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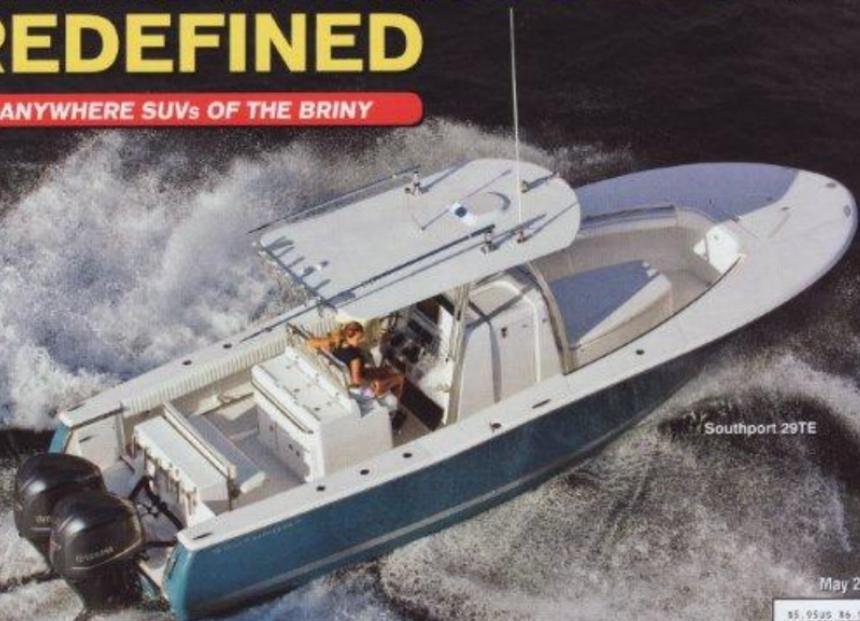
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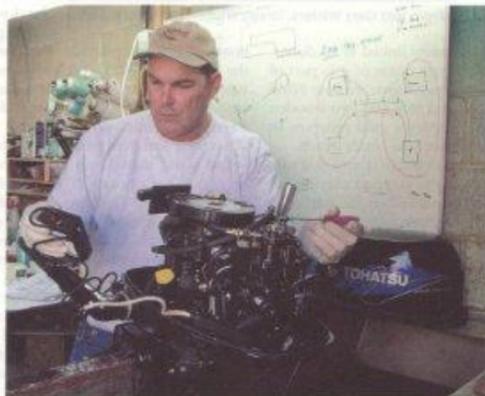
By Jack Sherwood

My newfound interest in outboard engines

I must confess that I am one of those boaters who do not thoroughly read the operational manual that comes with a new outboard. I have paid a price through the decades for this negligence, even though I usually blame any malfunction on the engine, not on myself.

My life with outboards began in the mid-1960s with one of the simplest engines, a British Seagull that pushed along my first boat, a 17-foot daysailer that I rescued from a scrap pile for \$100. As I recall, the accompanying literature described this import as having only three moving parts. But this, I soon discovered, did not include the fourth moving part: the operator forever pulling the starter cord.

Through the years, as my expertise in single-handed sailing improved, my technical abilities with outboards went nowhere because I prefer sailing over motoring. I was not interested in outboards and did little to keep them operating properly, short of paying hundreds of dollars to mechanics every spring. This all changed in March 2011, when I decided to buy a new outboard online and pledged to follow all of the instructions in the operator's manual. So far, this has paid off. I made it a point to study the manual after ordering my long-shaft 5-hp Tohatsu 4-stroke. I was meticulous this time in following the 10-hour break-in procedure, and the Tohatsu has performed quite well.



Chuck Holm gave the Bay Tripper's Tohatsu 4-stroke some TLC and showed him how to care for it.

After hauling out at Casa Rio Marina for the winter, I engaged the resident engine mechanic, Chuck Holm, to winterize my outboard and perform all of the necessary flushing, oil and lubrication steps. I also asked this factory-trained Tohatsu wizard to show me what he did, why he did it and how he did it. Maybe next year, when the hourly repair rate could hit \$100, I can do the job myself. It was not as complicated as I thought it would be, even for someone like me, who is ignorant in most ways of mechanical operations.

It turns out I could have taken the outboard to Holm when I bought it and had him do the prep and break-in — free of charge. However, that could have delayed the season, so I faithfully followed the owner's instruction manual and did the important break-in myself.

Toward the end of last season, I reported to Holm that the engine would sometimes shift from neutral to forward by itself at the dock once I got it started. He soon found the problem and replaced what I thought was my quite clever modification to the gear lever.

My outboard sits in a well in the lazarette, and it was a clumsy maneuver for me to reach down to engage the small gearshift lever. So I cobbled together a foot-long wooden handle over the lever with two stainless-steel tangs securely bolted in place and strapped in with three hose clamps. Holm says this somewhat clunky and heavy rig threw the delicate gearshift off balance, hence the problem of moving forward while still tied at the dock. His solution was to fabricate a lightweight lever extension of aluminum and adjust the balance accordingly.

He guided me through the myriad mysteries of outboards and I followed his every move. From now on, I will use Nissan/Tohatsu oil and gear lube products and use only quality gasoline. I will follow the manual when starting and adjust the throttle accordingly. "The mistake most people make with these low-horsepower 4-stroke motors is that they don't pull out the choke enough," he explains. "It's also a good idea to pop the fuel line and let the gas run out."

I have learned the hard way that when an outboard fails, it usually happens at the worst possible time. Years ago, cruising through the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal to Lewes, Del., and into Rehoboth Bay, my engine conked out while I was barreling along in Delaware Bay with a favorable outgoing tide. Fortunately, a cruiser in a 50-foot sailboat took me under tow and dropped me off just outside the Lewes Canal entry.

I had been under way for more than 14 hours and, by the time I reached this inland canal, it was dark and I was thoroughly exhausted. I tied up at an abandoned dock and crashed for the night, awakening the next morning hard ground and heeled way over in a foot of water. I found an outboard mechanic who fixed the problem, and the cruise continued through the Lewes-Rehoboth Canal.

Another outboard failure came as I was homeward bound in a dead calm and drifted into a restricted zone at the nuclear power plant at Cove Point, near Solomons. Workers on the platform shouted warn-

ings, and I tried to answer them. A light breeze eventually picked up, however, and I decided to sail back to the Patuxent River and spend the night in St. Leonard Creek.

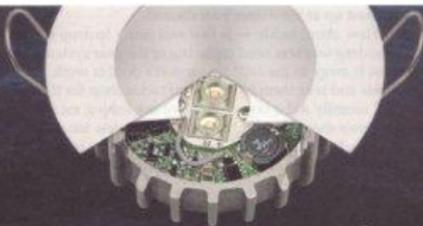
Late that afternoon, just a mile or so from the creek entrance, a sudden 40-knot squall from the northwest filled the waters of the river with whitecaps. As I clawed down my mainsail on the windward deck, I recall looking back and watching my starboard cockpit coaming go under water.

After hours of heaving into shifting, white-capped head winds, I finally reached St. Leonard Creek at dusk, only to be met by light head winds, forcing many tacks to finally reach Vera's White Sands Marina by paddling in a dead calm. I tied up, dumped the sails and collapsed, exhausted, for the night.

On another occasion, an old 2-stroke performed magnificently but noisily from the Rappahannock River to Solomons in a dead calm in 100-degree temperatures — a cruise of 75 miles or so in a haze of heat. My crew, son Scott and Gibson Island yachtsman J.P. Watson, made the cruise less boring with their endless conversation, and they also took turns at the helm. When we landed in Solomons late at night we found a Chinese restaurant that was open, and I fell sound asleep at the table. Despite my ambivalence toward outboards, they sometimes are a sailor's best friend. ■

Jack Sherwood is writer at large for Soundings.

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