

The First Sail

Written by Jack Northrup

My first sail on my newly purchased 1977 Pearson 323 was supposed to be a happy experience, filled with subtle lessons learned, silent speed, and successfully applied book-knowledge. I had purchased the boat only a week earlier, knowing little if anything about sailing larger boats. Our boat - Surprise - was moored on Lake Champlain in Vermont, with views across the Lake to the Adirondacks of New York.



As I dinghied out to the boat with my wife Ronnie for our inaugural first sail, three things were controlling my behavior. First was the terror/adrenaline charge similar to what I felt last summer as I climbed aboard a plane to skydive for the first time at age 47. My middle son Jamie, age 23, wanted to skydive for his birthday and he had no one to go with (who would pay for him). So I volunteered to go. The fear increases as the plane ascends and when the door opens and you look down 15,000 feet, you become overwhelmed by a certain uneasy feeling. I was getting that same feeling as I grabbed Surprise's transom from the dinghy.

Second was the reassurance of safety, and to me this meant an engine. How bad could it get as long as the engine worked, I wondered? I could always leave the engine running the whole time we went on our first sail, just in case.

And last was some level of security, because even though Ronnie knew less than me about sailing - and I knew almost nothing-she thought that although I was nuts for buying the boat, I must know what I am doing because I'm a guy, right? Having her there as my cheering section amounted to some psychological insurance, however misplaced her confidence was.

So as I climbed aboard, safety and security, no matter how lamely rationalized, were winning the battle over terror and adrenaline.

From behind the wheel, the boat felt like an aircraft carrier. With a car, you can always muscle the wheel to get it to turn. Cars always responds - and quickly. Responsiveness in a boat is measured differently, much differently, as I was soon to find out. I started the engine and we headed out, threading our way out through the minefield of moored boats.

We were five minutes out, still motoring, when I began to mentally construct the list of things we had forgot to bring - the cell phone, cooler, reading material, and the Lake chart. So I made the decision that we should turn around and get them.

My confidence had been building during each one of the five minutes of motoring, so I spun the boat around and headed back to the mooring. We decided that Ronnie would steer the boat through the mooring fields, and I would go up with the boat hook to grab the mooring line. That all seemed like a good plan.

We hit the mooring field at four knots. About 20 yards away from our mooring, I realized that our speed was too fast to hook the line. I yelled back, recalling having read something about hand signals. Then a quick look up told me that there were three boats in a line waiting for us if I missed picking up the line.

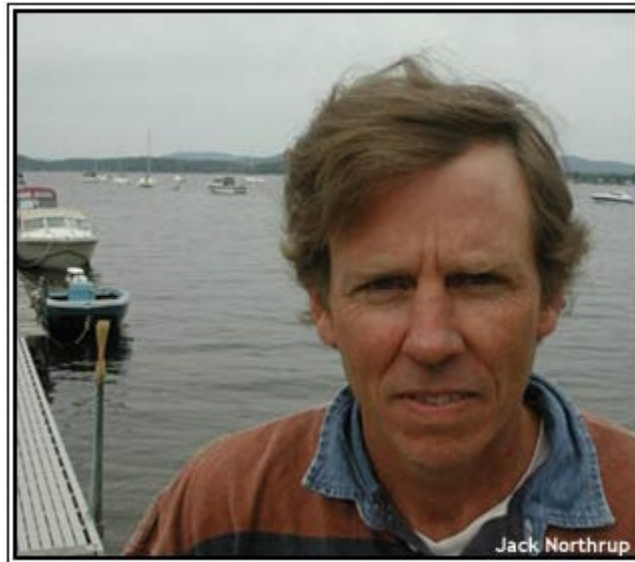
As we whizzed by the mooring, I snagged the line perfectly. Then I quickly stood up, and calmly walked toward the cleat with the line in my hand. Halfway there, the boat hook and line (and what feels like part of my arm) got jerked away and flew into the water. I can't remember now what I yelled at the time.

We were then approaching three nice boats at at least three knots. The first thing I thought about was the inevitable scene of leaving a message on a guy's boat. 'Hi, I'm Jack. I'm new here. I just bought my boat, and I hit yours. I have no clue what I am doing. Please call me at...' With three boats in front of me, I immediately ran through three movies in my mind, with three different guys.

I didn't think about insurance, which is probably what I should have been doing. But as time slowed and we continued moving toward the neighbor's boats, Surprise took a slight spin and got yanked to a dead stop, engine and all, our bow just six feet from the bow of one of the neighboring boats - a 45-foot fiberglass palace.

The mooring rope had wrapped around the prop, causing the engine to stop. I figured this out right away, as I could see the taut line under the water yanking the back of the boat. I was convinced that within seconds the prop and the shaft would be ripped out and the boat would sink quickly. I also knew that even

though the boat would sink, about 27 feet of the mast would still be sticking above the water.



But the boat wasn't sinking. Everything was calm. I looked at Ronnie, who sensed that things had not gone according to plan, and said, self-pityingly "This is just like everything else in my life...it just doesn't work out." She was the optimist. She said, cheerily, "Look, what do we need to get that rope off? A mask? There's a hardware store up the road, I'll go get a mask while you figure out your miserable life."

So, Ronnie dinghied ashore as I sat there figuring out my miserable life. Then I realized that not only was the boat not sinking, but also I had a mask on board and I could use that to investigate the problem. I found the mask, put it on, and climbed overboard, down the stern ladder. The water, at 50 degrees Fahrenheit, was indeed cold. Too late. I dove under and after about three or four attempts, I was just about finished unwrapping the rope from around the propeller. Then I realized that with one more turn the boat would be loose, with no one on board. I congratulated myself on being so smart and so stupid at once, and then rewrapped the mooring line around the prop shaft.

Then I went back on deck to rig up a line from the bow cleat to the mooring shackle. I climbed back down into the water, swam over to the mooring, tied the new rope to the top of the mooring shackle, swam back to my boat, dove under, and began to untie the rope from the propeller. With a little help from the slack water, I undid the final wrap around the propeller.

The boat cut loose and I remembered that I had to get back on board. So I quickly swam to the stern ladder, hopped up, and watched everything work smoothly. The boat headed up into the wind and I pulled in the excess line from the foredeck. In a minute we were tied up and secure.

I immediately started thinking that, of course, the prop shaft must be horribly bent and the next time I started the engine and put it in forward, it would gyroscope out of control and auger a hole in the boat, probably pulling the engine through the hull and down to the bottom of the lake. I asked myself, should I start the engine now and find out, or just enjoy the silence, secure in the knowledge that I would not be needing to introduce myself to my neighbors via notes on the cabin door? Why push my luck? At the time, I was only down one boat hook.

Ronnie came paddling back shortly after that. Of course, the outboard motor on the dinghy had quit for her return trip from the hardware store so she was using a two-ended kayak paddle to move an eight-foot rubber dinghy and a dead motor a quarter of a mile. While she was getting on board, I was trying to determine if we could salvage any remaining joy out of the adventure - remember, this was going to be our inaugural sail.



“How did it go at the hardware store?” I asked her. She pulled out the mask from a bag and said: “Well, I walked in there and asked if they sell diving masks. The man at the counter said ‘Why, did your husband wrap his prop around a mooring line? We sell one of these a day in the beginning of sailing season.’ ”

Then I explained that I had fixed the problem and that all should be well for at least a little while. Then I said to her: “So, when do you want to go sailing again?”