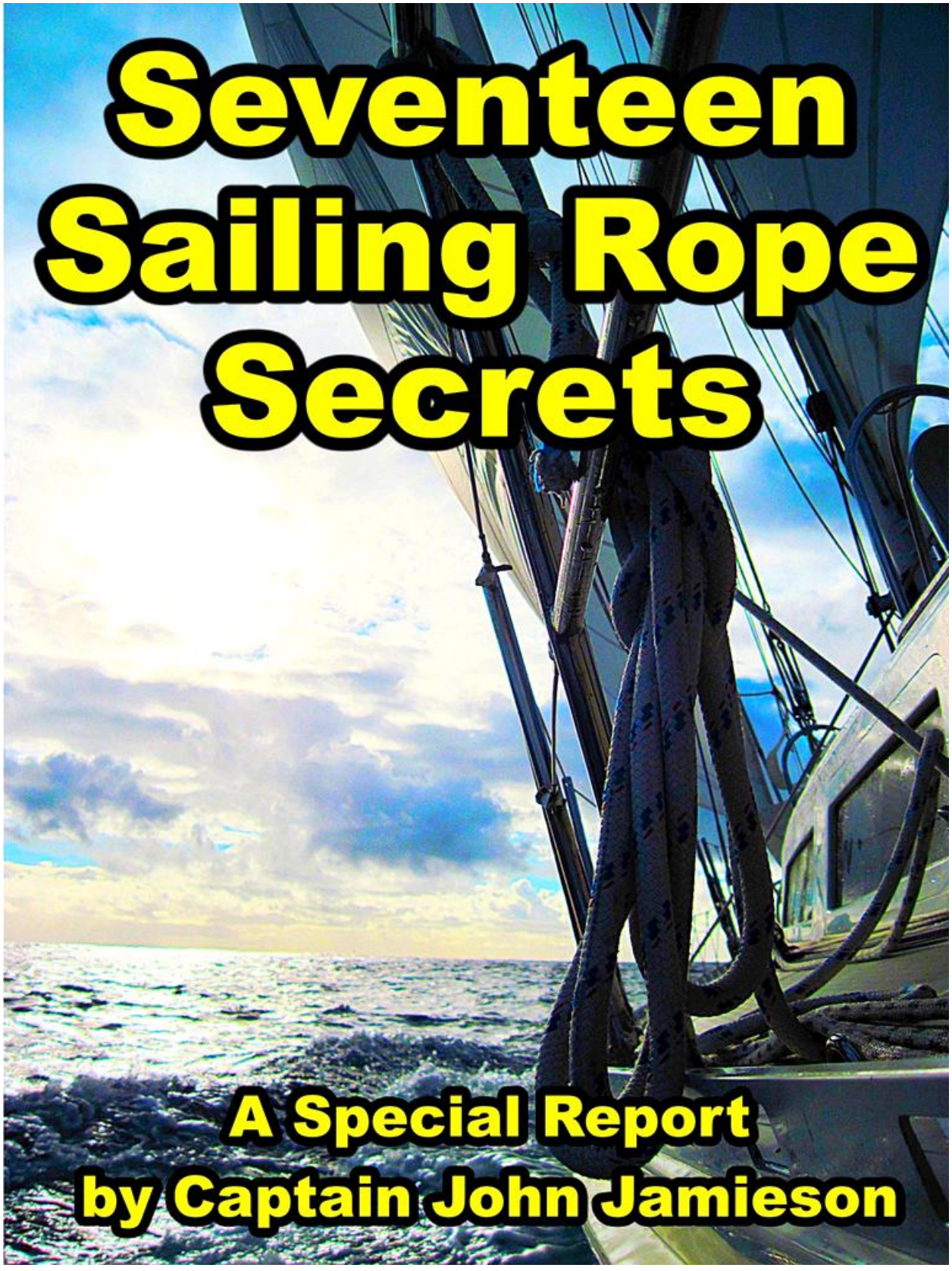
Seventeen
Sailing Rope
Secrets
A Special Report
by Captain John Jamieson

Stop into any chandlery that sells sailing rope and you are in for a shocker. Sticker prices are through the roof. And this applies to nylon, Dacron, and the high-tech blends that are marketed as the "*Samson*" of the rope world.

So how can we sailors extend the life of our expensive sailing rigging line? What secrets can you use right now to breathe new life into your line? How can you keep your line in tip-top shape 50% longer to save you big $$$s in replacement costs?

I believe a look to the past might reveal secrets that have stood the test of time and hundreds of thousands of sea miles. Indeed, the square-rigger sailors of old had to keep their standing rigging and other lines aboard fit-as-a-fiddle for months or years at sea!

We modern sailors have it easy by comparison. But rope care can still present a big challenge on a small sailboat with limited sailing crew. How can the short-handed sailor maintain his or her running rigging, docking and anchor line for top notch performance?

Discover the sea-tested sailing tips like how to "*end-for-end*" anchor or docking line. Learn how to turn a weak sailing knot into one that's strong and secure. Find out how to avoid "*hard spot wear*" on a mainsheet or reefing line to prevent failure. Unlock the secret of the "*straight lead*" to make handling any line aboard smoother and easier.

Put these simple sailing techniques into play today aboard your small sailboat. Save money, time, effort and wear and tear on all lines aboard your boat--wherever in the world you choose to sail or cruise. Sail safe and enjoy the read!

Captain John Jamieson

1. Find a Good Sailing Knife and Marlinspike

I would not board a boat without a knife and marlinspike. It's one of those tools you'll find comes into play time and again in a pinch--and in particular when you work with fiber and high-tech line aboard.

Use the marlinspike to spread fiber or wire rope strands for splicing, loosen shackle pins, make whippings and make seizings tight and secure. Make sure to attach your life to your person with a proper sheath and lanyard. Make the lanyard long enough so that you can hold the knife overhead.

2. Double Your Line Life with Two Easy Tips

Carry plenty of chafing gear aboard to protect your expensive lines at a dock, mooring, or at anchor. Swing by your local fire department or call and ask if they have old fire hose. Or, buy scraps of canvas. Cut the scraps into 9" (or longer) lengths. Wrap the chafing gear around any line that rubs, abrades, or contacts the side of your boat or a boat fitting (i.e. a chock) or a seawall, pier or piling. This single "pennies-on-the-dollar" gear will be your #1 boat guard to protect your docking, mooring, or anchor lines from wear or failure.

"*End for End*" docking line and rope anchor rode once a year. This ancient art can extend line life in a big way. Change that part tied to the dock cleat or piling to the opposite end. Splice a new eye as necessary. Swap out that part of your anchor rode tied off inside your anchor locker so that it now becomes the working end attached to the chain. Splice in a new thimble too. Follow these two sailing tips for longer line life--wherever you sail or cruise.

3. Fight Slippage with a Round Turn.

Turn or round turn? Knots made around a ring, post, piling or rail begin with a "drape" type motion called a turn. That's where you have the standing part (that part of a line not used to tie a knot) on one side and the working end (that part of a line used for knot work) on the other side. But, line can slide along any of these devices and that creates wear and chafe.

Put friction to work. Add one more turn--called a "*round turn*" to keep your line in place. This may not be what you want for all applications, but for some it will be. Remember the round turn when your sailing knot needs to "stay put" on a slippery surface.

4. Take Ten Seconds to Finish Any Sailing Knot

Tie a knot, make a whipping or splice line and you'll need to add another five or ten seconds to "get the slack out". Sure, it may be impressive to tie a fast knot and think you're done with it; but that's not good enough in my book. No knot will hold for long unless you work the slack out after you tie it.

Pull on the bitter ends and standing part. Hold one side as you pull on the other. It requires a bit of practice and time. Take the extra effort now to prevent surprises down the road. Remove the slack from any knot, splice or whipping for more peace-of-mind sailing.

5. Three-Strand Nylon or Double Braided Nylon?

Not many controversies can cause the temperature to rise as much as the 3-strand or double-braid debate. Both of these nylon ropes offer excellent service for three major applications aboard: docking lines, rope anchor rode and towing.

Three strand--also called "twisted braid" consists of three individual strands twisted (most often) clockwise to form a "right laid" line. It has a superb record for good stretch, longevity, and chafe resistance. Most of all, I enjoy the speed of splicing. You needn't have a sheepskin from "Marlinspike U" to splice the darn stuff. Nor do you need fids or measuring tape.

Others prefer the smoothness and elasticity of double-braid--also called "cored braid". This rope has an outer sleeve and inner core of tight woven fibers. It's difficult to splice and--I must admit--I just do not fool with it. I would rather bend a piece of double braid to a shackle with a bowline, buntline hitch than splice it on. Spices tend to wear where they rub the becket of a block.

6. Use a Snubber with Chain or Rope Anchor Rode.

Take the shock load off of anchor rode with a snubber. A snubber absorbs shock loads from swell or boat wakes. With all-chain rode, your snubber will help keep the cabin quieter. With rope-chain rode, a snubber reduces chafe in a big way. Use nylon line with all-chain; use a low stretch line like Spectra with rope-chain rode.

Anchor in the usual way with chain or rope. Make your snubber from a piece of line at least 25 feet (7.5 meters) long. Tie a rolling hitch onto the anchor rode just outboard of the bow fitting (roller or chock). Belay the end of the snubber line to a winch or strong bow cleat. Next, ease the anchor rode so that it develops a deep, well defined shape similar to a "U". Belay the anchor rode (or set the windlass break. Protect your snubber with lots of chafing gear where it passes over the chock or rail of your boat.

7. Lay a Clove over the "Hard Spot"

Few knots have the initial weakness of a clove hitch. Indeed, it can spill (untie) quite fast. But few knots are as important to know. Why? Because the humble clove serves as a vital foundation for many of the world's best knots--which include the double constrictor. If you tie the clove onto an irregular surface such as a rail with squared corners, make the hitch over the corner. Tie the clove in the usual manner; re-position it so that the overlapped turns lie on top of one corner. Cinch it down. It'll be more secure. And, as with most any weak-knot--beef it up to the next level of integrity when you add two half-hitches.

8. Should You "Lock" the Cleat Hitch?

I suppose the debate on whether or not to make a final "locking turn" on the cleat hitch will never end. I believe it boils down to two factors: load and time-factor. If you expect the knot to come under extreme loads such that the locked turn (also called a "*weather hitch*") might become jammed, then avoid the final hitch. Finish the knot with one or two wraps beneath the cleat horns for extra security.

Time enters the equation if you need to work the cleat--make it up; cast off turns; make it up; cast off turns. You do this when short tacking up a channel. Or you might do this when you work a boat alongside a pier with a spring line. You do not want to risk a jammed turn. Nor do you want to use a locking turn when docking in areas with extreme tidal ranges. High tension on the docking lines could cause the line to freeze onto the dock cleat. Follow the same procedure described earlier for safety.

9. Make This Self-Tailing Winch Tail Safety Turn

Use three or more full wraps around the drum of a self-tailing winch. Finish with a full 360 degree wrap into the clam plates on top of the winch. Pull hard on the tail to insure that the line jams into the clam plates. You could coil the line and be done with it.

But this does leave the tail of your sheet exposed. If you crew trips on the tail, the sheet could pull out of the clam plates. Add a final loose, 360 degree "*security turn*" around the drum as a safety precaution. That way, an accidental pull on the tail should keep your sheet turns in place.

10. Make Line Leads Straight and Fair

Think straight when it comes to any line. Check the angles made by any halyard, sheet, or control line from the belay point to the final destination. Each time you make a sharp turn with a line, friction builds, fibers wear and line weakens. If you want to run halyards, sheets or reefing lines aft to the cockpit, take care to mount line organizers with this in mind. That way, your line will be easier to handle and last longer.

But that's not all...

Match line diameter to block sheave diameter. Line too small for the sheave could "jump" out of the channel; line too large for the sheave will rub and wear on the cheeks (sides) of the block. Choose the right rope diameter for all of your sailing blocks to add longevity and reduce wear on your expensive sheets, lines, and halyards.

11. Achieve the Ability to Tie Sailing Knots Blindfolded

Reach over and under a boom filled with the bulk of reefed mainsail to tie off a reef point. Make up a main or mizzen halyard on a dark or rain-driven night. Wrestle a shredded furling Genoa to the deck at 0200 in howling wind and squall. Reach down into a dark locker to lash a loose provision and secure it in place. Loop a line around your body, tossed to you after you fall overboard--and tie a secure knot to attach you to the mother ship.

All of these scenarios might need to be done without a visual lock on the knot that you need to tie. My point? Learn to tie the most vital sailing knots so that you can do so blindfolded. When you first learn the knot, use the standard procedure to check and recheck the knot each step of the way. Realize most sailing knots have three vital steps--start, interim, finish. Start the knot wrong and you can almost bet it will not turn out the right way. So, make a heavy concentration on the start. Forget the interim and finish steps until you get the vital "start" step right 90% or more of the time.

Next, work through the interim step, where you hitch, weave, thread, or roll the knot onto a rail, spare, post, stanchion, ring, itself, or onto another line. Master the first two steps and then work through the "finish" step. Do not--on your life--make the mistake to think that a knot will hold well unless you spend an extra second or two or three to "work" the slack out all around. Practice these three steps until you achieve a high rate of success.

Now you are ready for "blindfold" tying. Continue to practice until you can tie any knot with one or less glances at the knot from start to finish. Achieve that goal and each of

the earlier scenarios will be resolved faster and easier. What sailing knots should you concentrate on? I call these the big seven of sailing. There are others, but these will fit 90%+ of all situations aboard any boat in the world--sail or power. Sailboat, powerboat, or ship.

1. Cleat Hitch
2. Round Turn and Two Half-Hitches
3. Clove Hitch
4. Rolling Hitch
5. Bowline (facing standing part; facing away from standing part)
6. Double Becket (Sheet) Bend
7. Reef Knot or Buntline Hitch*****

**** In all cases, the Buntline Hitch will be more secure. The Reef Knot can spill (untie); the buntline holds with tenacity. The drawback? If loaded, it could become difficult to untie.***

12. Keep Headsail Sheets Ready to Run Free

Pull on a Genoa or jib sheet and the working end (that part that you pull on) becomes longer and longer. Coil it down at the first opportunity. But what makes the best coil?

Consider these three options: coil the line on deck, fake the line down, or "*cabin cast*" the sheet. Try each method or work out your own technique to keep sheets coiled and ready for instant use.

To coil clockwise, start nearest the belay point (clutch, cleat) and coil in big bights to the right. Lay the coil in the forward part of the cockpit (sole, seat, or similar area.

To fake the line, move to the bitter end. Shake out the kinks as you pull and drop the line on top of itself onto deck. It will look a bit like spaghetti, but often this natural coil works well to eliminate knots and hockles that could jam when tacking or jibing.

To "*cabin cast*"--my favorite--make big bights of right hand coil and "*cast*" (toss) it down the companionway ladder into the cabin. This works well to clear up the cockpit on smaller sailboats. Keep your sheets ready to run and you will sail smoother and easier--in particular when short- or single-handed.

13. "Water Tow" a Line to Remove Knots and Kinks

Need to remove kinks from a knotted sheet, rode or other long length of line? If you have the sea-room and you are under sail (do not try this under engine!), tow the line behind you.

Belay one bitter end to a stout stern or quarter cleat. Use the slowest speed possible.

Ease the line over the side and tow it astern for a few minutes. Use the slowest speed possible. All those crazy kinks and hockles will untie themselves. Pull the line back into the boat. Coil it down as you do. Make sure to fresh water wash the line and dry it (see next tip) as soon as possible.

14. Keep Lines Soft and Supple with this #1 Cleaner

Did you know that microscopic razor sharp dirt and salt crystals plant themselves onto you expensive sheets, halyards, anchor rode and docking lines? Worse yet, they will embed themselves into the strands. And that results in core, fiber and strand breakdown and premature line "death". Use copious amounts of fresh water to blast dirt and salt away and give your line new life. Better still, you will keep your line soft and easy to work with when knotting, sheeting, wrapping, hauling, or cleating.

15. Flake Line Over a Rail or Lifeline Before You Stow

Keep wet line out of dark, dank anchor or sail lockers. This will prevent mold or mildew. Fresh water wash your line as described earlier.

Flake the line over a rail or lifeline much like you flake a mainsail onto a boom. Make long bights (loops) on alternate sides. Stagger the bights as you move up or down the rail. Keep the bites just a few inches off deck.

Each loop should occupy its own "drying space" on one side of the rail or lifeline. The next loop will occupy a space adjacent to the first bite--and so forth all the way down the rail or lifeline. With extreme lengths of line, you could flake over the first row. In any case, this will keep the line open to air flow all around.

This method works best in calm conditions when tied up to a pier or at a protected anchorage. We used this same technique to dry massive towing hawser or docking line aboard US Coast Guard small boats and cutters (ships). When dried all the way, coil the line down as described earlier.

16. Fake Line to Pay Out Smooth and Easy

Want your line to pay out smooth as a hot knife through butter anytime you lower your anchor, set up a docking line on deck for heaving to a dock hand ashore, or need to coil down a long length of line to take another boat in tow?

Fake your line onto deck. Faking is actually a type of deck coil. The line is belayed at one end and then the remainder laid in long bights that resemble a figure-8. When finished, you butt up one bight against the other, so that when done--the faked coil resembles somewhat of a rectangular mat.

The bitter end feeds over the side smooth without kinks or hockles, which is always a good thing. This no-nonsense method of coiling line proved to be so efficient, that we faked line as standard procedure aboard smaller Coast Guard rescue boats or big CG cutters for towing.

When I taught seamanship at Chapman's School, we taught young men and women on-the-water towing approaches (45 degree, parallel and crossing-the-T approaches) and we spent a lot of time on deck setup of the towline. We always faked a coil to prepare to take another boat in tow. They would set the deck up in this manner with a bridle. It always went out smooth and easy.

Why not try this little-known technique aboard your own sailboat. When the application calls for coiling down an extra long length of line--fake the line. Now you know it will feed out without knots and kinks.

17. Use These Magic Blocks in a Pinch

If you need an extra block to redirect a sheet, this can turn into a major hassle--in particular with a line under load. For example, if you need to place a block between the sheet lead block and winch, you may need to tack to release tension on the line. Then, you could unwrap the line from the winch, thread the bitter end through the new block, make up the turns to the winch again, and tack again once finished.

Or you can use a snatch block and cut out all those steps. All blocks are made somewhat like a sandwich, with hard, flat cheeks on the outside and sheave (pronounced "shiv") in the center to accept the fiber or wire rope.

Snatch blocks have one cheek that can pop open with the press of a finger on a button or some other means. This allows you to place the line over the open block with no threading necessary. Seat the line, snap the cheek shut and you're ready to go.

You could also use snatch blocks to...

1. Make up a purchase for lifting the dinghy or an engine.
2. Lead a line in a different direction to a winch or cleat.
3. Rig a bridle to enable you to adjust a sea anchor.
4. Put together a fast block and tackle in an emergency.
5. Increase pulling power to kedge yourself off of a shoal.

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Use these seventeen sailing rope tips to add life to your expensive sailing rope. Keep your anchor rode, docking line, sheets and halyards fit as a fiddle to save you money in repairs and replacement costs--wherever in the world you choose to sail or cruise!

Warmest Regards...

Captain John
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