



BY MICHAEL PETERS

SIGHTLINES

Beached

WHAT DO YOU DO IF YOUR TRAINING WHEELS FALL OFF?



WESLEY ALLSBROOK

On the first weekend of summer we had planned to take my Bertram 25 *Villam* out for Sunday lunch on Casey Key. As I approached the boat on its lift, I noticed that the registration had expired two days earlier. No big deal to me, but my lunch companion is what Willie Sutton would have called a “snitch.”

My wife is not about to take a chance with an expired registration and in fact would either call ahead to alert the authorities or flag them down just to make sure they knew. So without a partner in crime, boating was out for the weekend.

Making the best of a beautiful, clear, 85-degree day, I headed across the street to our beach on Big Pass, with my loyal golden retriever. Scupper never snitches on me and is always great company to hang with, so all was good. I spent the next two hours throwing tennis balls to Scup and watching boats go in and out of the pass. Before leaving the house I was reminded not to let Scup eat any sand, because of a recent article in the paper where a dog had to have its stomach pumped. Amazing the things you worry about living in paradise.

Going out the pass, powerboats outnumbered sailboats at least 20 to one, confirming my belief that sailing is just too much work for most people. Most of the boats were small center consoles, with a few larger Azimuts, Lazzaras, and Carvers mixed in. The bigger boats were throwing up huge wakes, generally plowing along with their bows reaching for the sky. Scupper loved the breakers they caused on shore. It’s hard to really appreciate a Carver all zipped up

bow-to-stern in a plastic bubble without an inch of open deck. You have to wonder why they bother leaving the dock.

As I watched the boats, I was struck by the fact that almost everyone was running their boats horribly out of trim. At first I thought maybe these are just lousy boats. Then a Yellowfin 26 ran by, trimmed so bow down that the forward sections were plowing water, and I thought surely Wylie [Nagler, founder of Yellowfin] would die if he saw this. For two hours I watched boats porpoising along, trimmed bow high for maximum speed or trimmed so low that spray was flying everywhere. Included in this unsightly parade were some Pathfinders, Contenders, and Chris-Crafts, which I knew ran fine, so I was sure the blame for this sin of boatmanship must fall on the captains themselves.

Do you think that today’s nautical gadgetry is ruining basic seamanship skills? Share your thoughts with Michael at inbox@pmymag.com.

My conclusion was that most boaters don’t have a clue as to what they are doing. This must be the same conclusion that everybody else in the boat business has come to, because there is a major push these days to offer boats that eliminate all skill required by the captain. The list of innovations is long: Jetstick, Skyhook, Joystick, Helm Master, JMS, EJS, etc. All of these fly-by-wire control systems are designed to eliminate actual boat-handling skill. This is for one reason only—to increase sales in the non-boater segment. Any old salt with basic knowledge and skill doesn’t need these things, and in fact even scoffs at them.

These innovations certainly make a rookie look like a pro and are good for business, but removing the requirement for basic knowledge of seamanship and boat handling raises an important question: What do you do when the system quits working? Fly-by-wire computer controls in a saltwater environment ... good luck! The day will come when it shuts down and you’ll have to rely on your instincts, with no ability or time to react. The industry is aiming for a boat that drives like a car, but a car is not subject to wind and current and constant corrosion. If your car systems quit, you just sit there. If your boat’s integrated computer control system quits, you simply stand at the helm and call your insurance broker while you crash into all the boats in your marina. It sure would have been nice if you’d known what you were doing when your training wheels fell off.

I went home and jumped in the pool with Scupper and told the Commandant what I had observed at the beach. She then quips that if I am such a hot-shot boater, why couldn’t I remember to register my boat so we could go show them how it’s done instead of being stuck at home? What a snitch. □