

ANCHORING UNDER SAIL, SHORT-HANDED EDITION

By Jeff Halpern

These days, one of the less frequently practiced of the sailorly arts, is anchoring under sail. But anchoring under sail is a skill that can come in handy should engine problems occur. I am a big advocate for practicing emergency maneuvers before they are needed. But I am also a big fan of voyaging under sail, by which I mean, making passages which end to end does not involve running the engine. To me this is all about a different an aesthetic experience, but it often had practical ramifications such as not adding heat from the engine into an already too warm cabin during the summer.

Anchoring under sail without cranking up the engine sounds way scarier than it is. Like any short-handed maneuver, the key to doing this safely and easily is all about thinking ahead, taking the time to prepare while you have time and sea-room, making sure lines are clear to run, and thinking through how you will do this on your particular boat and with your particular ground tackle. (In my case, I have a comparatively light 38 footer and use a Danforth HT with 40 feet of chain and a very long rode. This is the technique that I use based on the behavior and configuration of my boat.)

As in any other method of anchoring, I suggest that starting by picking a spot where you want the anchor to end up when set, and then sailing a distorted figure 8 over where you want to anchor, basically covering the perimeter of where the boat is expected to possibly swing. Once convinced that there is plenty of water and have fixed the constraints of the expected maneuvering room and drop points, put the boat on a beat maybe 5-6 boat lengths out from, and aimed at a point about 3-4 boat lengths dead upwind of where you want the anchor to end up setting.

Once on that course, I set the autopilot or lock the helm, release the mainsheet and main halyard and furiously pull the mainsail down which in my case usually brings the sail at least 3/4 way down and the boat starting to slow. Timing is everything but at the moment that the boat is the turning radius of the boat away from being dead upwind of the anchor drop point, turn the boat dead downwind (yup that way) aimed directly toward the spot where you plan to drop the anchor and again lock the helm. (If you have a wheel mounted autopilot, often the fastest way to lock the helm is to engage the autopilot without activating it. This is also the fastest lock to disengage)

Most of the anchorages on the Bay has soft mud or sand, and consequently the anchor will drag some before setting. The amount that the anchor will drag will vary with your boat, rode and anchor type, and bottom. Experience will give you a sense of how your boat will behave, but with my boat I typically lower the anchor to the bottom about a boat length upwind from where I want to the anchor to end up. I lower the anchor slowly to the bottom, and carefully feed out the chain to make sure it is laid flat on the bottom.

After that I let the rode feed out on its own while I get the mainsail the rest of the way down and flaked on the boom. Keeping a small amount of mainsail up is not the end of the world since it will provide some of the momentum needed to 'set the hook'. Also pulling the mainsail down when headed downwind can sometimes be easier if you pull the sail down from the leech. On my boat pulling the mainsail down, usually takes long enough that about 120-140 feet of rode feeds out which in our typical anchorages is approximately a scope of 10:1).

At that point, begin to tension the rode against the momentum of the boat. Very lightly at first, just enough to begin to stretch out the rode and chain. Once you feel that the anchor is through the soft mud and beginning to grab, greatly increase the tension on the rode feeling with your hands whether it is digging in or dragging on the bottom.

If it has grabbed at that point, the boat will start to swing up into the wind. As the boat swings up into the wind and 'tacks' the rode slacks a lot so that you can quickly take in the slack until the scope is near a 7:1 scope (or whatever you are comfortable with) When the boat falls away, keep the rode in you hand as the rode tensions, if it feels like you have a good bite on the bottom, cleat off, close the locker lid and you are done anchoring.

If you have any doubt, pull the boat up to the chain and then let it fall away again and pick up speed, keeping tension on the rode and using the boat's momentum to set the anchor deeper.

If still have doubts, walk the rode to the middle of the length of the boat and pull the boat sideways through the water for all that you are worth against the resistance of the keel. This will usually give a good feel for how well the anchor is set and will also potentially set the anchor deeper.

If you still have any doubts, it may be time to crank the engine and reset, but you mayt also try to do this without the engine. If you decide to reset without the engine, pull in the rode hard and fast enough to give the boat enough speed that you can get the anchor up and enough momentum to shoot upwind a boat length or two and then drop the anchor, repeating the part where the anchor is lowered to the bottom and the boat falls away and picks up speed, keeping tension on the rode and using the boat's momentum to set the anchor. Once set, in a crowded anchorage I put down a kelleet and choke up on the scope some.

This is not something to do as a new sailor, or try for the first time in a crowded anchorage. It is way easier with more than one person onboard to steer, but I do it single-handed a lot. If your boat isn't too large and once you get to know your boat, it really is not too hard to do, and frankly is way easier than it sounds.