

Forespar[®] Overboard Poles

10/13/05

“Man Overboard”! Two of the most feared words ever to be heard on board a boat.

For the many thousands of years people have plied the seas and to this day this one call can bring chills to the most seasoned sailor. These two words can cause panic or instant reaction, depending on how prepared the crew is and how much practice has been done in advance of the incident.

Preparation is the key. A crew that has practiced and prepared should not panic and be able to perform the needed functions for a successful retrieval. Some of the preparations are somewhat unique to your style boat. Others are time honored, basic methods that have been published dozens of times in magazines, books and flyers. It's the “unique to your boat” part that can be a problem. This is where the practice and preparation comes into play to make sure everyone knows his or her place and job during the procedure.

As mentioned, there are the accepted basics of a man overboard drill. The “quick stop” method is probably the most uniformly accepted “basic” maneuver used by sailors today. It simply makes sense to stop the boat as quickly as possible and return to the victim as fast as possible. Simple to visualize but not as easy to do! When you have everything flying, (main, staysail, jib or genoa, possibly a spinnaker) stopping the boat quickly is a bit harder than you think. Imagine if you're running before the trades in 20 knots plus with a 6 to 8 foot chop on top of a 20-foot ground swell. How do you stop the boat!

It is a fact that a boat moving at only 3 knots will be 50 feet away from a person in the water in only 10 seconds. 50 feet may not sound very far but in any chop at all, the person may as well be a mile away. Try finding a coconut in a chop. A person's head is not much bigger! Even with flotation and wild arm waving, if there is any kind of seas up, it's going to be very hard to keep a visual on the person, especially while trying to stop the boat, drop sails (remember that spinnaker!) and sail or power back. Now do it all at night!

This is why a Man Overboard Pole (or, to be politically correct, a Person Overboard Pole) is a vital component in the safety package arsenal on any boat going offshore. An overboard pole puts a flag (code flag “O”) a minimum of 9 feet off the water. This flag also has reflective tape for better nighttime visibility. With the overboard pole, you can see the flag/pole at a much farther distance and in rough seas far better than just a persons head and flailing arms. Used with a proper water light (automatic strobe light) the crew overboard has a far better chance of being found, assuming all the gear goes into the water within a few seconds of the person going overboard. Remember the 50 feet in 10 seconds at only 3 knots of boat speed. Every second counts!

Storage or placement of the pole is important. They come in three pieces (for easy shipping) and should be assembled and ready to deploy at all times. You don't want to have to have someone dive below to find the overboard pole, put it

together and bring it on deck in an emergency! It should be rigged in such a manner as to be immediately deployable with a minimum of fuss. Every crewmember on board should fully understand how to deploy the pole. You never know who will be closest to the pole when an event happens. If only one or two people on board are the “overboard pole deployment people”, what happens when they are off watch or below eating or in the head when you go overboard. Not a pretty thought.

The overboard pole is designed to be stored vertically up a backstay or mizzen shroud or along the lifelines horizontally. The bottom and the top of the poles need to be supported so they do not whip themselves to pieces in a seaway. Poles that are placed in rod holders or PVC tubes and not supported at the top can fracture with the constant leverage and motion. Also, the storage “mounts” must allow the pole to be deployed quickly without the need to untie or disconnect anything. Proper mounts and upper “flag tubes” are made and available for this purpose. They allow the pole to simply be lifted and dropped over the side. There are also safety packages available that not only mount the pole but also house the other safety items (water light, horseshoe buoy, whistle, drogue, etc.) as well.

Now back to the “unique to your boat” part from earlier. There are hundreds of different styles of boats, all with different cockpit arrangements, stern shapes, dodgers and biminis, boom gallows, railings, mizzen mast, helm stations and any number of winch placements, railings and push pits. All this can change your particular requirements in mounting and deploying the pole and the rest of the overboard equipment. This is why, in recent years, the Life Sling has become so popular.

Lets consider the Life Sling for a moment. It is very good at what it was designed for-retrieving a person in the water. What it lacks is the ability to find the person to retrieve! If you do the “loop-to-loop” that they instruct you to do but the person is not within that “loop”, what then? How do you find them? We are back to the overboard pole! Used with the Life Sling, an overboard pole allows you to find the person and loop around them while dragging the sling. The overboard pole gives you a visual reference that you do not have with the Life Sling alone.

Many offshore race categories require a man overboard pole. The Trans-Pacific Yacht Club recognizes this need and requires a Man Overboard Pole on every boat in the Transpac race. Many other offshore races also require overboard poles.

For all the reasons mentioned above, the overboard pole is an inexpensive life-saving tool that should be part of any boat’s safety equipment. Going offshore or just down the coast, the overboard pole should be ready to deploy in a moments notice. Even with a Life Sling or other equipment (horseshoe buoy, ring buoy, rescue throw-ropes, PFD’s, etc.) Without one, you will be hard pressed to find the person in the water to retrieve.