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BEFORE CASTING OFF THE DOCKLINES:
Ten little tips that can make a big difference

In the last year or so, a half dozen couples on the verge of casting off the docklines to begin the cruising life have asked us to look over their boats to see if they've forgotten anything in the frantic rush to get ready. After months worrying over alternators, refrigeration, and windlasses, the crew doesn't need any major new jobs. We advise them to relax, take a breather, and get in a little coastal sailing before they leave, and we make suggestions aimed at re-focusing them from the boatyard to the sea. We usually find about ten small items that can each be done in five minutes and can prevent big problems down the line. All of these suggestions help to avoid the potentially serious failures caused by the continuous vibration, chafe, UV and saltwater exposure of open ocean sailing. These suggestions are designed to be big hit, high impact, low effort items any one of which may just prevent a big disaster in a squall at 2 AM.

1. Check attachment points for tethers/harnesses. We usually start by asking about the couple's plans for watchkeeping and what rules they intend to follow with respect to being clipped in and going on deck alone. Every couple will come to a solution they're comfortable with on these issues, but all too often they haven't yet come to agreement and this is the time to negotiate a starting point. With respect to being clipped in, we stress the importance of using a short tether when working on deck with both hands above the waist, like when pulling a sail down the inner stay or doing something with reefing lines at the mast. Being clipped on with a short tether to points at the headstay, inner stay, and mast is much better than being clipped to a jack line because you can still go over the side with a long tether. We recommend always clipping the short tether to a secure point in the area where you are working. If there is not already a pad eye or other attachment point, Spectra loops can be tied through small openings to create good strong clip points. For the steering station, one or more of the through-bolts holding the pedestal can be replaced with an eyebolt.

2. De-fang uncovered split (cotter) pins. Next we look for any uncovered split pins and find ways to get rid of them. Uncovered split pins can snag lines, slice sails, and leave nasty gashes on skin. Racers tend to cover the pins with masses of tape, but this does not allow you to see what's happening under the tape, where trapped moisture can quickly lead to corrosion. We use stainless welding rod rather than split pins on most of our stays. A short piece of rod is bent into a "C" shape, threaded through the two pin holes in the turnbuckle and then the ends are bent in so they don't snag anything. On the backstay, which we need to remove when we haul the boat, and in other places where split pins are normally used, like on the mainsail luff hardware, we use stainless machine screws with nylock nuts to replace cotter/split pins. Where split pins are the only solution, we cover the sharp ends with a dab of silicon caulk.

3. Wire tie closed shackle pins and lock critical bolts. While we're looking for cotter pins, we also keep an eye out for critical shackles and bolts that would cause a major problem if they came open at a bad moment. The continuous vibration during passagemaking can vibrate nuts off of bolts and loosen and eventually open screw

shackles. On shackles we won't need to open, like on the jib halyard, we wire tie the shackle pin to the shackle to prevent the pin from coming loose. We use black wire ties as they seem to be more UV resistant than clear or white ones. We have had stainless nuts vibrate loose (brand new stainless seems particularly slippery/vulnerable to vibration) in batten cars, the steering system, autopilot ram, and roller furling, and now use nylocks, double nuts or thread lock liquid on all these nuts/machine screws.

4. Reinforce high load hardware and splices. Next we look at high load areas and the risks they might pose to the crew. The worst 2 AM dramas in violent squalls we have heard of have involved a piece of high load hardware failing – usually a mainsheet block letting go – and in some cases have ended in horrific injuries. Following the lead of a Vendee Globe racing boat we saw, we tie Spectra ‘safety lines’ through high load blocks and shackles to contain them in case something blows up. We also sew back and forth (using waxed dental floss) through any high tech (Spectra/Vectran) line splices. A surprising numbers of these splices, including those made by brand name riggers, come apart early in their life when exposed to the cycling shock loads created by offshore waves.

5. Mark the proper position for all sheet leads. In our experience, people getting ready to go cruising have far too little time to sail the boat, so we always check the basics. We have them hoist every sail to make sure it's still in good shape, and we make a rough check of the sheet leads. In most cases, the couple will never have hoisted the storm jib, and, if they have one, the trysail. Figuring out the proper leads for these can save a lot of grief in their first gale. We mark the proper position for storm jib sheet blocks, trysail sheet blocks, drogue leads, and outboard jib reaching short sheets clearly on the jib track or on the deck. This lets you set the correct block position in the dark at two in the morning without confusion. Use either international orange florescent paint or permanent markers. The storm sails, drogues and warps are usually buried at the bottom of a deep locker. After getting them out to find the best sheeting locations, we suggest that on passage they be stowed somewhere accessible like on the sole in the forepeak or the shower.

6. Put chafe protection on sails. While the sails are up, we look for any telltale black or smudge marks. These are usually caused by some rubbing action and can develop into chafe problems on longer distance cruises. We try to find the source of the chafe and eliminate it if possible. We also cover the rubbed area with sticky Dacron sail tape even if there is no chafe visible on the sail fabric. On heavier black marks, we use two layers of sail tape, putting the smaller patch under the bigger patch. This minimizes the exposed tape edges, which can catch on lazy jacks and spreaders.

7. Cover chafe spots on lines. We also look for any halyards, checkstays, or other lines that rub on the mast, spreaders or boom. If possible, we find a way to stow the line or halyard so it no longer rubs, but where that isn't possible we cover the contact point with extra Dacron cover, leather or simply some tape. Normal duct tape and electrical tape get brittle quickly when exposed to UV, but the extra long life masking tapes hold up quite well and are nice and slippery.

8. *Mark reefing lines and halyards at each reef point.* Squall lines always seem to sweep through when it's pitch dark out and whoever's on watch has started to nod off. We recommend marking the line where it exits the clutches or goes onto a cleat for each reef point on all reef lines and halyards. That allows us to drop the reefs in quickly, knowing each line is properly set. You can whip these marks into the line with contrasting color thread, which will last forever. Or, you can use 'permanent' marker pens, which is faster but will only last about a year.

9. *Keep your hands free on deck.* On many boats, a small flashlight mounted under the dodger in the cockpit and aimed at the key control lines is very useful. On *Hawk*, this shines down on the mainsheet, main halyard, vang, and reefing lines. Where the control lines are not under the dodger, a halogen headlamp with red and white lights will illuminate them while leaving your hands free and makes just about anything easier at night. We recommend carrying one for each regular member of the crew.

10. *Keep salt out of the interior.* Salt is far more insidious than most people realize – if you don't pay attention, in a few weeks your cushions and bedding will be in a perpetual state of damp from the salt they've absorbed. To prevent this, we recommend stripping salty clothing off before going below and certainly before getting anywhere near a settee or bunk, and stashing the salty clothes in the front of the dodger, a head, or the galley. We then use a towel hanging near the companionway to wipe down wet hands and hair. If we're really salty, we rinse off with a few spritzes from a spray bottle of freshwater before toweling down.

Finally, we talk about practices to ensure everyone stays hydrated. Dehydration can become a serious problem while on passage – we know a few older male cruisers who have gotten kidney stones and had to be helicoptered off boats. Following the lead of the offshore sailing schools, we recommend marking 'his and hers' quart or liter water bottles with the rule that each bottle must be drunk empty twice each day.

After working on a boat for a long time, it's always useful to have a fresh pair of eyes look her over. It's often one little thing going wrong that starts the ball rolling toward a major drama. Experienced sailors develop many small habits like those above, in all areas from sail handling to galley procedure, to prevent the little problems from developing in order to avoid the major ones.