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Lakeland BOATING

MAY 2018



PRESTIGE 460 FLY

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MAN OVERBOARD An MOB situation during the 2017 Race to

LAKE SURFISTAS A group of women surfers encourage others to catch a wave. **p. 52**

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Man Overboard

How can recreational boaters prepare for this emergency on the water?

I'm fortunate. In more than four decades on the water, the only man overboard (MOB) situation I've experienced happened on a springtime Arkansas River rafting trip in Colorado. No one was injured when our raft got trapped in an unseen hydraulic and flipped. We all had our life jackets on and were able to self-rescue. I will, however, always remember the feeling of 49-degree water and fighting back waves of panic.

Then there was the time in Wisconsin's Door County when my foot slipped on the dock. I almost went down between it and the adjacent yacht, but someone caught my arm at the last minute. I was left with bruises on my leg and my ego, but it could've been worse.

And "worse" is always a possibility. It doesn't matter if you're into watersports, fishing or long-distance cruising, and it doesn't matter how experienced you are. Accidents happen, and too often we're unprepared.

What are the facts?

It's easy to assume you'll only end up in the water in the event of a capsizing, grounding, fire or collision. It's also easy to believe that those most at risk will be the high-octane enthusiasts who are waterskiing or racing around on personal watercraft.

The truth is, according to the U.S. Coast Guard's recreational boating statistics, far too many MOB situations involve simple falls or ejections, and a whopping 90 percent of them happen in calm water with less than 1-foot seas. Eighty-five percent of the victims are men, with an average age of 47. Interestingly, alcohol isn't an overriding factor; it's involved in just 27 percent of daytime incidents. That number jumps to 50 percent at night.

According to Sam Insalaco, an engineer by trade who works with Ohio's U.S. Power Squadrons (USPS), the type of boating you pursue makes a difference in your MOB risk.

"With watercraft under 16 feet, such as a Jet-Ski, you can have a lot of horsing around," he says. "The good news is that most people do wear their Type III life jackets. The bad news is that many of them don't realize how powerful those machines are. Then, in the 16- to 26-foot category, you've got small, open boats with people who can, frankly, get complacent. Their biggest offense is not wearing a life jacket."

Spend enough time on the water and you'll inevitably hear, "I don't need to wear a life jacket; I'm a strong swimmer." Insalaco dismisses this, pointing out the risks of cold-water immersion.

"Hypothermia can occur when water temperatures are in the 60s," he says. "If it's in the 50s or less, you have one minute to get your gasp reflex under control, and 10 minutes before your arms and legs stop working."

Of course, if you hit your head, lose mobility due to injury or are rendered unconscious, you won't stand a chance without



the right life jacket, which will float you head-up: A Type I, II or III (including float coats) life jacket or an auto-inflatable Type V jacket. And as for the notion that someone might be able to grab a cushion or life jacket on the way down, forget it.

"It's a complete and total fallacy that you'll be able to reach for a flotation device while you're falling or if you're ejected from the boat," Insalaco says. "It happens in less than a second."

USCG statistics show that sailors suffer fewer MOB incidents than other types of boaters. In 2016, there were just seven man overboard incidents involving sailboats. Compare that to 56 for personal watercraft and 120 for open motorboats. Pontoon boats experienced 33, and cabin motorboats had 11 — almost as many as stand-up paddleboards that year.

"Boaters on pontoons and cabin cruisers tend to not wear life jackets," Insalaco says. "Again, there's that complacency; people think of these boats as if they're cars or RVs, but they don't behave like wheels-on-pavement. The risks are very different."

An important footnote: Immersions often happen at the dock while loading the boat (and there might not be someone right there to grab you before you go down). Put on your life jacket before you hit the dock and wear it while loading.

Beyond life jackets: Drills, education, gear

In addition to ensuring that everyone aboard is wearing a life jacket, another important step you can take to avoid tragedy is to train your crew to spot the person in the water and successfully execute an MOB recovery.

"Don't assume the skipper can do it," Insalaco says. "He might be the one in the water."

Drills are a good way to ensure everyone aboard will know what to do in an emergency. Throw a life jacket into the water, have the entire crew shout "man overboard," teach the spotter to point at and keep an eye on the MOB at all times, and have the driver work through the correct maneuvers for recovery.

It's always advisable to pursue boater education courses like the USPS' Jump Start program, which allows you to get hands-on training and experience with your own boat.

"This kind of training needs to be boat-specific, because boats aren't one-size-fits-all," Insalaco says. "There are tremendous differences between large boats and small ones, open boats and cabin cruisers, and single and dual props, so if you've recently made a shift, consider seeking some extra training. You can even do a refresher through your local boating club."

Boaters also should consider adding gear that will aid in MOB recovery. Bringing a potentially injured person



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back into the boat, for example, can present unexpected challenges.

"If you're a 130-pound woman and you need to recover a 220-pound man, how are you going to do it?" Insalaco asks. "In a sailboat, you can use a life sling and a halyard; it's going to be a lot harder in a small, open motorboat. You might have to put someone in the water to help the MOB back into the boat, especially if he or she is injured."

If you typically double-hand your vessel, you'll need to devise a system for one partner to recover the other. A blanket or cargo net will allow one person to lift 200 pounds or more. You also can find davit devices with harnesses.

The right gear includes electronics. Making waves this year is CrewWatcher, manufactured and distributed by Weems & Plath and now carried by major marine retailers. Winner of the 2017 *Sail Magazine* Pittman Innovation Award, 2017 DAME Design Award and 2018 NMMA Innovation Award, this app-based alarm system has two components: A smartphone application and a small beacon that can be worn by each person on-board.

If a crewmember goes into the water, an alarm will sound. The app automatically provides the latitude and longitude where the MOB occurred, and it will guide the rescuer back to that point using the device's GPS system.

"CrewWatcher was developed by two young Dutchmen with expertise in creating easy-to-use, intuitive smartphone

systems," says Drew Fleming, vice president of sales for Weems & Plath and an experienced sailor. "One has a father-in-law who is an offshore sailor. He and a buddy were planning a trip and they wanted a system that would immediately alert one person if something happened to the other."

Here's how it works. The CrewWatcher app sends a signal to the beacon every second. If the beacon doesn't answer after five seconds (or if its water-immersion sensor is tripped), the alarm will sound immediately. If you've linked your boat's marine stereo to your phone, the alarm will be magnified through the speakers.

The app records the "point of loss" — when the Bluetooth signal breaks or water immersion occurs. After the alarm, the app uses the virtual "MOB Compass" to guide the rescuer back to that point of loss. Because the alarm sounds almost immediately, the MOB is not likely to have drifted significantly, even though contact was broken during this phase.

Once you get close to the MOB, CrewWatcher will attempt to reconnect with its beacon, and it will let you know when that connection has been re-established. This is particularly helpful in rough sea conditions, or if you're approaching the person bow-first instead of backing down.

Even with CrewWatcher on-board, Fleming and Insalaco both agree on the importance of training and regular MOB drills.

"People always think, 'Oh, it's not going to happen to me,'" Fleming says. "Good, seasoned boaters walk through all the 'what-if' situations with their own boats, step by step." ★

For more information about USPS, including available courses, visit AMERICASBOATINGCLUB.ORG. For details about CrewWatcher, check out CREWWATCHER.COM.

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