

■ ASK THE EXPERT



Twin Engine Boat Handling With Capt. Wilson Sheppard

Captain Wilson Sheppard is a United States Coast Guard Licensed Captain with 100 Ton Master Inland / 100 Ton Mate Near Coastal certification. Sheppard has over 18-years experience on the water. He has performed many deliveries up and down the California coastline and gives boating seminars and teaches on-the-water boat handling throughout Southern California, particularly Marina del Rey. He can be contacted by phone at 818-455-5984 or by email at wilson@captainwilson.com.

So you've owned both single and twin engine powerboats. Which do you prefer?

Comparatively, a single engine boat is less expensive to operate, maintain, and repair. Twin engine boats have better maneuverability (excluding bow thrusters) and with two engines you have two chances to get to your destination. I really can't pick one over the other as each has advantages and disadvantages.

How do you describe basic twin engine boat handling?

I use an analogy that relates handling a twin engine boat to riding a bicycle. If you picture the handlebars on a bike, it has a left grip and right grip for the rider's hands. Similarly, a twin engine boat has controls for port and starboard engines. I am specifically referring to the gear controls (forward – neutral – reverse), not the throttle controls. For training purposes, the rudders/outboards/outdrives are centered and the engines are at idle speed.

To turn a bike to the left, you pull the left grip toward you and push the right grip forward. With twin engines, you pull the port engine control toward you (which is reverse gear) and push the starboard engine control away (forward gear). The boat turns to port.

To turn a bike to the right, you pull the right grip toward you and push the left grip forward. With twin engines, you push the port engine control away from you (forward gear) and pull the starboard engine control towards you (reverse gear). The boat turns to starboard.

Reverse on a twin engine boat is similar to using only one hand to turn the bike. When you pull the left grip toward you, the bike turns left. When you pull the right grip toward you, the bike turns right. Therefore, putting the port engine into reverse while starboard is in neutral turns the boat to port. Likewise, putting the starboard engine into reverse while port is in neutral turns the boat to starboard.

As the lesson progresses, I point out that as the bow of the boat swings in one direction, the stern swings in the opposite. For example, with the port engine in reverse and starboard in forward, the bow swings to port while the stern swings to starboard. Recognizing this is especially useful in close quarter maneuvering and docking.

So what is the biggest problem you see with novice twin engine boat operators?

Docking. Most beginners can manage to get out of a slip, but have trouble getting back in it. Novice powerboaters always want to use power. Sometimes they use too much, other times they use too little. It really depends on the situation. If you're backing away from a dock, you may only need to bump the engines in and out of reverse just enough to gain the momentum required to slowly drift away. If you're approaching a slip, you may need to use momentary bursts of reverse power to slow the boat and align it with the dock.

That being said, what docking advice do you have?

Docking maneuvers should be well-planned. Even when departing from or returning to your own slip. If you have crew aboard, let them know your plan and their role in the docking process. Even if they just need to be seated, stay out of the way, and/or do nothing. If something unexpected occurs (large wake or departing boat) or in an emergency (engine or prop failure), be prepared to abort a docking attempt or adjust your approach.

When departing you should be aware of the wind and water conditions. The speed and direction of wind and water will affect the handling of your boat. A boater can determine the direction



and speed of the wind by looking at nearby flags and burgees. Also, observe the direction and speed of water moving around your boat.

Determine how your departure will be affected by the force of the wind, the water, or both. For example, if the wind is blowing you out of the slip, you won't have to use much power to drift out. You may alternate using your engines in reverse to back the boat straight. Once clear of the dock, you can split the engines (one forward, one reverse) to swing the bow in the intended direction of travel. You may need to momentarily increase your speed to overcome the strength of the wind. Notice that this entire departure is accomplished without using the steering wheel.

When returning to a slip, check the wind and water conditions again. You may need to adjust your approach to compensate for the condition(s) affecting your boat. For example, if the wind is blowing you toward the slip, position your boat into the wind to give it room to slide while turning.

What other advice can you provide regarding twin engine handling?

Practice, practice, practice. Practice when the wind and water are calm. In Marina del Rey that generally means early mornings. I use weather.com for hourly forecasts, but there are many weather outlets that provide useful updates. Practice maneuvers using only the engine controls. Rent a slip at Chace Park with no neighbors to practice docking. While there, be sure to practice side-docking at the Visitor's Dock. Remember to take it slow. When you go slow, bad things happen slowly. With enough practice, you won't even break a sweat while everyone is watching you skillfully squeeze between two large and expensive boats in a strong wind at the fuel dock.