

An Homage to Cleats (with some thoughts on securing your boat to a dock)

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Those of us who mess around in boats have the joy of using certain items which the shore based world just never gets introduced to. There are pieces of gear that are so perfectly evolved over time, so brilliant in their use, so simple and versatile, and so ubiquitous, that we ourselves barely think of them or know they are there. Cleats are one such piece of gear. The inventor is surely lost in the mists of time, but every manufacturer has “perfected” a version; you can see the various permutations on any stroll through a marina. But they all work alike. (For those uncertain about the proper way to belay a line to a cleat, see note* at end.)

This article is not only an homage to this little heralded piece of boat gear, but includes suggestions on the proper (and by proper, I mean safest, easiest and most seamanlike) way to use them. It includes a challenge to the habits of many boaters which might be disconcerting at first, but may be very much appreciated when our everyday weather gets ugly and we need to access our cleats’ every attribute.

For the moment, let’s just think about the amazing feats a cleat can accomplish. It can belay (secure) a line that will hold in a hurricane. The belay is quick and easy to execute safely, and, more importantly, quick and easy to cast off. Even better, one can surge (bleed off and loosen) the line safely and with perfect control. Just sit with this a moment: a perfectly secure belay which is easy and safe to surge a few inches or to cast off completely. And you can safely do so even when the line is under great pressure. That is an impressive achievement. Caveats are few: common sense dictates that line size must be appropriate to cleat size; lines must be a reasonable length, strong, and with no knots or splices; and some of the modern slippery lines benefit from an extra figure eight loop prior to the half hitch. What a marvellous piece of gear it is.

However nowadays it is hard to buy a designated dock line *without* a spliced loop, which undermines most of those attributes of a cleat that make it so versatile. So many just use the loop and rarely think about it. Skippers I have talked to say that it is convenient to just drop the loop over the cleat either on the deck or the dock, and that instructions to guests are easy, which are valid comments. However, though a spliced loop may seem to be an innocuous aid to securing the boat, its use holds serious dangers to person and boat if the weather turns boisterous. And even at the most benign of times, there are real functional drawbacks.

Attaching and/or releasing a spliced eye from a cleat too often is attempted when the ship is moving and/or the line is too short for easy use. When pressure is about to be taken up on the line, often unexpectedly, pushing a loop under and around a cleat, prying the loop off, or pulling the loop to get it over the horn entails getting your hands and fingers in the middle of the action area, leading to injuries. On the other hand, belaying a dock line onto a cleat (vs dead-ending as a loop does) is always safe as fingers need never get between line and cleat, and control is gradually increased with each added turn of the line. As well, when you aren’t worrying about lines, you can focus on keeping the boat safe.

Just give the following scenarios a moment of your imagination.

Scene one: The wind is up and there is some chop, and boat safety dictates you leave the dock. Your crew is attempting to pry a spliced loop from a cleat. The ship is jumping about and the line is on again /off again slack and then loaded. It is tempting, maybe necessary, to release in a way that leads fingers and/or hand to being inserted between the rope and the cleat as the attempt is made to pull the loop clear of the cleat. Good timing and strength is often needed and if the boat jumps at the wrong moment, fingers will be mangled as the line mashes the hand into the cleat. Contrast this to releasing the hitch and lifting the line from the cleat allowing line to bleed off, or just undoing the belay with the line smoothly pulling away from the cleat. No strength necessary nor impeccable timing needed. Hands and fingers need never be between the rope and the cleat so are safe throughout the manoeuvre. A similar possibility of hand damage occurs when trying to secure a boat to a dock with a spliced line.

Scene two: You arrive at your destination late and tie up to the wharf anticipating a good night's sleep. Hours later you awaken with your vessel at a decided tilt and, proceeding to the deck, it becomes perfectly clear why: you did not leave enough slack in the dock lines to account for the dropping tide. Since you have eye splices on the cleats on the boat, you must clamber up the handy, but old, slippery and sea-weedy wharf ladder and figure how to loosen the belays to the wharf that were tied earlier, not easy fully tensioned. Much easier and safer to surge the line from the boat when belayed properly to the cleat, especially as your habit is to leave significant extra line for later adjustment.

Spliced dock lines have drawbacks in everyday docking activities even in quiet weather.

- It is impossible to adjust line length with a spliced loop. It is either completely “on” the cleat or completely “off”. There is no middle ground. A line belayed properly on a cleat is always able to have some surged off if, as should be the habit, leaving some spare to work with. Similarly, if need be, line can be taken in. This can be done safely by “sweating” the line in or with the engine assisting.
- Some like the idea that an eye splice will always achieve the correct line length allowing accurate tie ups at repeat locations. But there is an easy alternative: an elegant seamanlike whipping, colored for visibility, and strategically situated to allow the line to be belayed to the cleat at repeatedly the same length.
- Others might argue that it takes time to tie onto a cleat: done properly, tying onto a cleat should take but a moment.
- Sometimes a loop is necessary or handy, say to go over a post. It is easy to tie an appropriately sized eye with a bowline, or, better yet, a clove hitch or tugboat hitch, two knots that can be adjusted under pressure.
- Some docks have no cleats or posts but are festooned with a myriad of other fasteners. A spliced loop will work with some and be impossible with others. An un-altered dock line has the flexibility to always find a solution.
- Other problems with a spliced eye in a dock line occur when attempting to lead the splice through a fairlead or hawse where the fatter splice does not run freely or gets jammed. An un-spliced line will run free with much less likelihood of getting caught on something or hung up.

- Finally, a spliced loop can make the line more difficult to use for other purposes where an eye may not be wanted, or the whole length of the line is wished for.

Two more scenarios:

Scene three: You waken to find you must adjust dock line length. Wind is up and you are bouncing about. You have spliced loops around the cleats on your deck so they are dead-ended: un-adjustable. The dock is bouncing, wet & slippery and you are now a few foot leap to the dock which, when you went to bed, you were snugly against. With line properly belayed on the deck cleat, all involved stay on the boat and letting out more line is easy & safe. Taking in line only entails either sweating the line in or starting the engine and horsing the boat into a better position while the crew, never needing to leave the safety of the boat, takes in slack in the dock line on the cleat as it occurs, again safely and in control.

Scene four: You are being blown off the dock by a fine breeze and itching to get sailing. The spliced loop of your dock line is around the cleat on the dock. No amount of pulling allows enough slack to get the dock line free. The engine is on and you believe that you can manoeuvre the boat to allow slack to get the loop free only to realize that the person left holding the loop will not be able to hold the boat nor to make a flying leap, loop in hand, to a rapidly retreating vessel. The skipper starts to contemplate how a knife might solve his immediate problem.

A knife, in fact, is the only way to release a spliced line under pressure on a cleat.

In summary, the proper use of a cleat is, for me, an issue of safety first, then one of utility and finally ease of use. In settled weather, it matters little how one uses a cleat, it is when things get a little boisterous that a spliced loop fails all the above criteria and an un-altered dock line properly in use with a cleat is the picture of safety, utility and ease of use.

* In short, to secure a line to a cleat: go to the far end horn of the cleat starting at an angle, come around to the near horn, then do a figure eight and then a half hitch continuing the figure eight pattern (and getting the line aligned - not piled on itself) . This gives you a belay that will hold through a hurricane (more crossed loops or added hitches will not increase strength and definitely make the use of the cleat more difficult: moreover, it looks terrible). This text description is accurate, but a visual in one of the many good books or videos on the internet will make clear that sometimes a picture can be worth a thousand words.