

Rule of thumb

Below, when *Endurance's* anchor line came out of the bow roller, Ron Schaper tried to flip it back onto the roller and his hand became trapped. Right, the force on the line as it ran aft was sufficient to cut into the keel.

To the editor: Commercial fishing operations abound with heavily-loaded lines. My dad, Louis Schaper, Nantucket-born into a fishing schooner family, taught my brothers and me from an early age a seaman's respect for handling lines. As teens, we operated power winches, secured and released the myriad of cordage involved in ocean fishing in small boats.

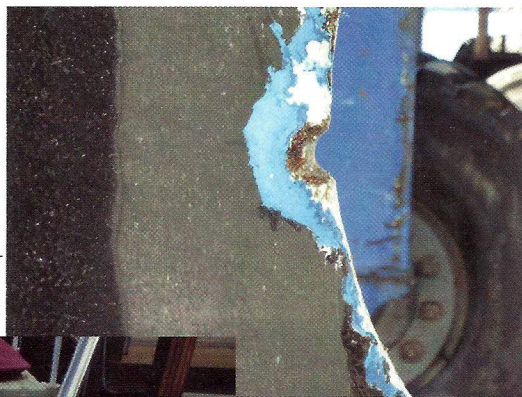
I was shocked the time that a straining cast iron snatch block exploded and ricocheted off my dad's head. He crumpled to his knees, hands to head,

then waved a bloody arm to acknowledge my uncle's call to him. Urgent radio calls, a rendezvous with the Coast Guard, an ambulance and surgery found my dad never losing consciousness and ending up with a metal plate installed in his head. It wasn't long until he was back fishing again. He hadn't done anything wrong. He knew and respected the sea and the forces he dealt with in fishing it. It was just an accident.

off to sleep in my bunk lulled by the soft patter of a moderate rain. Earlier in the day, my wife, Andrea, and I had a lovely Gulf Stream-assisted sail from Hillsboro Inlet to Palm Beach in readiness for an early charter the next morning.

Around midnight, there was a different "feel" to the boat. While not violent, it was enough to alert my inner pilot. Venturing on deck with a light rain jacket, I was quickly soaked through and chilled as a breeze with heavy rain had come up in a squall. Quickly changing to my full offshore foul weather gear, I saw from the bow that the anchor line ran sharply down our starboard hull to the keel.

This is a strong current area. When the tide was flooding and the wind was light, we swung south with it. Later, as the tide began to ebb, the boat must have circled and snagged on *Endurance's* wing keel. Then, after midnight, the current was running a good two-and-a-half knots. All the strain was directly on the anchor line running under the boat from starboard and out to the port beam. While I could turn the wheel and



Ron Schaper



Fifty years later, with thousands of sea-miles under my keel in everything from old leaky wooden boats to racing trans-Atlantic in a towering 257-foot clipper ship, we were in our 40-foot sloop, *Endurance*, securely anchored in a sheltered area with light winds. I drifted

the rudder felt clear of the line, I was not sure about the prop and shaft. With a couple of other boats anchored nearby, I was concerned about fouling them as we surged fore and aft.

I thought that if I could deploy another anchor over the bow, the load could be taken upon it, which would straighten us out bow-on to the current. As I was preparing that second anchor, I noted that the loaded anchor rode had jumped out of the roller. I decided to ease the windlass out a few feet to provide enough slack so that I could move the line back into the roller. The windlass whirred out the requested line, which I grasped in my right hand to flip back into the roller. In an instant the taught 5/8-inch nylon line snapped me forward, trapping my right thumb in the heavy aluminum anchor roller housing. I tried to reach back to the windlass switch with my foot, but could not reach it. I was literally trapped by my thumb between my 20,000-pound boat and the anchor line. I called out for Andrea, who snatched the emergency knife off the binnacle and came running to the bow.

Andrea quickly cut the heavily loaded anchor line, which allowed me to remove my severely mangled thumb from under the anchor line. I held my nearly severed thumb in my fingers thinking, "don't drop that thumb overboard...they can reattach it."

With the anchor line gone, *Endurance* ran with the wind and

current until Andrea fired up the engine and maneuvered us clear of the other boats. I took the helm as Andrea dove below for a bag of ice and towels. I plunged my thumb-clenched bloody hand into a bag of ice cubes and maneuvered to the nearby Sailfish Club docks in Palm Beach where we were met by emergency services. Despite a helicopter rush to surgery, my crushed thumb could not be saved.

Damage or loss of thumbs and fingers is, unfortunately, not unique. Here's the story of another experienced sailor who was participating in the 2012 Key West Race Week. "It was gusting over 25 knots," Arne Petersen explained to me, "as the crew of the 37-foot sloop got ready to douse the spinnaker at the end of the first race. The foredeck crew was unable to gather the foot quickly enough, and the spinnaker kept a full load when it traveled aft as the boat changed course after crossing the line. Trying desperately to pull in the spinnaker, I was pulled toward the metal shroud. In a split second I felt a sharp pain as the spinnaker hit the water and, acting as a brake, slapped my hand hard against the shroud. Looking down, my eyes were greeted by my left thumb hanging by 15 inches of tendon, having been broken and pulled off as it was entangled in the folds of the spinnaker."

And yet another story from a fellow member of Hillsboro Inlet Sailing Club: Bob Schuldenfrei had just engaged *Island Dream's*

transmission when he noticed a stern line still looped over the cleat. He lunged for the line and almost got it off the cleat before the boat snubbed the line, jamming his ring finger between it and the horn of the cleat. After surgery, Bob reflected on his accident saying, "I was the victim of reaction, not thought...here is where experience can work against you. A novice sailor, if he noticed the dock line at all, would have thought about how to get it off the cleat. I noticed it in milliseconds and my instincts commandeered my brain...and I almost got away with it."

The rule of thumb in all of this is that a line under load is a thing alive. The potential energy entrained in the line must be respected and handled accordingly. Commercial mariners are taught to never stand in the bight of a line or in the direct line of pull when the line is under tension. These cautions apply to all vessels — motor or sail. Despite a sailor's experience and familiarity, as both my dad and I, and Arne and Bob found out, accidents can happen quickly. The prudent sailor addresses these risks and remains prepared to deal with them, to sail another day.

—Ron Schaper spent the summers of his youth on a small island in New York's Great South Bay. He has captained, delivered, cruised and raced sailing yachts worldwide. Schaper currently sails and charts his Sabre 402 out of Fort Lauderdale, Fla. To learn more: CaptainRonYachtCharters.com.