Moving along nicely

Sailing onto a pontoon or a moored boat is an important skill to master and practicing it can help your students to feel in command of their vessel at all times and not just when surrounded by obstruction-free open water. Simon Winkley, RYA Coach/Assessor unlocks the core skills and finer coaching points for coming alongside both a pontoon and a moored powerboat in tidal and non-tidal waters.

Students should follow the sequence of:

» Plan
» Approach (the target)
» Manoeuvre (against the target)
» Escape ('plan B' should something go wrong)

Moored boats – no tide

A great way to coach coming alongside is from a moored safety boat. Get students to aim for the opposite side to which they are approaching from to give a clear escape route if required. Ask them to imagine there is a buoy on the rear quarter of the safety boat on the non-approach side and to aim for it. Once the imaginary buoy is by their windward shroud they can simply use the last bit of boat speed to steer upwind alongside the moored boat.

When leaving, jib-backing can be practiced to turn the boat onto the correct course until boat speed allows the rudder to take over.

Pontoons – no tide

If the wind is blowing down the length of the pontoon, a simple approach across the wind onto either side can be made, turning into the wind to slow down.

If the wind is blowing square onto the long side of the pontoon several types of approach can be made:

1. **Onto the end**
   This gives a small landing area yet has good escape route options.
2. **Onto the windward side**
   This is not recommended as boat speed is difficult to reduce and hull damage is more likely. In addition, the boom will end up right over the pontoon which can cause rig damage if the underside of the boom strikes it. It may also be impossible to fully de-power the sail as the boom can press against the leeward shroud.
3. **Onto the leeward side**
   This is a useful option but has the pitfall of leaving the bow pointing directly at the pontoon. It will be difficult for both the helm and crew to safely get around the mast, move across the bow and step onto the pontoon. It is likely that the boat, once stopped, will drift frustratingly backwards and possibly onto the shore.

A leeward side pontoon landing needs either a very slow approach on a very shallow angle or a ¾ tack to be carefully executed just before making contact. Fully sheeting out the mainsail can be a problem either way as the boom will press onto the shroud. So, in this case, a swift hop out onto the pontoon to hold the boat by the bow is required to prevent it powering up again.

If the wind is blowing away from the pontoon at an angle, an approach from one side will work with a ¾ tack to land safely, while an approach from the other side will set the boat onto a broad reach as it comes alongside. Avoid the latter version at all costs!

Promote the importance of managing any loose mainsheet, especially on a boat with a stern traveller. Snagging it on a horn cleat or other pontoon feature on the approach could bring the boat to a very abrupt halt. When leaving a pontoon it could even swing the boat onto a run and force a gybe with potentially harmful consequences!

With the wind blowing away from the pontoon at 45° - a ¾ tack positions the boat perfectly alongside with sails de-powered

Omitting the ¾ tack, however, sets the boat on a broad reach with the boom pressed against the shroud

Tidal considerations

If the tide is moving in the same direction as the wind, any of the methods above will work with a little distance adjustment to allow for the tide.

If wind and tide are opposed, it may be necessary to sail upwind, swiftly lower the mainsail and use the jib to sail the boat downwind against the tide and alongside the pontoon or boat. Failing to lower the mainsail can cause the boat to power-up on landing as the tide swings the hull around.

Coming alongside the windward side of a pontoon or boat is less likely to damage a boat than with the mainsail up and reduces the chances of missing the target with only a jib for power.

Visual learning

Using simple models in a briefing/debriefing will create a visual understanding of any of the above methods. Back this up with accurate instructor demonstrations (with the students either on the pontoon or sat in the moored boat) to clarify the coaching points and to enhance learning.

Alongside a moored boat is a convenient position to receive feedback