



Hannah and Sam Glatzel demonstrating how to come alongside successfully.

Developing Core Boat-Handling Skills

Paul Glatzel looks at the factors that influence how a boat handles and what you can do to improve your skills.

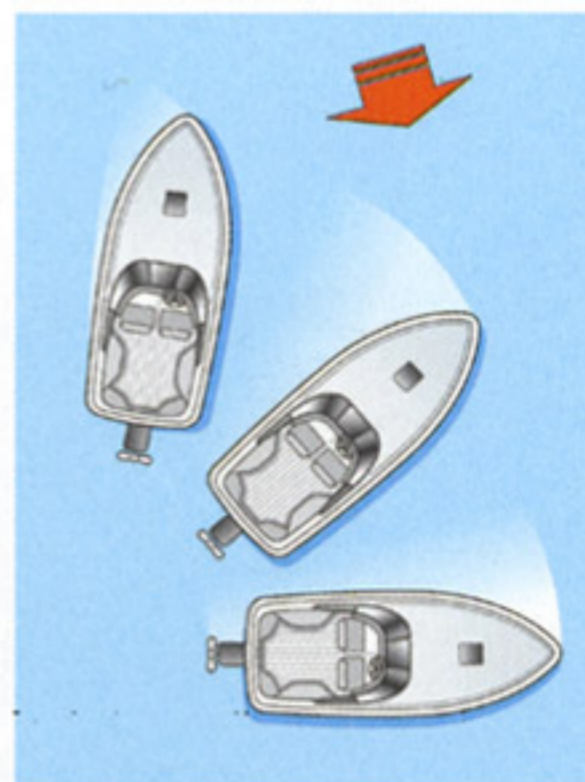
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Being able to put a boat alongside a pontoon confidently and safely in any conditions is a great skill to master but becoming able to do it doesn't happen overnight. A really good boat handler understands how his or her boat is affected by the elements (wind and current/tide) and marries this understanding to plenty of practice. The wind obviously has a great impact on every boat, but what that impact is varies from boat to boat. Anyone who has driven a powerboat knows that one of the first things to remember is that because powerboats don't have deep keels (like yachts) they will tend to be easily blown across the surface of the water.

While they do get blown across the water's surface they also want

to move to their 'happy' position which is lying side on to the wind or with their bow slightly downwind. To get a feel for this, position your boat heading directly into the wind. Once the boat has come to a stop the bow will drop off to the left or right and come to rest side on to the wind. How quickly the bow moves round depends on i) the craft – a four-berth family cruiser with a canvas top arrangement has lots of exposed area ('windage') in contrast to a RIB with a lower profile. The length will also have a bearing and long craft with light bows are more affected than shorter 'stubbier' craft; ii) the wind strength, which of course also has a major bearing. In stronger winds a four-berth cruiser-type craft may only take four to five seconds from stopping to ending up side on – this can easily catch the unaware out.

IMAGE: Happy position



The impact of this characteristic is that when you point the bow into the wind and stop, a battle starts between you and the wind as the wind tries to push the bow around. You have three choices: i) use the

knowledge that this will happen to your advantage; ii) compensate with throttle and steering to hold the bow where you want it; iii) a bit of both.

If you want to keep your bow into the wind, how do you achieve this? Point the bow directly into the wind. As the bow starts to drop off to the left (for example) turn hard to the right and briefly engage forward gear then neutral. If you time it right (and don't leave the power on too long) the bow will hold in that position directly into the wind. You can achieve the same effect by using reverse but by steering

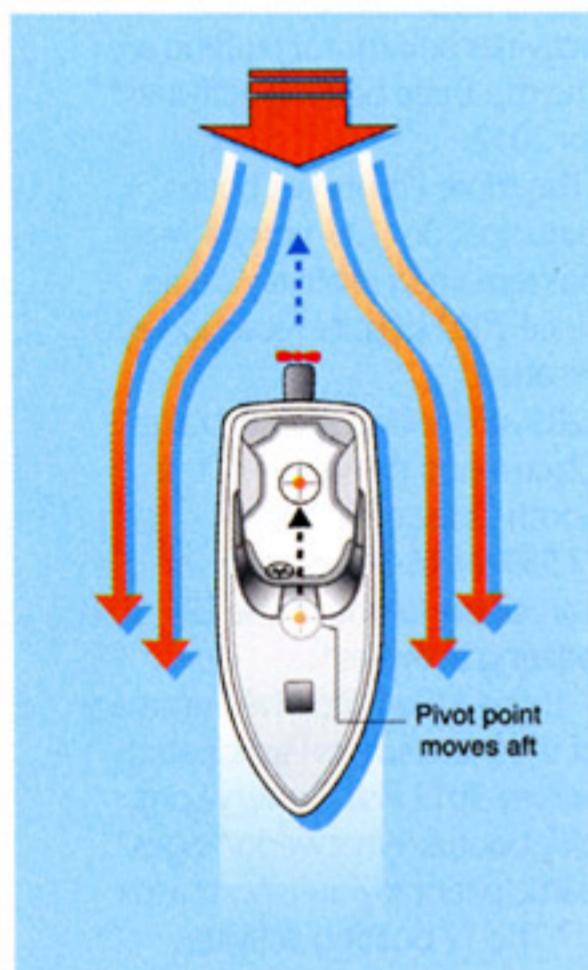
If you can handle your craft really competently around a buoy you will be able to do so in a marina too.

the other way – so in this example the bow drops to the left, turn hard left then engage reverse. Practising this really develops your ability to control the bow in the wind but also helps you to develop a core boat-handling skill – the concept of 'steer then gear'. The whole idea with steer then gear is that before you engage thrust from the engine, you point the steering where you

want the bow to go. The turn that you want is almost instantaneous – understanding this is important as it is a skill you will use often in close-quarter situations.

Before moving on, one other thing worth knowing is that your craft is really happy stern to wind too. It won't end up in this position naturally but if you are trying to hold position then keeping the bow into the wind will involve much more work than keeping the stern into the wind. Use this knowledge to your advantage in marina situations if things go a little wrong. When it doesn't quite go as planned the temptation is to try to recover the bow, but often it's best to just let it go and reverse into the wind to settle things down and plan the next move.

IMAGE: Stern to wind

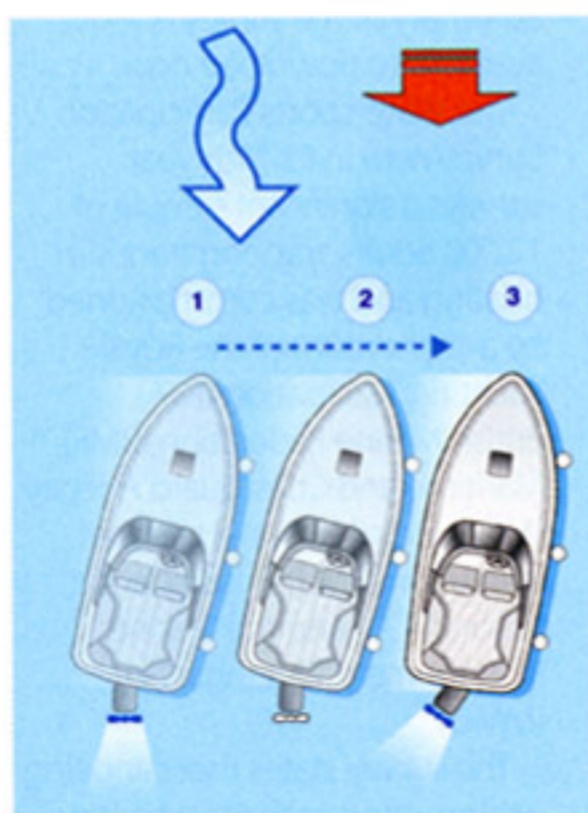


Current or tide (let's call these 'stream') also affect your craft. When stationary, stream moves you in the direction it is running, but if you point the bow into the stream and move ahead, the flow of water runs down either side of the craft slowing forward movement, but may also help to overcome some of the effects of the wind just referred to.

Stream can be used to your advantage with a great technique called 'ferry gliding'. Point your bow directly into the stream – the 12 o'clock position. Little blips of power will keep it in position. Now turn the steering and position the boat pointing to the 1 or 2 o'clock position. Keep using those little blips to stop the craft moving backwards, but now the stream will be hitting the craft on the left-

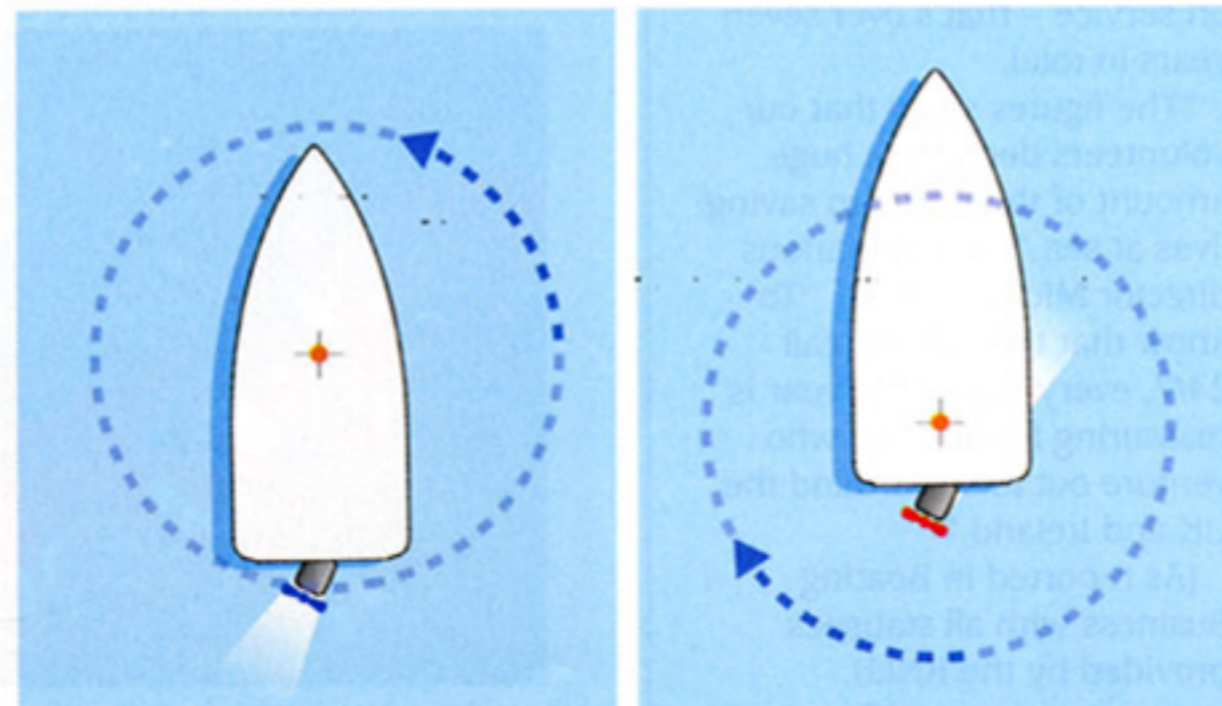
hand bow so the vessel will start to slide sideways to the right. Careful balancing of the steering and throttle while keeping the correct angle will have you sliding from side to side without moving forwards or backwards. This is a great technique if coming alongside a pontoon or another craft in stream. Once you have mastered this with stream, give it a try with the wind too – you can also do it holding the stern to the wind.

IMAGE: Ferry gliding



We touched on the boat 'pivoting' about a point. When stationary this 'pivot point' is at the stern where the engine is anchoring the craft. When you engage forward and turn left or right the pivot point is roughly one-third back from the bow. This means when you turn left everything behind this point goes right. In astern the pivot point is a bit less than one-third in front of the stern. Understanding this characteristic is important as in close-quarter situations you need to be careful you don't forget about the bits of the boat that are swinging the opposite way to your turn – you might side-swipe another craft.

IMAGE: Pivot points



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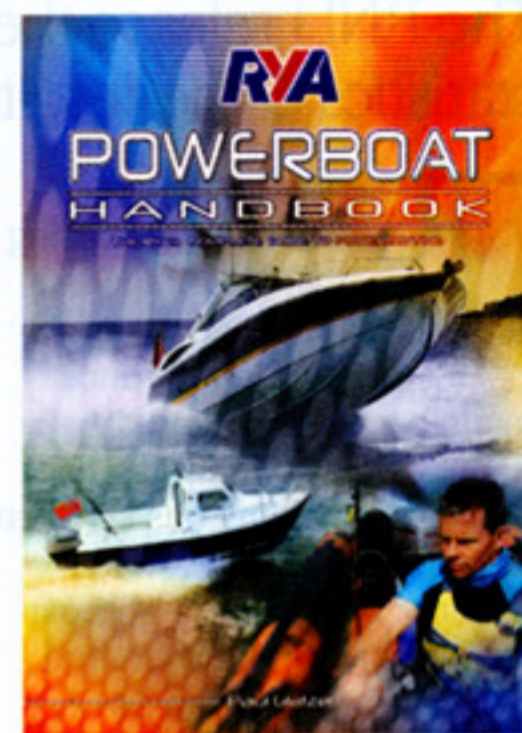
A few exercises can help to really get to grips with these techniques. Exercise 1: Get in some clear water and practise holding the bow into the wind just using forward. Then do it just using reverse. Then position the boat between two buoys and use whichever of forward or reverse helps to keep you on the line between the two buoys while keeping the bow into the wind. Exercise 2: Position your boat pointing into stream two boat lengths downstream of a buoy. Use the ferry gliding technique to slide two boat lengths to the right. Head directly upstream to two boat lengths upstream and then slide left. Keep driving round the buoy

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in a square pattern until you have completely mastered ferry gliding. If it goes pear-shaped and you are drifting onto the buoy, just select neutral and you will drift onto it and past it. Exercise 3: With a good dose of wind and stream, position your bow into the wind near a buoy keeping about a boat length off. Use your new-found skills to hold that position.

The skills that we have just introduced give you the core skills necessary to be able to handle your craft in a close-quarter situation. As we will see in one of the next articles, when handling a craft in a marina it is about combining all of this knowledge about how your boat handles to address the way at that particular moment in time that the wind and stream are pushing you around. If you can handle your craft really competently around a buoy you will be able to do so in a marina too.

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RYA HANDBOOK

The RYA Powerboat Handbook contains many more useful insights into how to make handling your boat a whole lot easier. It is available for £15.50 from the RYA website or from Amazon. It will also soon be available as an eBook using the RYA app.

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