Launching and retrieving a small boat

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As stated in last month’s article about backing a trailer, the best time to practice launching and retrieving is during lousy weather when there are few boats at the ramp. Wind is a major headache when retrieving a boat, so choose either a very sheltered ramp or a day when there is little wind and just rain or cloud keeping most punters off the water.

I will focus on small boats (under 4.5m), as once you get over this size by far the best method of retrieval is drive-on, drive-off. That is also good for small boats but most small trailers don’t have rollers suitable for drive-on.

Preparation is the key to easy boat handling and one of the major ingredients is a launch rope. This length of heavy (at least 12mm) rope makes handling a boat at the ramp a breeze. Splice, or have someone splice, a loop on one end that will just slip over the cross bollard, or splice in a quick release clip. Now take good note of the next piece of advice. Cut the rope so it doesn’t quite reach the prop on the outboard. Inevitably even the most experienced boatie will one day forget to toss the launch rope in the boat, or as happened to me recently, will be taking out a green horn and forget to check that he tossed the rope in the boat. Ropes around props are something to be avoided at all costs, because it can end up costing you big time.

Develop a set ritual that you have thought through in advance, so even when you are half asleep at 4am you can still remember it. This also helps with your speed at the ramp. There is nothing more annoying to boaties than people fiddling around on the ramp. You should be in or out in a matter of minutes.

Bungs (or should I say no bungs) are often a problem, so develop the habit of putting them in at home, unless it is raining. Check the tie downs, motor support strut, winch, trailer lights and safety chain before leaving home. On the boat, run through your switches for nav lights, internal lights, bilge pump and electronics. If it has been more than a week since you last used the boat, run the motor to check that it starts easily, before leaving home.

Once at the ramp remove the trailer lights if necessary, the outboard support and tie down, at the top of the ramp. DO NOT remove the safety chain until the boat is at the bottom of the ramp. I have seen and heard too many stories of boats ending up on the ramp because the winch let go on the slope of the ramp. A gal chain and D-shackle is far better than rope for a safety chain but make sure it is kept lubricated enough to be operated by hand. Having to get in the boat or car to find pliers wastes time.

Remove the trailer lights etc in the rigging lane, if there is one, or away from the ramp a bit so boats can continue to get in and out while you prepare for launching. Nothing is more likely to get you a mouth full from an impatient boatie than doing all this at the bottom of the ramp.

If at all possible try launching your boat without immersing the axle in the water. That will depend on the size of the boat and type of trailer, but it should be possible with most boats under 4.5m. The secret is to use the launch rope to slow down the launch. (More on that later.) The reason for this is your wheel bearings will last a lot longer, to say nothing of the trailer itself. While on bearings, every few trips put your hand on the bearing case when you get to the ramp, or home, and check the temperature. If you can’t comfortably hold your hand on the casing then the bearings are overheating, usually from lack of grease. Time to service or replace them.

Before undoing the safety chain, run one wrap of the launch rope around the winch support with the loop going down. If you run the loop up you end up with a half hitch that locks down as the boat slides off. Undo the safety chain, and release the winch while holding firmly to the launch rope. Your rollers should be lubricated enough, and set up, so a small push will see the boat on its way. All you have to do then is slow the launch with the rope so the stern doesn’t bang onto the ramp as it slides off. It doesn’t do transducers, live bait pick-ups or the hull any good to hit the concrete ramp!

Once at the ramp remove the trailer lights, at the top of the ramp. DO NOT remove the internal lights, bilge pump and electronics. If it has been more than a week since you last used the boat, run the motor to check that it starts smoothly before leaving home.

Always start the motor and make sure it is running smoothly before pushing off from the ramp. You don’t have to be boating long before you see people paddling back to the ramp after a false start.

Figure out before returning to the ramp, where you put the car keys and who is backing the car down. Put the launch rope back one the cross bollard and be ready for action when you hit the ramp. While the car is coming, turn off all the boat electronics like sounder, radio, nav lights and bilge. With two people, one works the car and the winch while the other lines the boat up on the trailer. Try and position the boat so it is on the up-wind and/or up-current side of the trailer. Use the launch rope to hold the nose on the first roller and push the boat around until it is straight. The person controlling the boat should expect to, and be prepared to, get at least their legs wet. If alone use the launch rope to hold the nose on the first roller until the winch takes upon the tension.

Once the boat is winched up, screw on the D-shackle on the safety chain before moving off the ramp to the rigging lane. Reverse the procedure you used when preparing to launch, making sure bungs are removed and placed somewhere they won’t bounce out on the way home. Check that clothing or anything likely to blow out when doing 100 km/h down the road is stowed away.
Have two or three run-throughs with the whole procedure from arriving at the ramp to leaving the ramp and you will feel very confident when you launch on that first fishing trip. Good luck and remember the six P’s. Prior Preparation Prevents Possible Poor Performance!

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