fancy new sails, just toppled. I never heard the reason, but perhaps the rigging was not designed to keep the mast pointed up.

And then there was the cruiser, 40ish feet, with a single engine that was hyped as another world cruiser. To ensure reliability and safety, there was a get-home power takeoff so the generator could also turn the prop in case the engine failed.

That worked just fine until someone (not me) dropped a 1-inch dockline overboard. It was sucked instantly into the prop. It wrapped itself so tightly that the entire prop and prop shaft were yanked right out of the boat. When the crew pulled up the suddenly slack line, there was the prop and shaft, attached.

That, of course, left a 2-inch hole in the bottom, through which a 2-inch solid bar of water was quickly filling the engine room. And we had no power to return to the dock. Again, the harbor patrol saved our bacon.

We put up with a lot to bring readers the facts for all kinds of boat-buying choices. Oh, and the designer's Vuitton bag? They cut it out of the floor, and she now takes a carpet sample to show potential clients. ❄

My Rules of the Road

These 10 decrees will keep pretty much any boater safe out on the water.



I live just off the Intracoastal Waterway in Florida, but nothing could get me on the frothing waters over the Fourth of July weekend.

Instead, I sat at my favorite yacht club, watching the mayhem unfold as every other boat in South Florida fought to get under a drawbridge. The times of its raising were clearly controlled by a bridgekeeper with a malicious sense of humor. I was surprised that no masts fell, although I did see a radar dome knocked askew, not by a bridge too far, but by a bridge too low.

Most skippers think there are only two sets of rules of the road: international and inland. Technically, that's correct, but over a period of 50 years, I've also developed My Rules of the Road. My rules are far simpler. And safer.

The official rules, of course, are the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea and the Inland Navigational Rules of the United States. The COLREGS, which stretch to no fewer than 200 pages, apply on outer coastal waters and the high seas, while the Inland Rules cover lakes, rivers and near-coastal areas. If you read all of these rules, you will learn things like the fact that you do not have the right of way over a seaplane towing a barge while engaged in fishing.

Confusing? Very.

By comparison, My Rules of the Road can be summed up in just 10 decrees. The

REGS are as simple as the tablets handed to Moses, which also had 10 rules.

The REGS are based on the reality of life that anytime two boats are on the water, there is a chance of collision. My rules combine COLREGS, Inland Rules and the Golden Rule to avoid scrapes on the water.

BIG BOATS ALWAYS HAVE THE RIGHT OF WAY

You'll lose every time if you try to sneak in front of a tanker or a tug pushing a barge. Your engine can die or you can misjudge their speed, and the only winners will be your heirs and some lawyers. The four most dangerous words in boating are: "We can make it." If you ever look at a ship and say those words, your crew should slap you silly, just like Capt. Queeg in *The Caine Mutiny*.

ASSUME THEY DON'T SEE YOU

You'll never get in trouble if you always assume that the other skipper doesn't see you or is too stupid to know that you have the right of way. Defensive driving works just as well on the water as on land. As they say, you can be dead right just as easily as dead wrong.

MAKE COURSE CHANGES EARLY AND SUBSTANTIALLY

It's hard to judge angles and distances on the water. If you plan to keep clear of another boat, change your course enough so that your move is readily apparent to the other boat. And do it early enough that they know what you are doing. Too many accidents happen when boats get trapped in an "after you, Alphonse" series of back-and-forth course changes that end with a collision.

WHEN IN DOUBT, SLOW DOWN

Pulling back on the throttles gives you time to think, as well as time for everyone involved to act intelligently. Remember that even at 10 knots, you're moving at almost 17 feet a second.

BOATS ON YOUR RIGHT ARE RIGHT

Why do you think they call it "right" of

way? Technically, your danger zone is from directly ahead to 112.5 degrees on the starboard side. But don't push your rights with that 80 mph speedster approaching from 113 degrees on the starboard side. He may not see you.

KEEP RIGHT

When two boats meet head-on or nearly so, each should turn to starboard, just as you would on a one-lane road in your car.

OVERTAKERS, STAY CLEAR

When two boats are moving in the same direction, the passing boat must keep clear. If you're on a waterway like a canal or the ICW, it's nice if both boats slow down a bit so the wakes don't spill the drinks.

KNOW THE FLOW

On inland waters, know which way the current is moving, because it affects right of way. Boats going downstream have the right of way over those that are upbound, and boats going across a river must stay clear of those going up or down. Don't worry about the reasoning. Just do it.

REMEMBER TO HONK

Unlike in a car, honking your horn on a boat signals your intentions to other skippers. One blast means starboard, and two blasts is port. If the other skipper agrees, they sound a similar signal. If they don't, they'll sound the danger signal of five or more honks. Slow down until you both figure out what you're doing.

As they say, a collision at sea can ruin your whole day, so there is one last rule: Play nice. This rule covers every situation you might encounter. Leave road rage on shore, and don't use the official rules of the road like a hammer to force other people to give way. Avoid situations that can lead to problems, and give way even when you don't have to by the book.

As the police sergeant on the old *Hill Street Blues* television series always warned his officers at the end of each morning briefing: "Hey, let's be careful out there." ☛