

Skipper Saver

It's a beautiful summer Saturday morning at the docks at the San Joaquin Delta Power Squadron Island. The docks are packed with boats and the skippers and first mates just getting that first cup of coffee and wandering around surveying the situation. This is the first day of the two day skipper saver program and most of the participants arrived Friday evening, but there are still a few boats expected this morning. Today is the day the first mates have been waiting for; the chance to operate their boat in a supportive and relaxed atmosphere and learn the basics of boat handling. Its skipper saver weekend!



Barbi Carson with instructor Dave Tagget preparing to get underway

My introduction to the skipper saver program occurred in September 2003, shortly after we had joined the California Carver Club. At that time, most of the Carver club members were also members of the San Joaquin Delta Power Squadron and as one of the cruise activities the commodore had arranged to have a skipper saver session for Carver Club members only.

It sounded like fun. Going out the island for the weekend with the club and having my first mate get the opportunity to learn safe boating from someone else. Her instructor that weekend was Dave Tagett, who still teaches the skipper saver program today. Having been exposed to the program that weekend, I found myself wanting to join the fun. Shortly after we joined the San Joaquin Delta Power Squadron and the next year got involved with the skipper saver program. It is very rewarding giving back to the boating community and I have made many boating friends over the years.



The students and skippers listen intently to instructor Don Webb

The Skipper Saver program is designed to teach the first mate how to handle their boat in an emergency. During the two days, subjects such as anchoring, first aid, knot tying, basic navigation, and radio procedures are covered in short discussion sessions, while most of the time is on the boat learning basic boat handling. As one of our instructors starts out his lecture; "You need to be prepared." "When the skipper has indulged in to many of those prune

margaritas, is no condition to get the anchor up and the boat back to the marina, it is up you, the first mate, to take the helm." This program shows the first mate how to get the anchor up, get the boat started and underway, navigate back to the marina, and put the boat into the slip. After an hour or so of lectures and group discussion, the first mates are assigned an instructor for the on water session. The anticipation is evident as the instructor meets the first mates and the skippers on their vessel and goes over the basic rules. This is complete role reversal, the first mate is now in charge and the skipper must do as told. The instructor carries a roll of duct tape just in case there is more talking than listening from the skipper. I am amazed to this day how many skippers don't know where the fenders go, how to tie them off, and where to put the dock lines. Most skippers are good at giving vague orders, such as put the fenders out, or get the dock lines ready, but not so good on the actual details of putting the fenders out and



No worries, it will fit. There is enough room for two boats, really.

tying the lines off. It is clear that not only the first mates are learning new skills today. I have had many skippers tell me in confidence that they learned as much as the first mates during the weekend. After a short discussion on how to get the boat underway, the first mate is given instruction on basic close quarter maneuvering and then we are off. For the next two hours we practice slow speed turning, backing straight, holding position on a fixed object, and backing into a dock. Once the first mate is comfortable with these new found skills,

we head back to the island where a place at the dock is waiting. As we approach the island, the first mate uses the VHF radio to call the harbormaster and obtain docking instructions. Orders are passed to get the fenders and dock lines ready as the docking location is surveyed.

Every student ends the on-the-water session by sterning the boat to the dock. In the 7 years that I have been involved in the Skipper Saver program, not a single first mate has failed at this final skill. But I have seen skippers have a difficult time with this maneuver when they arrive. Once the boat is secured there is relief and exhilaration from the first mate. They have found confidence from performing one of the more difficult boat handling skills.

By late in the afternoon all of the first mates have completed the on-the-water fun and we rendezvous at the patio for our last discussion session, knot tying. By now everyone is a lot more relaxed as the adult beverages are flowing freely, so playing with line and tying knots is a great way to wrap up the discussion topics.



The Skipper Saver instructors and their first mates serve a great dinner to the students

Once the students are done for the day the instructors and their first mates turn into hosts and prepare a great BBQ steak dinner, complete with baked potatoes, mixed green salad, and garlic bread. There is even a nice fresh salmon for the non meat eaters in the group. After dinner and plenty of adult beverages, the students are presented their certificates and a few gifts from the Power Squadron.

cigar and glass of port and talk about the day's events with the other instructors and participants. Like all good instructors, we talk about each student, of course only in the best of terms, and discuss what went well and what didn't, and congratulate ourselves on how great we think we are. We also take turns recruiting new members for the Power Squadron as surprising enough; the San Joaquin Delta Squadron is the only squadron that offers skipper saver to non Power Squadron members. A few other squadrons offer the program, but only to their members. This is a shame because this is a great program and has been a success in getting first mates behind the helm and bringing in new members. Many former students go on to take other Power Squadron classes and continue their boating education.

Now that our work is done, it's time to sit back and enjoy an early evening



First mate Barbara Wesley is presented with her certificate of completion from yours truly while skipper John Wesley looks on.



Instructors from left: yours truly, Dave Tagget, Bob Souza, Jim Fenelon, Don Webb, Dave Sieber

For all you skippers, take a break from the rigors of operating the boat and let the first mate take the helm. The only way to get good at something is to practice. You might even get good at deploying the lines and fenders, who knows? So what lesson did we learn, if you have to ask, you need to read this article again.



Just off the Stockton Deep Water Channel at light 13

To sign up for San Joaquin Power Squadron's Skipper Saver class go to their web site at www.sjdps.org and select the skipper saver link. Better yet, talk with a friend that has been through the class then call the organizer, Wolff Coulombe at 925 200 4381. There are still a few classes scheduled this year and there may even be an opening or two. The US Power Squadron is dedicated to boater education and the Skipper Saver program is one of the many courses offered.