

# Skipper Winter Refit A Few Suggestions

When the boat is laid up for the winter, there are chores and upgrades that can be done, but how about an upgrade for the skipper? While there's no end to what one can learn, here are some basic, vital skills that can be practiced and perfected while waiting patiently for spring.

For most of these basic skills, the information you need to know can be found in books such as *Chapman Piloting and Seamanship* and the *U.S. Coast Guard Navigation Rules*. If your boat is longer than 39 feet overall, you are required to have a copy of USCG Navigation Rules onboard [www.uscgboating.org/regulations/navigation\\_rules.aspx](http://www.uscgboating.org/regulations/navigation_rules.aspx) but it's a useful reference source for any boater. In the meantime, why not use the downtime over winter to brush up on:

**Whistle Signals.** Remember last summer when the tug pushing that barge full of coal gave you a call on the VHF and said he would pass you "on two toots"? Uh-oh, were two toots starboard or port? Whistle signals are as much a part of being a safe mariner as not running aground. They're a quick and precise means of one skipper telling any nearby boats and bridge tenders just what his intentions are.

**Navigation Lights.** With horn signals down pat, consider going over the rules for navigation lights as well. This is a bit more complex, because lights can tell you the size of the boat, its direction of travel, and, to a certain extent, its speed. You can learn if the boat is engaged in trawling, towing, perhaps minesweeping, or maybe it's dead in the water. These are all important things to know, and could literally save your life late some night a few miles offshore with a containership's lights clearing the horizon and seeming to be headed your way.

**Preventing Collisions.** Now that you've brushed up on your whistle signals and lights, make sure your understanding of the NAV Rules is thorough and complete. While some boaters simplify the rules for avoiding collisions to a single, tonnage-based rule (the bigger the boat, the more right of way it has), the complex reality of

sharing the water with ferry boats, tugs, sportfishing boats, maybe a Panamax containership, and a sailboat barely doing five knots means everyone needs to know what is expected of them.

**"With all of that information securely stowed in your mind, you will have a season's head start on the lifelong learning that is part of the joy of being out on the water."**

**VHF Channels.** Spin the channel selection on your VHF radio and there are, depending on your radio, as many as 58 VHF channels, but only a few of them are for everyday use. Learn the channels for recreational mariners and use the proper channel.

The owner's manual that came with your radio will list the channels and their intended use. For recreational mariners, there are less than a dozen channels that you will need regularly.

**A Boating Course.** You can brush up on all of the above and more by taking a boating course. The BoatUS Foundation offers a non-proctored course and exam ([www.boatus.org/onlinecourse](http://www.boatus.org/onlinecourse)) that has been approved by the National Association of Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) and is recognized by the U.S. Coast Guard as exceeding the minimum requirements for the National Recreational Boating Safety Program. The US Coast Guard Auxiliary and the Power Squadron also offer free courses to non-members.

**Six Basic Knots.** The definition of a good knot is that it has to be easy to tie and untie, and does the job for which it is intended with a minimal loss of rope strength. Despite what the old guy down the dock says, you need only master a few knots to take care of your crew and your boat. These are (with room for disagreement): the bowline, the square knot, the figure-eight knot, the clove hitch, the overhand knot, and the half-hitch. Without getting too deeply into the subject, all knots reduce the strength of the rope by 20 to 40 percent. Tie a proper knot and you minimize the loss of strength.

1. The bowline is probably the basic sailor's knot. It can make a loop to attach the anchor or to get a crewmember back onboard. The bowline is the same knot as the sheet bend, used to attach two ropes.
2. The square knot is used to attach something to the rope. It is an overhand knot done twice, and is also called a reef knot, used by sailors to tie in a reefed sail.
3. The figure-eight knot is used as a "stopper knot" to prevent ropes from running through a block and are also used to tie two ropes together, with the joining rope following the course of the first knot.
4. The clove hitch is very useful for tying a rope onto a fixed object without putting slack in the rope.
5. The overhand knot is a basic knot, half of a square knot and is also used to join two ropes together, just like the figure-eight knot.
6. The half-hitch is a basic knot used as a "security knot" to tie off existing knots or as a simple, quick, and temporary attachment to a fixed object.

There is no shortage of books that can show you how to tie these knots. Two lengths of rope, two or three feet long, will suffice for practicing. Learn to tie these knots instinctively in the dark and you will be prepared for nearly anything on a boat involving lines.

With all of that information securely stowed in your mind, you will have a season's head start on the lifelong learning that is part of the joy of being out on the water. 🦋