

Habits That Keep Us Alive

Boating is joy, freedom, and fellowship... but it's also unpredictable. The ocean does not negotiate, the wind does not hesitate, and accidents don't wait for you to "get ready." Many of us drive smaller boats, by this I mean under 30 feet, but what I have to say applies to all boaters.

That is why I feel so strongly about two safety practices that every one of us must treat as non-negotiable:

- (1) **wearing a life jacket**, and
- (2) **using your engine cut-off switch every time you operate a vessel.**

These aren't bureaucratic rules. They're lifelines.

Life Jackets: Wear Them All the Time or Anytime the Power Is On

I cannot emphasize this enough: a boat that has its engine on—whether in gear or not, or a sailboat underway—is an unpredictable machine. Boats rock, people slip, wakes appear out of nowhere and even the most seasoned operators can be caught off guard.

A life jacket buys you those critical seconds that separate a close call from a fatality.

Why I'm a Champion of Automatic Inflatable Life Jackets

If you've ever seen me on my boat, you know I'm borderline evangelical about everyone on the boat wearing a life jacket. I provide an inflatable life jacket for everyone joining me. Modern inflatable life jackets are light, are comfortable, and most importantly, they are designed to protect you even when you don't anticipate needing protection.

Some reasons I'm so passionate about them:

- You'll actually *wear* them—comfort is compliance.
- The automatic inflation feature saves you if you hit the water stunned or unconscious.
- They provide excellent buoyancy and keep your airway clear.
- They blend into normal boat activity—you forget you're wearing one, until you're very glad you are.

Real Stories That Stick With Me

These are not dramatic, Hollywood-style rescues. These are everyday boaters caught by surprise:

- **A day of fishing gone wrong:** Art LaPoint and I were out fishing on a wonderfully warm and calm day, when we heard on the radio that the Coast Guard was looking for a missing man after his boat capsized. The other person on the boat had been rescued, but

the missing man was found dead and was not wearing a lifejacket. That could have been us. They probably started their day the same way we did, but something went wrong, the boat capsized, and someone died. A worn lifejacket could have made all the difference.

- **A simple docking assist gone wrong:** A sailor slipped between the dock and the boat when a gust pushed the bow off. His inflatable life jacket deployed instantly and kept him afloat in a tight space where panic alone could have cost him his life.
- **A health scare underway:** A captain fainted momentarily at the helm—no warning, no chance to react. His life jacket ensured he floated face-up until his crew regained control. Without it, the outcome could have been catastrophic.
- **A fisherman knocked overboard:** One unexpected wake in January. One bad angle. He was in the water before he even knew what happened. His life jacket saved him from inhaling water in that first stunned moment.

None of these boaters planned to fall in. That's exactly the point.

The Engine Cut-Off Switch (ECOS): A Simple Clip That Saves Lives (or better yet, get a wireless man overboard system)

Federal law now requires operators of most powerboats under 26 feet to use an engine cut-off switch (ECOS) whenever they're on plane. That's the legal part.

But the moral part, that hits home even harder!

When the captain of the boat goes overboard without an ECOS engaged, the boat becomes a blind, spinning, multi-thousand-pound hazard. The "Circle of Death" is not a dramatic nickname—it's the tragic pattern we see repeated again and again.

Incidents That Still Haunt the Boating Community

I mention these not to scare you, but because they are preventable:

- **An encounter with an unexpected wake ejects two occupants:** A Princeton, New Jersey doctor died this summer when he was unexpectedly ejected from his boat, and his circling boat struck him. His passenger, who was also ejected, was fortunately rescued with minor injuries. Using an engine cut off switch would have shut off the engine immediately upon the captain leaving the helm and likely saved his life.
- **Two men dead in Fresno, California:** Two men were ejected from a fishing boat in California. One had a lifejacket on and the other did not. Both were killed by the circling boat. With an ECOS attached to the operator, the boat would have stopped in the water, and the boat operator could have easily re-boarded.

These tragedies stay with you. They're the reason I speak so passionately about this.

Let's Make These Practices Who We Are

As your commander, but also as a fellow boater on the water, my message comes from a place of deep conviction:

Wear your life jacket—at least, anytime the engine is powered on or while underway when sailing.

Use your engine cut-off switch every single time.

These are small habits, easy to dismiss—until the moment they mean everything.

Let's set the example for our families, our community, and every boater who shares these waters with us. Take these two steps every time you head out on the water and we can all look forward to many safer, beautiful days together on the water.

Stay vigilant. Stay prepared. And above all—stay alive.

— **Dave Medvedeff, Commander, ABC Hilton Head**