

# KEVO'S BOATING TIPS

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## Personal Flotation Devices

**W**ith April being "Opening Month" for the Northern California boating season, it seems appropriate to discuss life jackets, i.e. "PFDs." (Everyone's favorite subject.)

According to the U.S. Coast Guard nothing would reduce boating accident fatalities more than universal life jacket wear.

Now, I'm not naïve enough to think that anything I say is going to get everyone out there to stop everything and put on your life jackets. But I do think there are some relatively easy precautionary measures that all responsible boaters could do to make their boating experience safer and more fun.

Before I go any further I have a confession to make: **Until recently, I was the biggest offender I know when it came to not wearing a life jacket while on the water.** I'm a good swimmer. Cold water doesn't bother me. (I grew up surfing on Long Island where in the winter the water gets down to 37 degrees.) And after all, I'm an experienced boater... nothing could happen to ME!

## I Came To My Senses

Then I started thinking: I'm a boating instructor. I'm sometimes on four or five different boats/yachts per week. I'm (usually) not familiar with the specific layout of these boats. Cleats, fenders, dock lines and many other potential hazards lay waiting for me to trip over.

My instruction philosophy is that in order to learn, the client needs to be at the helm at least 90 percent of the time we are under way. This means that I am de facto the first mate in addition to the instructor.

Picture it... I'm on the swim platform coiling a dock line when all of a sudden my inexperienced client "*hits it*" accidentally. I'm gone. No question

about it. No big deal right? I can swim. I'm comfortable being in the water. The problem is now I've got a novice at the helm of a yacht he/she doesn't know how to handle and he/she has to come and get me. No way! I'll tell the student to stop the boat and I'll swim to it. (Not a pretty picture, is it?)

## A Simple Answer

So what to do? I found the answer. **WEAR A LIFE JACKET.** (Actually, my wife found the answer as she was slapping me upside the head.) But I hate those bulky life jackets. And let's face it: it's hard to look *stylish* wearing a big bulky orange life jacket.

Well ladies and gentlemen, ***we don't have to take it anymore.*** There's a brand of life jackets called "Suspenders" that are much less bulky, easy to don and very effective at saving your life. To get a look at these little wonders go to [www.suspenders.com](http://www.suspenders.com).

Basically, there are four types. One is for offshore sailing where you need a harness. (This is pretty hard core.) The next is the same as the first without the harness. Both of these have an explosive CO2 charge which is activated by a trigger containing baking soda. When the baking soda gets wet, the charge goes off and the jacket inflates. Put simply, the moment you hit the water this PFD automatically inflates. (Very cool!)

The third type and the one I wear has the CO2 cartridge but is set off by pulling a ripcord. I chose this one because I have a kayak and didn't want the PFD to go off by mistake. The fourth type needs to be manually blown up by blowing into a tube. These are strictly for "floaties" like kayaks and such — not advisable for serious boating. By the way, none of these qualify as PFDs by law enforcement or Coast Guard unless they are actually being worn.

## Here's What You Do

But enough about my epiphany! Here's what I'd like to suggest...

First, get those PFDs you stored last year out of their compartment. If they still have the wrapper on **TAKE IT OFF!** They are not legal with the wrapper on. Next, check for dry rot, frayed straps and clarity of the instructions printed on the vest. If you can't read it, it is not legal. Toss them if they

are not perfect.

Next, mark each PFD in relation to who is potentially going to wear it with a magic marker. Place them in order in a compartment everyone knows. When you pull them out, everyone should know which one is theirs.

Finally, do a PFD drill. Simulate a mayday and order all aboard to don life jackets. **Time it.** You'll be amazed. It's not that easy and let's face it, if you need a life jacket, you probably need it NOW! Practice the drill until everyone has it down.

Just to be clear about which vessels need to have PFDs: Any vessel over 16 ft. in length needs to have one (USCG approved) PFD for everyone onboard and they have to fit. In addition, you need to have a "throwable" PFD such as a cushion with handles or a "ring" with handles readily available.

OK... Here's the deal... If we can turn the "*wear your PFD*" debate into a "*fashion & status*" debate I think we can get somewhere. Picture it... you are tooling along and you see a boat full of people having fun, looking *maaaavelous* and wearing these really cool PFDs. They seem to be very comfortable and are not "*obnoxious orange.*" You say to your spouse/partner: "Hey, why don't we have those cool PFDs?" It could start something. (This is exactly how folks started wearing helmets for bicycle riding and snow skiing/snow boarding.)

Hey! Your reach should exceed your grasp. Could happen... Until then let's focus on checking those PFDs, identifying whose is whose and doing the drill.

Be safe, have fun & happy boating! Remember, feedback is appreciated. You can e-mail me at [Kevin@pacificpowerboating.com](mailto:Kevin@pacificpowerboating.com) or call 925/890-8428. 