

# LEAVING & COMING ALONGSIDE PONTOONS

by Paul Glatzel

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A great day out on the water is too often spoiled because getting your boat back alongside a marina berth proves more difficult than you would like it to be. Often the worry and stress of coming back into the berth hangs over the whole trip and detracts from what would have been a fab day on the water.

**So what can you do to make things simpler and make your time afloat more fun?** There are a few things that combine to make handling your craft in a marina that bit easier, these are:

**Understanding your boat:** Knowing how your boat reacts in the wind, knowing how to turn it in a tight space, being able to use the throttle and steering effectively.

**Practice:** All the theory knowledge in the world won't help you without practice – 'practice makes perfect'.

**Pride:** It won't always go right and accepting that and realizing you are not a failure because you don't always 'nail it' will help too.

**So what's worth knowing about your boat and how it handles?** The first key thing to understand that will make a real difference is how your boat reacts to the wind.

To get an understanding of this point the bow directly into the wind and come to a stop. The boat's natural 'happy' position is to lie side on to the wind either at 90° or with the bow slightly downwind of this position. Whenever

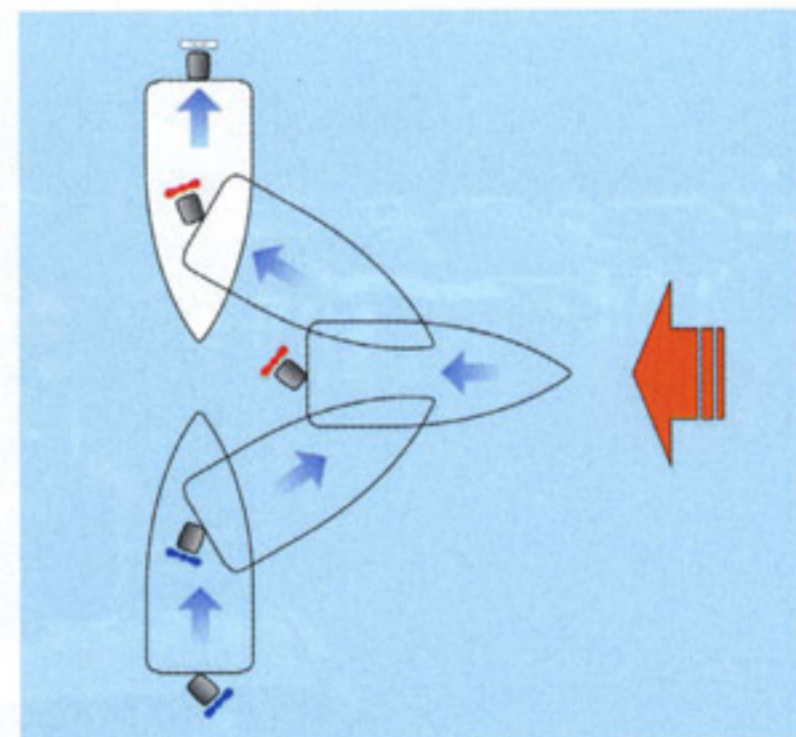
you stop your boat it will always try to return to this position. If you point the bow into the wind the bow will probably come round quite rapidly, if you point the stern into the wind it will eventually come to this position but may take a fair amount of time to get there.

**Why is it handy knowing this?** Because you can either use this effect to your advantage when handling your boat or if it just happens knowing where the boat will settle can be useful. Every boat will react at slightly different speeds with those boats with heavy sterns and light bows reacting the quickest – like long RIBs or mid size 4 berth family cruisers.

When things don't quite go as planned in a marina then either holding the stern to the wind (where the boat is very happy to sit) and just using small amounts of throttle to hold position or letting the boat come to the 'side on to the wind' position allows you to calm things down then try again.

One of the key concepts introduced on boat handling courses for outboard and outdrive powered craft is 'steer then gear'. Using the 'steer then gear' technique can make a real difference to the effectiveness of your boat handling. Take the example of turning your boat around through 180° - being able to turn in a small space is a key skill to master as the techniques you use for this you can also use to adjust the position of your boat when approaching any berth. To execute the turn go to neutral and let the

momentum reduce, before the boat comes to a stop turn hard to port or starboard (whichever turns the bow into the wind), go to forward gear then neutral only staying gear for about half a second.

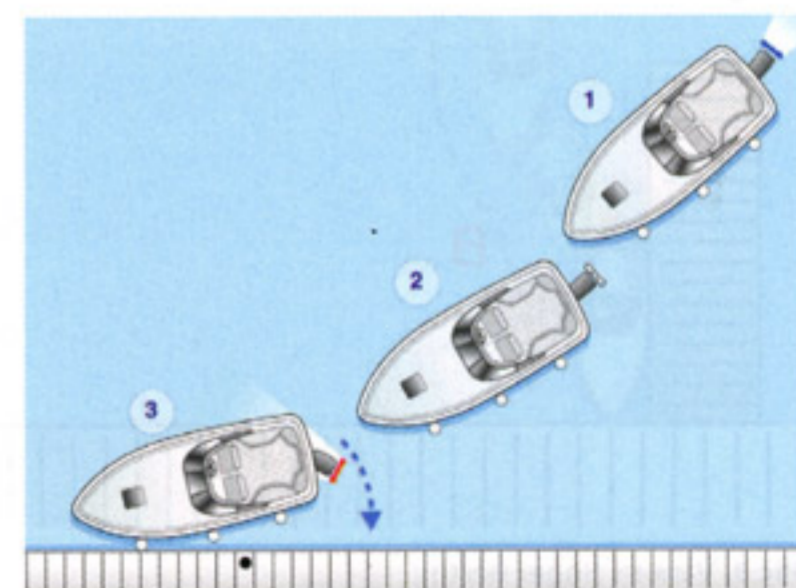


Pic 1. Various 'turn in a confined space'

Do this once or twice to bring the bow round by about 90° - don't leave the throttle in forward too long else you will create too much momentum. Now (with the throttle in the neutral position) turn fully the other way then go astern – by getting the steering where it needs to be the 'pull' of the engine will be immediate and the turn will happen in a tighter space. Another full turn of the wheel while in neutral and back to forward will probably complete the turn.

**So what about coming alongside a pontoon?**

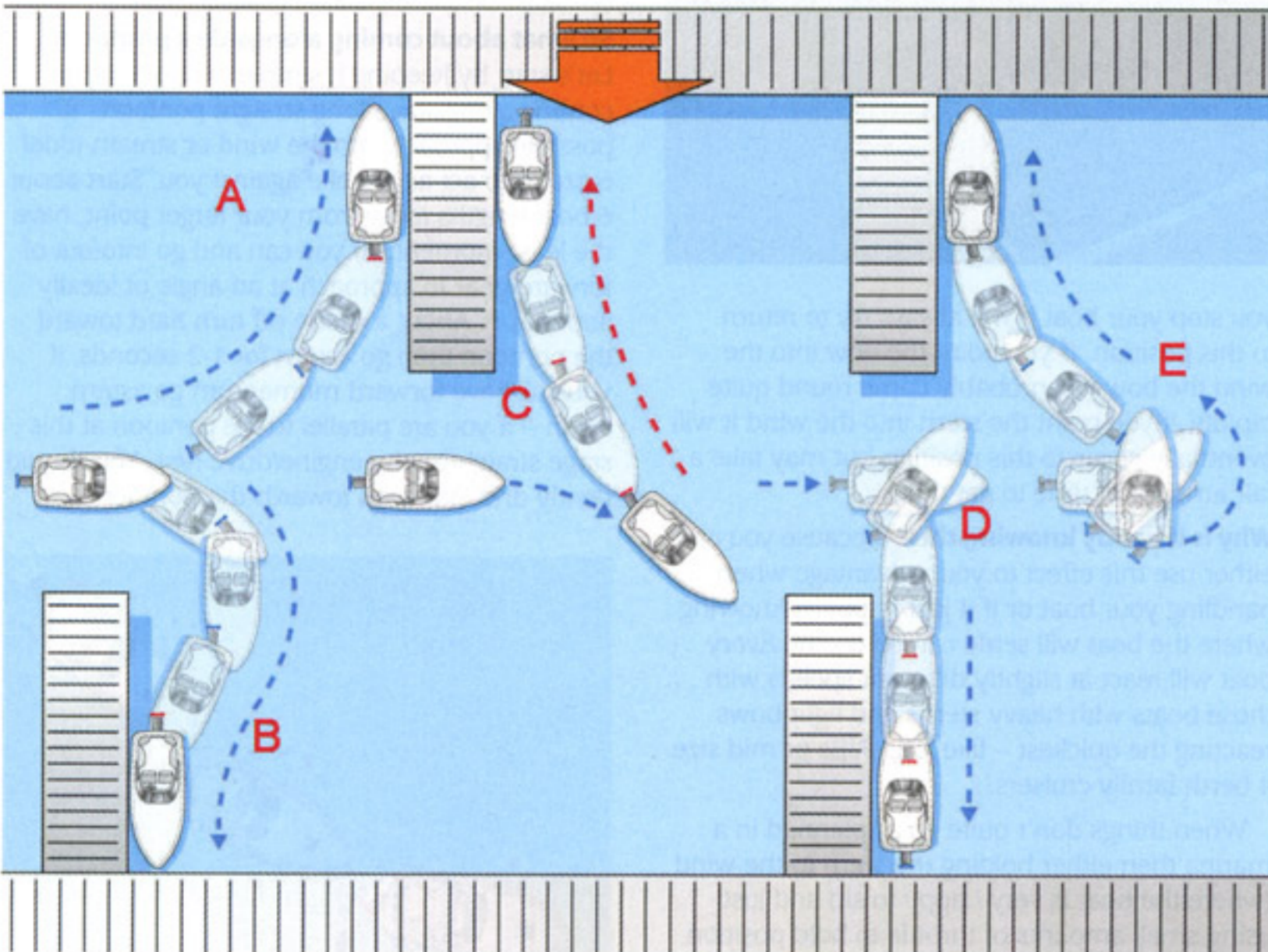
Let's start by keeping it simple and looking at coming alongside a long straight pontoon. If possible approach into the wind or stream (tide/current) to act as a brake against you. Start about 6 boat lengths away from your target point, have the least momentum you can and go into/out of forward gear to approach at an angle of ideally about 30°. About a metre off turn hard toward the pontoon then go astern for 1-2 seconds, if you still have forward momentum go astern again – if you are parallel to the pontoon at this stage straighten the engine/drive first. You should gently drift sideways towards the pontoon.



Pic 2. long straight pontoon

**Tip:** Pretend the pontoon is about 1m out from the actual pontoon – doing so means that if you over egg it you have some escape room. If you fall short you can always throw lines or manoeuvre the boat in closer.

Finger berths present a different challenge but are best viewed as a combination of the approach to a long straight pontoon with the techniques described for turning your boat round in a small space.



Pic 3. Various finger berths

**Take the pontoons in this example: (above)**

**A** – The momentum of the turn carries the craft onto the berth, the wind helps to reduce forward momentum

**B** – Care needed as momentum carries craft away from the berth. Good use of steering and then use of astern to halt forward momentum with wind behind needed.

**C** – Reversing into wind, craft is naturally in a 'happy' position as it will sit very comfortably stern to wind making this a fairly easy

manoeuvre:

**D** – Wind on the bow risks bow dropping off to port or starboard as craft will want to lie side on to the wind – could be a challenging manoeuvre.

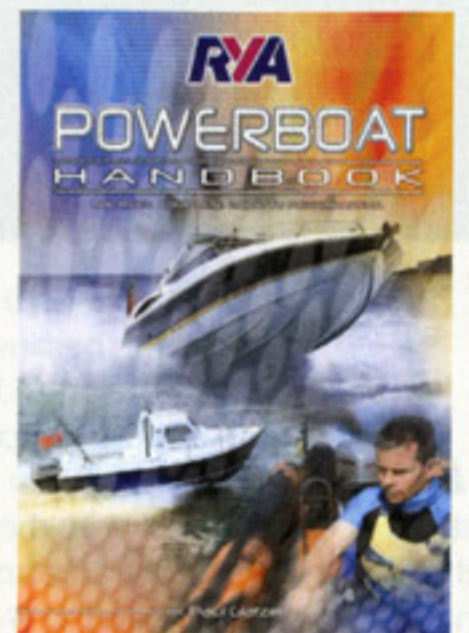
**E** – Going past the berth, turning then approaching with momentum carrying craft onto the berth is a good use of the skills discussed.

**Tip:** 'Let the boat do the work' – by which I mean if the boat is drifting slowly where you want it to go just let it happen.

Even the best boat drivers get things wrong,

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perhaps they misjudge the effect of wind or tide or are caught out by a sudden gust. If this happens then a good skipper knows to abort - remember don't push a bad position - move away and start again

As we mentioned at the outset 'practice makes perfect' and there is no point getting frustrated with marina handling if you are not prepared to invest the time to do some practice. Start when there isn't much wind and choose some simple berths to approach 20 - 30 times. As you progress you will start to get a really clear idea of how the boat is handling and what you have done on each approach that has either made things work or gone wrong. Then progress to more complex berths and as confidence builds practice on windier days too.

Again though, it won't always go right - it never does for any of us.

Have fun boating!

**Paul Glatzel**