

## Off-season training for boaters

by Hank\_Parker

Whether you just got a new boat or your old one spent the winter months parked in the garage, you've got to be excited about the fact that the calendar now says it's March. Regardless of what the weather is like at your place right now (I thought the groundhog didn't see his shadow this year), we're only a few weeks away from spring. And if you're like me, spring means getting back out on the water and catching some big fish. A two-time champion of the Bassmaster Classic, Ranger Pro Hank Parker is the host of "Hank Parker's Outdoor Magazine."

It's during the first few trips to the lake each year that I am reminded of what a high school Spanish teacher once told me: "If you don't use it, you lose it." Of course, she was referring to my international language skills, but the same thing holds true for boating. Whether it's backing down a ramp in a safe, timely manner as so you don't cause a traffic jam or towing a trailer or running your boat on the water, all of these activities take a certain amount of practice. Doing them well will ensure more time for you on the water and make you far more popular among others at the lake. Launching a boat is always easier with two people: one person backs the tow vehicle; the other drives the boat. Backing the trailer takes a lot of practice. Consider practicing in a large, empty parking lot before heading to the lake. The lines for the parking spaces make ideal reference points for backing. Make sure that everyone who is going to be using the boat gets plenty of practice time. Once you've mastered the parking lot, try the boat ramp - but remember the addition of traffic and people watching your every move can make some people nervous. But if you've practiced enough you should have no problem. When I'm launching my Ranger bass boat, I make sure that everything is on board before I begin backing down the ramp so I don't slow the process down any more than I have to. Put your ice chests, fishing gear, the dog, batteries, whatever you take with you on the water, in the boat before you take your place in line. This speeds up the process a lot. As far as trailering your boat, this requires just as much practice. There are a lot of things to keep in mind (also, check with the manufacturer of your tow vehicle to make sure it's suitable for towing your make and model of boat), especially the added length of your entire rig. Allow extra room for turning and for getting by and around traffic. That extra 20 or so feet and a couple of thousand pounds that you are towing can significantly impact your acceleration and maneuvering. In addition to making sure that you use all of your safety equipment (lights, chains, etc.) when you tow, it would be a good idea to test drive your rig before going to the lake just to see how the vehicle (whether old or new) handles the towing duties. See how it turns and accelerates and how much clearance you need to back up and get around obstacles. Believe me, it pays off. Once you are on the water, make sure you observe all the posted signs concerning boat traffic. Don't drive the boat beyond your limits to control it and never operate it while under the influence of intoxicating substances. Just knowing how to safely and respectfully maneuver your boat around other boats and into fishing and docking positions will greatly increase your enjoyment of your trip. We all own boats because we love the lifestyle, enjoy getting out of the house and fishing or just spending time with family and friends. To make sure we continue having fun, these last few weeks before the days get longer and the weather gets warmer is the perfect time to polish and perfect every aspect of our boating skills. It's time well spent and something the whole family can be a part of, just like every member of the family takes part in enjoying the boat.

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