INSTRUCTION

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POWERBOATING

Paul Glatzel says...we're afloat - let's get going ...

In the last article in this series of articles based around the RYA Powerboat Level 2 course we got our RIB afloat and looked at the preparation we should do ahead of getting launched. In this article we'll move on and look at the RIB itself and at the basics of handling her.

Once afloat you will need to go through the final few kit checks on the RIB and undertake a few basic checks on the engine and systems (you might do some of these on a trailer before launching if you have trailed your RIB). The checks you do are pretty basic and are similar to those you would do on a car engine – oil, other fluids, coolant level (if inboard), trim tab oil, fuel etc. Also start to 'learn' your engine – know where any oil drops are, know where any dirt is so that you can spot any changes that may indicate an issue. For example, with inboard engines there will always be some dust from the belts under the engine. An increase in this dust or some stringy bits from the belt may indicate excess wear which might have arisen from a loose nut causing a belt to wear more. Catching this early could prevent a subsequent failure at sea, which at the least would spoil your day but could lead you into serious danger. Checks over, insert the key, trim the engine/leg down, attach the kill cord (more of which later), check that there is nothing/no one in the area of the propeller and fire up. How you fire up and whether you need choke etc will vary from engine to engine. Immediately check to see if there is a jet of water coming out of the engine (if an outboard). We call this the 'telltale' and the presence of a firm jet of water indicates that there is plenty of cooling water getting round the engine. A weak jet may not necessarily indicate circulation issues but may merit investigation. If you have operated recently in shallow water, often some mud gets drawn up into the system and can jam at the telltale outlet. A paper clip or small screwdriver inserted up the tube often clears the

blockage.

Every year, all over the world, people are maimed and killed because the helm of a small boat fails to wear the kill cord, falls out and the boat drives off, causing mayhem and possibly death. Kill cords are simple bits of fabric/plastic cord that when pulled kill the engine – attached to the helm, the action of being ejected/falling out kills the engine. Despite the simplicity of kill cords there are a few dos and don'ts: 1) Always wear kill cords round a knee or thigh and not a wrist. There have been many instances of kill cords slipping over a wrist when people are ejected from a boat but never (to my knowledge) coming off from around their knee without killing the engine. 2) Clipping around a life jacket will generally work but often makes the kill cord susceptible to being snagged/getting wrapped round the wheel – I always choose the thigh/knee option even on tiny tiller-controlled RIBs. 3) Ensure the plastic versions of kill cords have a central solid core as those without are susceptible to becoming brittle and snapping. On the other hand, beware of the fabric kill cords which stretch and can become very loose and drop down the leg. 4) Have a spare kill cord on board so those left on board can easily restart in the event of the helm leaving the RIB – my preference is hanging off a seat back or at the helm position. 5) Before you go out each time, start the engine, then pull the kill cord to ensure that it works – I've found a few instances where they haven't.

With your crew on board and the lines secure, gently engage forward, then reverse, to check you have drive and/or haven't lost the prop! It's pretty embarrassing to cast off, engage gear and find that someone has nabbed the prop!

Good seamanship, in my opinion, is about keeping things simple and constantly looking for the safest way to approach a task. This is why I recommend crew to rig slip lines around cleats/through rings so they can cast off from within the boat rather than casting off then leaping in. While, for many, leaping into a RIB presents no issues, for some it is no small step and they could easily step onto a hatch or twist a knee or ankle. There is some risk in leaping in and no risk in tending lines from within the boat – a no-brainer. Getting crew to tend lines from within the RIB is particularly important when coming alongside, as I've lost count of the incredible leaps onto pontoons/walls I've seen which have resulted in either embarrassment or serious injury – a completely destroyed elbow with the person in the water being the worst so far. Learn to lasso cleats: aside from the fact it's safer, it looks damn impressive too when your crew nail a cleat from 5 to 10 foot away!

Moving away from the pontoon/wall you will be putting the RIB into and out of gear. Many throttle systems have a small red/white catch under the handle called the 'interlock' which needs to be pressed to engage gear. Learn where the forward and reverse engage points are and practise moving positively from the neutral to the forward or reverse position. Always move first to these positions, then you can decide whether to add additional revs in due course. When going into neutral, if you find yourself missing neutral and going into reverse (with associated crunchy expensive-sounding noises!), then if there is an interlock on your throttle, try going to neutral by using a flat hand, as the problem is that you are gripping the throttle/interlock and bypassing the neutral position by holding the interlock up.

When you start out boating you will often find you spend hours/days/weeks zigzagging along the water. This is because when you

turn the wheel the effect of the turn takes a while to be felt. You make a slight turn, think nothing is happening and add a bit more. You've now gone too far and correct back the other way – and so on. A simple way to prevent this is to limit yourself (where possible) to 1/8 movements of the wheel. Turn 1/8 and wait for the effect, if this isn't enough add another 1/8 and so on. You'll soon find yourself driving straight!

To be able to handle your RIB with ease it is handy to understand a little of what 'makes it tick'. Firstly imagine you stop your RIB pointing straight into the wind. It is absolutely guaranteed that the bow/nose of the RIB will move left or right so that the RIB lies side-on to the wind. How quickly this happens will depend on the wind, where the people are in the RIB, how long the RIB is and how light the bow is etc. This is the RIB's naturally 'happy' position and the RIB will lie either at 90 to the wind or with the bow pointing slightly downwind. Knowing that your boat always wants to return to this position will help you as you get more comfortable with handling it, as rather than fight these effects you begin to use them to your advantage.

On a Powerboat Level 2 course, one of the first few tasks an instructor will get you involved in is driving your/the school's RIB around two mooring buoys in a figure-of-eight course.

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Why does he/she do this? If the instructor asks you to drive round at a minimum speed and gets you to try to maintain a set distance off the buoys at each end as you round them, then you start to quickly feel how the wind and tide are pushing you around – you start to compensate for these forces in order to be able to hold that set distance off the buoys. By doing this in forward then reverse you also learn that the point about which the boat rotates (its 'pivot point') varies according to whether it is going forward or backward. Going forward, the pivot point is roughly just forward of the middle of the boat, meaning that when you turn left everything behind this point swings right.

Going backwards ('astern'), the pivot point moves to the back of the boat just forward of the engine, so if the stern is going to the left ('port') then everything forward of this swings to the right. Again, being aware of and understanding these handling characteristics helps you to being able to predict what your RIB will do when you are manoeuvring it.

Think APE (or 'Monkey'!) before you start any on-water manoeuvre! 'A' is for 'assess' (wind, tide, depth, other water users etc), 'P' is for 'plan' (direction of approach, route etc), 'E' is for 'execute' (doing it). Most boaters tend to jump straight in at 'plan', then 'execute'. Great helms are doing the 'assess' bit without even realising they are thinking about it, before P and E. Use 'APE' to remind you to do the 'assess' bit, as then the P and E bits will be far better!

As with any skill, understanding it doesn't mean you can do it. Get out and practise driving around a couple of mooring buoys, holding that set distance off and only at dead slow – else you override the effects of wind and tide/stream. Even experienced helms benefit from returning to challenges like these – after all, if you have loads of experience this should be dead easy, shouldn't it! Perhaps a fun competition between the RIB's regular helms would be good – just remember the kids often do better than the adults at these … you've been warned!

In this article we've introduced the basics of boat handling; in the next article we'll look at how we develop these skills to make coming alongside and leaving berths more straightforward.

This article covers subjects found in the RYA Powerboat Handbook written by Paul Glatzel of Powerboat Training UK in Poole. (www.powerboatraininguk.co.uk).
 The RYA Powerboat Handbook was written to support the RYA Powerboat Scheme and is available from www.rya.org.uk/shop.

WIN THE BOOK!
Answer this question

Q: An Orange smoke flare is used to…

A. Alert others to your presence for collision avoidance
B. Issue distress
C. Check wind direction before anchoring

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