



SKIP NOVAK

IT IS A MEASURE OF GOOD SEAMANSHIP THAT, SHOULD THE RUDDER FAIL, YOU DON'T IMMEDIATELY THINK OF THE RESCUE SERVICES



hat a pleasure to read in the December issue about the couple who sailed themselves halfway across an ocean after a complete rudder failure. No rescue was called out, this being my point. Granted, they had much support and advice via the cruising net, but as we all know the stories are legion of boats being towed in by overly stretched rescue resources, for all sorts of reasons, many of which were unnecessary.

You can consider systems on board such as the rig with sails and of course the steering system as fundamental. Engine and propulsion system also, but debatable as secondary. Sailing back to a mooring or an anchorage, if not a jetty, should be doable, for safety's sake.

If you are unhappy about this, I suggest you should practise for when the engine fails, as it surely will do, at some point in your sailing life. Getting towed in because of engine failure is unnecessary and just bad form.

“THERE WERE LASHINGS HERE, LASHINGS THERE, A LINE TO HOLD THE END OF THE SWEEP AND ANOTHER TO KEEP IT FROM SKYING”

If the rig comes down – and remember it takes the failure of only a single part of the many pins and fittings to bring down a rig – thinking about how you would set up a jury rig with enough mast and sail out of the rubble left over is an exercise worth spending some thought on. Spare parts, materials, tools and a plan is what I mean.

Ditto rudders and steering systems. It is a bragging point that in my entire sailing career I have never lost a rig. But the bragging stops there when it comes to rudders – and for that matter a keel and when you lose one of those you are surely screwed.

Rudder shaft sheared

To save undue embarrassment I will recount only one incident. It was 1990 and we were on passage through the Southern Ocean from South Island, New Zealand to Chile to begin our second Antarctic season. *Pelagic* was 800 miles from the Straits of Magellan when the hollow

steel rudder shaft sheared off above the top section of the swing lifting rudder.

This was not a sudden failure, as the blade had already started to flag in the heavy swell after the heel support gave way. We had attached a tagline to the rudder so when the shaft finally sheared as expected we retrieved it with the spinnaker halyard with some drama and lashed it to the deck, just on nightfall.

Feeling helpless

After sleeping fitfully on the dilemma we woke at first light, driven out of our bunks by the sickening roll and feeling at first quite helpless. Chile was a long way away. It would have taken a full naval and possibly an air operation to locate us and pull us in. This was never contemplated, and after all it was downwind to Chile.

It took a full day and then continuous tweaking for Hamish Laird and I to build a sweep out of our aluminium spinnaker pole with a piece of plywood attached to the end by threaded rod, all of which we had in stock. We went through three reductions in the plywood blade before we got it right, which in fact was not much wider than the diameter of the pole.

It was quite a rig with two steering lines led from the end of the sweep through blocks on the quarters and then to winches, the port one led across the cockpit to the starboard so one person could ease and trim. There were lashings here, lashings there, a line to hold the boat end of the sweep up and another to keep it from skying, with our fenders as cushions.

Although steering was strenuous, we averaged just under 100 miles per day and luckily arrived off Cabo Pillar at the entrance to the Magellan Straits in a rare spell of settled weather. Motoring on to Punta Arenas was straightforward.

We had avoided what could have been an even worse situation in calling out a rescue knowing that a tow through the Southern Ocean might mean abandonment of the boat. Clear thinking, calm and weighing it all up was what was required.

The satisfaction felt when we cast that first dockline ashore was almost worth the pain.