

Gauging Ground Tackle

Choosing an Anchoring System Depends on Personal Needs

BY PETER PISCIOTTA

Even in an election year, politics won't start a debate around a yacht club bar as quickly as the topic of anchoring. There are dozens of different designs, all with adherents and test data — often factory sponsored — promising salvation for erstwhile drifters. But just as opinions of candidates are based on individual political agendas, opinions of ground-tackle systems are based on personal boating agendas (where you're sailing) and your vessel.



Anchor choices vary based on bottom composition. A swivel between the shackle and anchor (right) would help this rode.

Ground tackle is all equipment used during anchoring and includes the anchor, the rode (usually line, chain and sometimes cable), the vessel attachment scheme and a retrieval mechanism (roller and windlass).

The Hook

Anchors come in four basic styles: Fisherman anchors (like Popeye's tattoo), fluke anchors (the Danforth is the best-known), plow anchors

(such as the CQR) and claw-style anchors (like the Bruce). There is no perfect anchor for all situations.

For one thing, no single anchor works in all bottom materials. Fisherman anchors grab rocks, fluke anchors sink deeply in mud, claw anchors set quickly on short scope, and the weighted, pointy end on plow anchors penetrates grassy or hard mud bottom.

Second, there is more to consider than just holding



WALT STEARNS (TOP); PETER PISCIOTTA (INSET)

power. What if the wind shifts or the tide turns? How will the anchor be stored? Selecting the right anchor involves several factors that include ability to quickly set, initial holding power, ability to reset after veering, anchor strength and stowability.

If you anchor only locally, where bottom conditions do

not vary and you are unlikely to face storm conditions, then a single, moderately sized anchor may be all you need. But the farther you venture, the more varied conditions you will face and the more flexibility you will need. Experienced cruisers often carry three or more anchors of varying types and sizes.

Getting Connected

Anchor rode discussions are usually brief: "Do you have chain or rope?" Chain rode resists chafe, is easily retrieved by a windlass and is strong. But it's also heavy and does not stretch to absorb shock loads.

Perhaps the best all-around rode is a couple hundred feet of chain backed by several hundred feet of rope just in case you need extreme scope for a storm. It's lightweight, strong, flexible and adaptable for multiple situations. Here are some guidelines for anchor rode:

■ Include a swivel at the anchor end of the rode, but do not attach it directly to the anchor, where it will bind if side-loaded when the boat veers. Attach a shackle in between; a long-link, straight shackle is best and often comes with the anchor.

■ Chain/rope splices allow a rode to be retrieved by a combination windlass gypsy. Surprisingly, these splices are very strong — tests show chain links stretched and deformed before the splice failed. But the splice needs to be periodically renewed. The best practice is to install

an oversize link in the end of the rode.

■ Chafe is the No. 1 enemy of rope rode. Bow chocks often look attractive but can saw through line in a half-hour of heavy weather.

■ Chain rode benefits from elasticity. A snubber is simply a line of rope (usually three-strand nylon because it's stretchy) connected in-line. It does not need to be fancy. A long, heavy dock line attached to the chain with a rolling hitch works well, and the equipment is already aboard. Attach the loop end to a bow cleat and let out extra chain so the snubber takes the load.

■ If you're using an all-chain rode, add 20 feet of rope to the end so you can cut it quickly if you ever need to abandon the rode.

Before an offshore pas-

sage, rode should be faked into the anchor locker by manually guiding it from below to prevent it from bouncing around and possibly becoming knotted. New rope rode needs to be fed in off a spool so that it does not develop "twist-knots."

Bring It Back

Ground tackle is heavy — chain weighs several pounds per foot, and getting it all back aboard and stowing it properly is heavy work. Here are some tips to consider to make anchor retrieval easier:

■ Do not use the windlass to drag the boat. Take up slack in the rode, then pause — the weight of the rode will pull the boat forward, slowly building inertia — then take up the new slack. Repeat until the bow is directly over the anchor.

The anchor should break free easily.

■ If the anchor is well set, don't overload the windlass trying to break it free. Be patient and the anchor may break free on its own. If not, snub the rode and put the boat in gear. Take your time and use natural forces to your benefit, not brute strength.

■ When anchored, attach the rode to a cleat or chain stopper rather than let the windlass take the load. Side-loading is hard on the machinery, and cleats are designed to take the load.

■ Anchors on rollers should have secure attachments beyond windlass tension, such as a pin through the roller cheeks and a line securing the tackle in place. A loose anchor in a seaway will cause severe damage, and a pitching bow is no place to haul

and secure an errant anchor.

■ Develop a simple set of intuitive hand signals to communicate between the bow and the helmsman. Remember, the helmsman cannot see the angle of the rode and will rely on the bowman's guidance for proper positioning.

■ Bow rollers should be big and well-supported. The cheeks should be fair and flared to guide the rode aboard without chafe or binding. There should be a bail that keeps the line from jumping off the roller.

Consider installing an anchor washdown system. These keep mud and debris off the rode and extend their life while keeping the foredeck clean.

For more on ground-tackle systems, visit www.powercruisingmag.com.