

An Ounce of Prevention

by
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Many of us never give a second thought or have a plan in place in the event we need to turn over our helm to an unfamiliar crew member. While this story is actually about a sailboat, the lesson to be learned has equal applicability to a power boat.

I wrote about this incident more than 30 years ago for an owners' publication that I was writing at the time. I have actually since lost the article and newsletter so I am rewriting it for the lesson is still relevant today.

We were on a town mooring in Great Salt Pond a few days after the conclusion of the annual Block Island Race Week. There were a few of the larger race machines still in the harbor having been abandoned by their crews and owners who used other means to get home and were being tended to by skeleton crews. One of these boats was on a mooring in front of us measuring in the 40' - 50' range.

On board was obviously a crew member since he was sporting the boat's name and logo on his shirt. He was accompanied by a female companion. As they were stowing bags of sails below, the young lady clearly was out of her element. I assumed this might have been her maiden voyage on a boat and no less a full fledged racing machine.

This sailboat was designed for three things: racing, speed, and winning. It was not a cruising boat in any way, shape or form; strictly business. While I could not see below deck, I suspect it was quite spartan. The hailing port was Boston so my suspicion was it was being readied to make the journey home with this crew of two or making its way to yet another racing venue where it would be met by its owner and full crew for yet another race series.

The boat was equipped with a huge destroyer wheel with a deck cutout to accommodate its size. Because of its diameter, it could easily be reached while the skipper sat on either lee side while racing so he could see around the headsail and easily hold and steer the wheel with one hand.



Large sailboat wheel

Given the size of the wheel, the typical mounting of the

engine controls on the upper starboard and port sides of the pedestal would be awkward. Consequently, they were mounted at the base of the pedestal and were intended to be operated by one's foot.

The boat's one "official" crew gave his female companion a brief lesson about steering and the location of the engine controls. She was probably about five foot six in height and when she stood at the wheel it was slightly taller than she. To hold it at two and ten o'clock, her hands were actually higher than her shoulders.

My wife and I were in our cockpit savoring our morning coffee and watching intently and anticipating an interesting and perhaps entertaining departure.

With the engine fired up, the guy moved forward to cast off the boat from the morning. He signaled to his companion to put the boat in gear and move it forward slowly.

Being unaccustomed to the set-up of the controls, she left one hand on the wheel and bent down to use the other to put the boat into forward gear. Not letting go of her right hand on the wheel the boat turned hard to starboard for she had pulled the wheel a quarter turn. When he yelled to straighten out the boat, she immediately stood up, leaving her left hand on the throttle thereby, pulling it up, which was akin to a holoshot. To say it resulted in an excessive speed for the mooring field is a gross understatement.

He yelled to slow it down!

Need I say what happened next?

As she bent down to depress the throttle the boat once again turned hard to starboard. This was repeated twice before the gentleman ran back from the bow and took the wheel narrowly adverting multiple collisions with other boats. She left many occupants shaking as they had hurriedly positioned themselves to fend off a disaster of crunching fiberglass. While we were mildly entertained, those closer to having a disastrous outcome were not.

The moral of this story is to be purposely prepared.

So, whether you are a boat owner or an occasional crew, be sure you have a plan in place. It might help get you home; better yet, it may save your life and others.

Here's to safe boating!

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