

The Three Cornerstones to Safe Boating

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Now that spring is here, most boat owners are thinking about getting their boats ready for a season of fun boating on our local waters. But have you taken to what I like to refer as “Three Cornerstones to Safe Boating”? They are: 1. Taking a Safe Boating course; 2. Having a Vessel Safety Check; and 3. Planning for every person on your boat to always wear a properly fitted lifejacket.

The following is a review and outline of these three cornerstones.

The Safe Boating Course

These courses are given by the Coast Guard Auxiliary and your local Power Squadron. To emphasize the importance of these courses, the Coast Guard reported that in 2005, 70 percent of all boating fatalities occurred on boats where the operator had not participated in a boating safety course. These are very comprehensive courses. Most require seven two-hour consecutive lessons and include lessons such as Know Your Boat, Before You Get Underway, Navigating the Waterways, Operating Your Vessel Safely, Personal Watercraft, the Legal Requirements of Boating, Boating Emergencies, VHF Radio, Rules You Must Follow, and Marlinspike. An exam is given at the end of the course and those completing it are issued a certificate, which may make one eligible for a discount on boat insurance.

Vessel Safety Check

The vessel safety check consists of 15 basic requirements and eight recommended and discussion items. The 15 basic requirements include display of registration numbers; documentation papers and numbers; personal flotation devices (life jackets), which must be Coast Guard approved and in good condition with one of suitable size for each person on the boat; visual distress signals, including night and day devices which are not expired. Fire extinguishers, size and number depending on size of boat, must be readily accessible and serviceable. Also included are ventilation, either powered or natural depending on age of boat and backfire flame arrester, required on all inboard gasoline engines. Sound producing devices must be capable of a 4-second blast audible for one-half mile; navigational lights, number and location depending on size and type of vessel, are required between sunset and sunrise and in



Coast Guard Auxillarist Sal Prato performing a vessel safety inspection.

conditions of reduced visibility. Both a pollution placard and a Marpol trash placard are required on boats 26 feet and over. A vessel must have a marine sanitation device, Coast Guard

approved, with discharge outlet capable of being sealed. Number 13 on the list is a current copy of Navigational Rules, required on-board boats over 39.4 feet. A boat also must meet any state and local requirements of the state in which it is being examined. Lastly, the overall boat condition means things like the deck being free of hazards, clean bilges, and all systems, electrical and fuel, galley and heating in good working order.

The eight recommended and discussion items are not required for issuing a decal, but are encouraged and include: the marine radio; dewatering device; mounted fire extinguishers; anchor and line; first aid kit; inland visual distress signals; capacity/certificate of compliance; and other items such as nautical charts, float plan and check lists.

Two of the benefits of having a Vessel Safety Check and getting issued a decal are that the Coast Guard Auxiliary (see photo) does it for free and it may prevent you from getting stopped and boarded by a regulatory agency.

Always Wearing a Lifejacket

Are you wearing your lifejacket when you are out on your boat? Are your friends and family wearing their life jackets when they are out on your boat? Based on a recent survey done by the author at a Coast Guard Auxiliary Boating Safety Class, apparently most of you are not. When this same class was asked why they did not wear lifejackets, their answers included “uncomfortable,” “too hot,” “interferes with my fishing,” “I would look stupid, feel silly,” etc.

The boating fatality statistics certainly dictate the importance of wearing

your lifejacket. Approximately 70 percent of all boating fatalities were the result of drowning, and 90 percent of those victims were not wearing their lifejackets. Recent data shows that for one year, 431 lives in the United States could have been saved if boaters had worn their lifejackets. There is a legal requirement that each boat have onboard a lifejacket for each occupant. This does not mean that lifejackets

could be your lifesaver. If the jacket is not the proper size or easily accessible once one is in the water, it may not be possible to put on a properly fitted lifejacket. It has been estimated



Type V-II, Series 4000, Automatic Inflatable offshore by West Marine, Buoyancy 33.7 lbs.

that drowning often occurs in less than two minutes.

One of the goals of the Coast Guard Auxiliary, along with members of the National Safe Boating Council and other organizations,

is to get boaters, their family members and their friends to wear lifejackets at all times when on the boat. This effort includes having boaters become aware of the options when it comes to lifejackets, including the inflatable versions that offer a complete range of movement and even can be considered to look professional and stylish. When purchasing lifejackets, it is important to make sure that they are Coast Guard approved.

In an effort to bring public awareness the different types of lifejackets and, hopefully, encourage the wearing of same,

we share the following series of photographs taken at Brewer Yacht Yard by Roy DeMeo and the author of the different types of lifejackets, with special emphasis on the various Type V inflatables available. The lifejackets in the photos were made available by the author, Mike Sueiro, and West Marine. Special thanks to participants Donna Wexler, Eileen Gallagher, Bob Scott, and James Cope of the Flotilla 18-08 Boating Safety Class, who volunteered to wear the various lifejackets for the photographs. Also, special thanks to Richard Sutton who made his sailboat available for a photo platform.

With these three simple cornerstones, you, as a responsible boater, can take the recommended steps to help ensure that you have a pleasurable boating season and not place yourself, your family or your friends in a situation in which any of you could become a boating accident statistic.



Type V-II, Automatic Inflatable by Mustang, Buoyancy 35 lbs.