

WANTED: Responsible Boaters

Responsibility on the water is more than just about lifejackets

By John P. Whelan, United States Coast Guard Auxiliary

"Boat Smart. Boat Safe. Wear It," says the National Safe Boating Campaign with its graphic showing a person wearing a lifejacket. Lifejackets or, "personal flotation devices," worn while boating have shown they do save peoples' lives. But the campaign message and other initiatives are much more than just about lifejackets; it's about boaters' need to boat more responsibly.

"You're in Command. Boat Responsibly!" is the U.S. Coast Guard's national boating safety outreach initiative launched in 2004. "You're in Command" is designed to help boaters become aware that they are "in command" and "responsible" for their actions while on the water. The outreach specifies the four principles of boating safety as: *Boat smart from the start wear your lifejacket; Educated boaters save lives – take a boating safety course; Safe boats save lives – get a free Vessel Safety Check; (from your Coast Guard Auxiliary or U.S. Power Squadrons. See www.vesselsafetycheck.org); and Sober boaters save lives – don't boat under the influence of drugs or alcohol.*

Whether you're the captain of a ship, the skipper on a boat, or just the family leader at the helm for the day, you are the person responsible for the safety and security of all persons onboard, for damage to property, and people you might injure or affect by your boat's course or its wake. Thus, you have a duty and legal obligation to be a person of trust and reliability and to earn that level of respect you must know what you are doing and demonstrate it through example and practice.

To a degree, unmatched by many other forms of transportation, passengers and other boaters are dependent on your skills, conduct and professional approach to boating. According to the Coast Guard, of those persons involved in fatal boating accidents, nearly 70% of them had no formal training in boat handling or safety. They also have one thing in common with many motorists who do not buckle-up; 80% do not wear lifejackets.

By the same token, being the passenger on a boat also bears some accountability as an individual, but not necessarily in the legal sense. For example, wearing a lifejacket is not only boating smart, it's about the boater staying alive. "It is time for recreational boaters to accept personal responsibility for their actions - to boat responsibly," says the Coast Guard's Office of Boating Safety. "Boaters need to understand that lifejackets save lives, that there is rarely time to reach for a stowed lifejacket in an emergency," says John Malatak, Chief of Programs Operations Division for the United States Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard's boating accident fatality report indicates that more men and women would be alive today if they had just done the responsible thing and worn their lifejackets. According to 2004 U.S. Coast Guard statistics, out of 676 recreational boating fatalities, 484 persons drowned, 109 were related to alcohol, and 383 or 57% were the result of capsizing or falls overboard. Of those, a total of 431 persons were not wearing a lifejacket when the incident or mishap occurred. Overall, statistics also show that approximately 4% of accidents are due to equipment failures or malfunctions, 33% are attributed to the environment, and 63% are a result of human error.

There is good news; the boating industry has responded with more choices in personal flotation devices today than ever before. Modern life jackets are smaller, lighter, more comfortable, colorful, and customized for each type of boating activity. Inflatable models are perhaps the least bulky of all PFD types. It contains a small amount of inherent buoyancy and an inflatable chamber. When inflated, its performance is equal to a Type I, II or III. This makes an excellent choice for sportsmen like hunters and anglers but also for the general boater too.

While much of the boating industry and their consumers prefer not to have mandatory PFD wear on recreational boats placed upon them through laws and regulations (like seatbelt laws are for safety in automobiles), the growing trend is leaning towards mandatory boating safety education. A growing list of states, now have mandatory boater education laws passed for certain vessel types and/or age of the operator, or they are currently developing one.

With motor vehicles, wearing seatbelts, safety equipment in working condition, and safe operation are imperative. Just like driving an automobile, vessel operators are also legally responsible for a number of mechanical and operative procedures on boats. Boat operators are required to carry specific Federal and state safety equipment like the proper number of lifejackets for each person, fire extinguishers in working condition, sound producing devices, visual distress signals, proper displaying of registration numbers, etc. While underway, properly displaying of navigation lights at night, giving correct sound signals when required, and observing no-wake zones and other restricted areas are standard operating procedures for boat operators. In addition, completing accident reports, providing assistance to others in distress, properly disposing of trash, oil, and other pollutants, and overall safe handling of the boat in any condition simply cannot be ignored. The boat's overall condition is equally important. Ventilation systems should be working, and if required, the backfire flame control should be in working condition to prevent a potential hazard.

Finally, boating under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol even in small amounts can be a recipe for disaster. Unlike being on land, operating a boat is as dangerous, if not more dangerous, than driving a car while intoxicated. Alcohol not only depresses the central nervous system, in conditions where your senses are further challenged by weather conditions and other stressors, a boater's

performance at the helm is more diminished by the effects of the environment. Such factors like heat of the sun, glare, rain, wind, carbon monoxide exposure, and the motion of the waves, and other factors like noise and vibration all affect performance.

“If boaters accepted personal responsibility for their actions and the actions of their passengers they would not drink and boat,” says Malatak. “They would not subject themselves, their passengers, or other boaters to accidents and fatalities caused by impaired reaction time and judgment.”

Current Coast Guard statistics reveal that approximately 33% of recreational boating fatalities in 2004 involved alcohol. Stated another way, 223 people may have died in just one year because they or the boat operator was impaired. As horrific as this fact is, it represents only part of the impact of BUI.

The bottom line is, responsibility does matter, and it should apply not only to those with a legal obligation to others safety but also to those with a personal obligation to themselves. It is assumed that the people who perished in past boating incidents probably did not plan to die. Each one of those fatalities represents a devastating loss to family and loved ones. Each one was probably preventable in some manner.

Wearing a lifejacket while boating is a person’s first line of defense and perhaps, in some cases, a person’s last line of defense as well. Safety education is paramount to operating anything with a motor or used to transport others. Safety equipment in vehicles and boats are standard features and when it comes to driving under the influence, ‘knowing when to say when’ is just not enough these days. The most important safety feature and standard today is a sober operator and one who boats responsibly.

Recreational boating is truly one of America’s favorite pastimes, a growing family sport, a way of life for others, and a freedom we all should continue to enjoy. But with great power comes great responsibility and then some, and, we owe it to others and ourselves to stay the course and be responsible on the water.

For more information about recreational boating safety and boating accident statistics, visit www.uscgboating.org .

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