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Boats need plenty of TLC

Many boaters cruise the River Denial when it comes to upkeep

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Article Text:

They say the happiest two days in a boat owner's life are when he buys his boat, and when he sells it.

The rest of the time is spent in that netherworld between misery and ecstasy, trying to enjoy carefree moments at the lake for another shot at a trouble-free day.

I've seen boats on the launch never hit the water because owners struggled in vain to fire them up. I've seen the most humiliating rub of all - high-priced luxury craft being towed in by a jet ski while the owner sits forlornly behind the wheel wondering what went wrong.

The answer is usually simple. Obviously you didn't pour the right amount of cash into your money pit - usually two (or three) parts currency to fuel.

You see, boats are sensitive creatures that need to be coddled and cajoled into playing nicely.

They seem to know how much you look forward to a vacation or weekend at the lake and respond accordingly, so unpredictably that it will eventually drive you crazy.

About the time you begin to trust your boat, you will hear a noise, for which you always have one ear tuned. It may start as an occasional misfire, become more frequent, and then stop altogether.

"What was that?" you may ask, trying to ignore it.

Then one day, an odor. Burnt rubber, electrical, gas fumes? Maybe just a campfire on the shore. You are so paranoid by now.

Another sound. A slight knock that occurs only at full throttle, then disappears.

“What could that be?” you think as you open the cover to look at the engine and see ... nothing.

You see nothing because you have no idea how this mass of nuts, bolts and steel is put together and works. Admit it, you’re just guessing, and not doing a good job at that.

Then one day you turn the key and a grind. It doesn’t happen all the time, just once in a while. You hope it will just go away. Now, think how stupid that sounds.

Believing it will fix itself, you are cruising on the River Denial, friend. Admit it, that sound is going to get worse until your boat sits in the garage waiting for you to summon the courage to haul it to a marina where you will pray the problem is something minor.

You’re kidding yourself again. Delusion has set in.

The marina will put your boat in the yard where it will sit for three weeks until you get the call that you need new bearings, gaskets and other gold-plated parts that are out of stock but can be ordered from some foreign country.

Allowing for the wrong part to arrive, shipped back, reordered, retro-fitted and installed, it might be Thanksgiving before you get your boat back.

Still on the River Denial, you think maybe you’ll outsmart your boat, pick it up and use it anyway. After all, it was just a small noise and you’ll be more careful to avoid top end until the sound subsides. After that you plan to take it to another marina where they will know more about your particular model.

Do you even know how irrational this plan of action is? How doomed you are at this point?

This is insanity at its worst, and your boat knows this.

You may also invite a bunch of friends with you to the lake for this ill-fated voyage.

That’s a bold but stupid move.

Now you’ll inevitably be stranded in open water trying every trick you know to start your balky engine and limp back to shore while your friends at first feign sympathy, irritation and then despair at the situation you’ve dragged them into.

How do I know these things?

I learned to water ski when I was 5 years old and have been hooked on boating ever since. I love the water, the feeling of cruising a lake at full speed, skiing, or putting along the shoreline at night as the sun sets on the horizon. Nothing brings more a sense of freedom.

And the good days shared with friends and family are cherished memories.

But boating this long, I've also tasted the bad.

I've seen motors burn up - one of my boats caught fire on the highway (don't ask). I've seen wheels go flat or fall off trailers en route. I've seen a two-cent screw almost destroy a boat after working its way out of an alternator and locking up the belts.

There also have been propellers destroyed by unfamiliar waters, engines rebuilt, outdrives fail, water pumps quit - you name it, I've seen it.

I'm not a risk-taker and have a healthy respect for the water being a former lifeguard and water safety instructor, but boating is a challenging endeavor that will inevitably put one at odds with nature.

Maybe man wasn't meant to operate an engine on water. That the very idea of putting the internal combustion engine on a lake is as contrary as mixing dogs and cats.

I question why a car can run an additional 20,000 miles with an engine knock that would stop a boat in its wake.

But I persevere. My love of boating weighed against the odds always takes me back to the lake where I put in, fire it up and ease on the throttle until I'm at cruising speed feeling that same thrill once again.

Then, I tune my ear to the hum of the engine, listen intently, pray for just one more trouble-free day and tell myself it's all worth it.