

# DIVER DOWN! - SERIOUS THREAT ON FLORIDA WATER

By Stu Jones

By the time this issue of Powerboating in Paradise Magazine is in full circulation, National Safe Boating Week, May 22-28, 2022, will have just passed. Regardless of what hat I am wearing, whether editor of this publication, or President of Florida Powerboat Club which is operating in its 30th year, boating safety is as subject that should not just be half hour topic in a captains meeting before a poker run, but rather a "mindset" that takes top priority on any given day, every time we get into our boats and turn the keys.

While common safety practices are second nature to experienced boaters, there are still many boaters who need to have constant reminders about the most basic of safety practices, especially in the performance boating arena. The Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission (FWC) recently released its 2021 Boating Accident statistics, and it is clear that Florida remains the state with the highest frequency of boating accidents, but sadly Florida also has the worst record for serious injuries and fatalities, (70 deaths last year) so we clearly have to do better to reduce these numbers.



## HERE ARE SOME OF THE KEY GUIDELINES THAT REQUIRE CONSTANT ATTENTION BY BOATERS:

**WEARING PFD'S:** I don't know why this is such a hard point to hit home, but one statistic I noticed is that of 70 fatalities, the largest number of deaths were related to passengers being thrown overboard while the vessel was underway. While this may not be as serious in smaller boats or cruisers that operate under 30mph, the same cannot be said in the performance boat sector, where speeds average 70-100mph at times. For these reasons, PFDs on poker runs are highly recommended by FPC management. And for those boats that average higher speeds in the 75mph plus range, the racing style lifeline jacket is the most suitable application.

**KILL SWITCH LANYARDS:** On a recent FPC poker run event, an outboard cat landed awkwardly in some chopping conditions, stuffing a sponson and hooking hard, almost rolling over. All four occupants were tossed into the water about 60+ mph, and thankfully all wearing good PFD's. They were immediately rescued by another poker run boat, but their boat engines did not shut down because of a faulty kill switch lanyard. When the boat righted itself, it drove miles with no crew and crashed on the shoreline, thankfully with no injuries, but the boat was damaged seriously. When a driver uses a kill-switch lanyard, that does not kill the motors, then the system was never TESTED properly. These lanyards must be tested before they can be relied on, and once proven...must be worn properly. FPC will be focusing more attention on this issue for future poker runs, putting great emphasis on the proper use of engine kill lanyards.

**IMPROPER LOOKOUT OR "WATCH":** One of the requirements in Maritime law and Rules of the Road collision-avoidance guidelines, is to maintain constant watch as the vessel proceeds on course. FWC reported that 44% of the boating accident collisions that occurred, were due to 'Operator inattention or improper lookout.' In today's performance boating arena, this task can rarely be done effectively by captain alone, simply because of the many distractions that come from multiple sources.

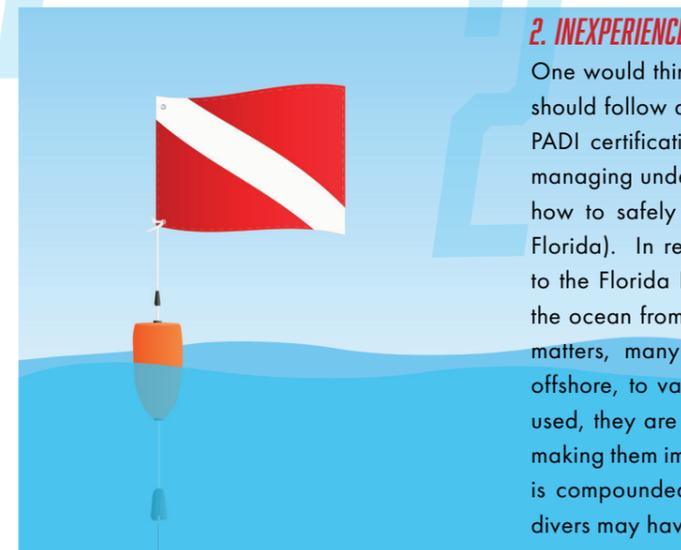
New boats have so many gauges and gadgets, giant highly detailed GPS screens with engine monitoring data, a stereo command center, engine control instruments, shifters, gauges, trim and tab buttons and VHF radio...not to mention cell phones that can lead to distracting text messaging.

This equation is further complicated with the increasing trend of center console boats, which have robust T-top supports and windshield frames that create far more visual obstructions than the old school performance boats that were once commonplace in the performance boating scene. Another factor is the greater number of passengers, since these large center consoles can often carry 15-20 crew giving a captain more distractions than ever before. Therefore, it is important to have one or possibly two additional crew members to take watch at the helm alongside the driver, to assist with this important "watch" task.

## GENERAL WARNINGS - CHALLENGES OF FLORIDA BOATING:

**1. INEXPERIENCED & CARELESS BOATERS:** Thousands of Americans discovered recreational boating during Covid, and in the wake of the pandemic we more (new) boaters on the waters than ever before. This generally means more inexperienced boaters are out there than ever before, and it requires every driver to take extra

caution, especially on weekends and in congested areas where rental fleets of PWC, pontoon boats and runabout rentals, is at an all-time high. Be on the lookout for these boaters, as they are the ones most likely to cross your path when you least expect it!



**2. INEXPERIENCED BEACH-ACCESS SCUBA DIVERS:** This is a growing threat in Florida! One would think certified scuba drivers are licensed for this adventure sport and should follow a code of conduct when it comes to safety. Sadly, many do not. A PADI certification course teaches all the dos and don'ts of equipment use and managing underwater pressure and oxygen gauges, but little is addressed about how to safely enjoy diving in a high-density powerboating environment (like Florida). In recent months, along coastal waterways from Palm Beach County to the Florida Keys, there has been an increase in solo scuba divers who enter the ocean from beach access points, using no dive support boat. To complicate matters, many preserve their air supply, by surface-swimming up to a mile offshore, to various reef destinations. While the mandatory dive flags are often used, they are extremely small, and frequently lean over or tip in the light swell, making them impossible to see when approaching in any powerboat. This problem is compounded by the faster closing speed in a performance boat, and these divers may have no way to escape a tragic encounter.

**3. DIVERS SEPARATED FROM SUPPORT BOAT:** This happens quite often and has the same outcome as the above scenario. Often when scuba divers are underwater, they fall victim to currents that push them far away from their support boat. Even with use of small drift flags, these flags can be compromised by wind and waves, rendering them invisible to a naked eye from one

hundred yards or more. On an early weekend in May, the FPC crew encountered a two-man dive team on the surface, over one mile offshore, and their support boat was not in site. Only when we stopped to assist, did the support boat notice our position and respond. We have seen many near misses in recent months, and this is becoming a serious threat.

## ADVICE TO BOATERS RUNNING THESE FLORIDA WATERWAYS:

**1** Stay well offshore! 1.5+ miles is a good rule of them. Divers rarely make it out this far, so it's not likely you will encounter this accident threat.

**2** Stay several hundred yards clear of (any) vessel that appears to be stationary or anchored. Even if you cannot SEE a dive flag, it is always best to assume there are divers down.

**3** Pay attention to your GPS and local waters. Any reef or shallower areas along coastal waters will often attract scuba diving enthusiasts and recreation fishermen. Stay well clear of these areas, there is no need to get close to them.

