

Trailing Your Boat Safely – PART TWO

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MARCO ISLAND, FL – In the first article, we began this topic by looking at the hardware necessary to get your boat from home to the boat ramp. This week we will look at the launching process. I will give you some pointers and checklists to help you get your boat in the water successfully. As in any endeavor where a boat is part of the equation, nothing will beat experience in making the process run smoothly. Don't expect your first launch to go without some little hitch, but hopefully the points we cover here will keep your problems to a minimum.

I would tell you to simply go to the boat ramp and observe several people launching their boats to get some firsthand experience with the process... but you might see some really bad examples.

Before we get into the launch, I want to be sure you can actually handle getting your boat in position. You will need to back the boat onto the ramp, which means you need to safely maneuver your vehicle and trailer in reverse. It can be a little confusing and it is a good idea to practice backing up before you get to the ramp. You will also need to back onto the ramp to retrieve your boat, so this is an important skill to master.

I would suggest that you take your trailered boat to an empty parking lot where you have lots of room to maneuver the trailer. Set out some markers to give yourself a target ramp, or use the parking spaces as an imaginary ramp. Empty bleach bottles or gallon milk jugs are fine to use but might be hard to see behind your boat.

Turning the trailer can be easily handled if you keep your hands on the bottom of the steering wheel and remember that if you want the trailer to move to the right, you move the steering wheel with your right hand. Go left with your left hand. Be careful as you turn, for you can only go so far in one direction before you get your towing vehicle perpendicular to the trailer tongue and run the risk of jack-knifing the trailer. Practice this backing up process many times until you feel you can do it with many eyes watching you at the ramp. It is much easier to accomplish this with the help of a spotter and that is particularly true at the ramp. Then you can always blame a botched back up on the spotter!

Now let's go to the ramp.

Ramp etiquette is important. You do not want to be a ramp hog or jump in front of another boater. Wait your turn no matter how frustrating the other guy is... you have a very good chance to frustrate someone else your first few times. Besides, you have things to do before you put your boat in the water. You want at least ten minutes to allow your bearings to cool down. Check them by touching the bearings, they may be warm, but that is OK. If they are hot enough to make you pull back your hand quickly, the metal could crack if you submerged them in cold water. Do these steps first.

- Disconnect the electrical coupler from the towing vehicle port. (Not now, if you have surge brakes)
- Install the boat's drain plugs. Note, if you did not remember to bring them, go home and start over.
- Turn the boat battery selector to "on" or "both". *Check the drain plugs.*
- Remove the support for the stern drive or outboard engine. *Check the drain plugs.*
- Remove the transom support strap. *Check the drain plugs.*
- Remove the bow safety strap. *Check the drain plugs.*
- Attach a bow line to the bow cleat and place fenders on the side you will dock the boat. *Check the drain plugs.*
- Raise the antenna, bimini top and any other equipment that was lowered for transporting your boat. *Check the drain plugs.*
- Turn on the blowers for inboard or stern drive boats, prime the fuel line for outboards. You will want to start the engines as soon as you get the boat in the water. *Check the drain plugs.*

If you have someone to act as a spotter, he can help to do these tasks, but remember you are the person in charge and need to make sure each step is completed. And while you are at it, get the helper to check the drain plugs.

If it is your turn to launch the boat you should first take a look at the length of the ramp and depth of water near the end. You do not want to get your towing vehicle's rear wheels in the water or run your trailer wheels off the end of the ramp. Have your spotter help you align your vehicle and trailer parallel to the side of the ramp, so you can back up in a straight line. Back down the ramp slowly.

Depending on the type of trailer you have, you will want to submerge the trailer until the boat floats or can be rolled off the trailer. When you reach the launch point, apply the brakes and place the vehicle in park and engage the hand brake before you exit the vehicle. Now you can disconnect the electrical coupler from the towing vehicle port if you have surge brakes. Have your helper enter the boat while you position yourself to disconnect the bow strap. Have the helper lower the outboards, if equipped. The helper can start the engines and as soon as the engine is running you can disconnect the bow strap. Push the boat off the trailer and the helper can slowly move the boat away from the ramp.

Reconnect the power cord to the vehicle power port, especially if you have surge brakes. The reverse lights disable this type of brake, allowing you to back up. If you fail to reconnect the power after launching, the brakes will lock up when you try to back up into a parking space. Return to the car and release the parking brake. Then slowly drive forward up the ramp. Ramps can be slippery, so take your time. If your vehicle has four wheel drive, use that in low to help get you moving forward. Park your vehicle and go to your boat. Enjoy the next few hours on your boat.

In the next issue, Part Three, we will tackle the retrieval of your boat onto the trailer.

For more information about safe boating courses Joe Riccio, (239)-384-7416 or CGAUXCOURSES@GMAIL.COM.

To schedule your **FREE** Vessel Safety Check, please call: John Moyer, (239)-248-7078 or Coast Guard Auxiliary Station – Flotilla 95, (239) 394-5911 or email John at Jmoyer1528@aol.com.

For those interested in joining Flotilla 95, USCG Auxiliary, please call Bob Shmihluk at (215) – 694-3305

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