



Training Day

With a bit of professional help, building nautical know-how can be child's play.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY PIERCE HOOVER

Teach your children well. Crosby, Stills and Nash certainly crooned those words with the best of intentions, but it's unlikely they were mariners. As more than one doting boating parent has discovered, what begins as a well-meaning transfer of generational wisdom too often devolves into alternate bouts of shouting and pouting.

So when my son Nash arrived at that certain age when adults suddenly know nothing, I decided to seek professional help. But there would be no family counseling or group therapy for us. Instead, we packed our sea bags and headed for Fort Myers, Florida.

For more than two decades, Vic and Barb Hansen have been helping landlubbers take the first steps toward becoming old salts through a series of hands-on sail and powerboat courses created by their company, Southwest Florida Yachts, which runs the Florida Sailing & Cruising School. Though adults usually enroll in the company's Basic Powerboat Handling (P-101) class, Barb agreed that an enthusiastic 11-year-old boy should have no problem following the program.

REPORTING FOR DUTY. Nash Hoover at the helm ready to go (left). Backing into a slip (below).



Educational professionals might call it immersive learning. We called it living on a boat. The evening prior to our class, Nash and I arrived at the docks of Southwest Florida Yachts and loaded our duffel bags aboard the 42-foot Grand Banks *Buena Vista*. For the next three days, this well-maintained classic would be both our home and our floating classroom.

Nash was, of course, excited by his surroundings. After exploring every nook, cranny and storage locker, he wanted to start the engines and go somewhere, anywhere. He remained equally keen to cast off when Capt. Chris Day came aboard the following morning. But the skipper had other ideas.

"Before you go anywhere on a boat, you have to make sure everything is in order, and the first priority is keeping us afloat," Day instructed. He went on to explain the concepts of seacocks. We spent the next half-hour locating each and every seacock on board and then tracing water flows from inlet to outlet. It was the first phase of what Day called a forensics approach to the ship's systems.

Nash had minimal familiarity with the concepts of internal combustion engines and DC power — a lack I'd assumed would preclude him from taking on the engine room. But Day knew better and employed a holistic approach to propulsion, cooling and power consumption. "Diesels need three things: air, water and fuel," he said. "Find where they get each one of these, and trace the way it comes into the engine and goes out." And just like that, the cooling, fuel and exhaust systems became child's play.

By treating each system as a puzzle and a treasure hunt, Nash developed a remarkably thorough understanding of the boat's inner workings within a couple of hours. There's water flow at the strainer but not at the exchange? Then the problem must be the pump, and so forth. Just before



FLOATING CLASSROOM. Instead of reading, lectures and memorization, Nash immerses in every aspect of boat operation, from engine checks (above) to route planning with Chris Day (right).

Trawler Training

For more than two decades, the Florida Sailing & Cruising School, which is a division of Southwest Florida Yachts, has offered not only sail and powerboat charters, but also a suite of both sail and powerboat training programs.

The class we enrolled in was P-101, an immersive three-day program that provides hands-on instruction to prepare students to crew or skipper a single- or twin-engine vessel of 32 to 42 feet in length. Many graduates of this class move right to P-102, which builds on the basics by having the participants plan and execute a live-aboard cruise of at least two days in the coastal waters of southwestern Florida.

After completing these programs, most participants gain the confidence to plan subsequent bareboat charters or take command of their own live-aboard cruisers. For those wishing to gain even more cruising experience in a training environment, the company also offers a seven-day program that includes some offshore time and takes participants as far afield as Key West. For more information on powerboat training programs, visit flsailandcruiseschool.com, or browse swfyachts.com for charter information.

lunch, we used this newfound knowledge to play a game: Day would usher us aboard one of the various other powerboats in the company's charter fleet, then task Nash with finding seacocks, tracing fuel lines, identifying oil and coolant reservoirs and understanding the organization of the batteries and electrical panel.

Over sandwiches in the salon, we discussed the use of the VHF radio and performed a radio check, then we had our first look at nautical charts. Next came a tour of the deck and a bit of practice with the lines. Then it was finally time for the big moment — almost.



MASTER AND COMMANDER. Though close-quarters boat handling is initially the most exciting aspect of the training, the program also deals with navigation and rules of the road. Nash ties up the boat after pulling into the slip at Cape Harbor (above). The reward: a burger at Rumrunners (left).

"Nash, I want you to go down and make sure everything looks

good in the engine room; check the oil and fluids," Day instructed. "Then, if you think everything is OK, you can start the engines and cast off." I figured there would be a bit more of a lecture on propulsion and thrust and throttle usage, but again, Day allowed that learning to happen organically, down at the far end of the canal where there were some vacant slips and plenty of room to maneuver.

After interfering with Nash's first docking attempts, I realized the best thing I could do was sit down and be quiet. Under the captain's more patient tutelage — which included considerably more trial and error than I would have allowed — Nash began to develop an intuitive feel for twin-engine boat handling.

As we returned to our slip, I expected Day to take the helm. After all, there was a pretty fair crosswind, minimal margin for error between the adjacent cruisers and a gaggle of onlookers at the flanking waterfront restaurant. Nash balked. I suggested it might be a bit much on his first day. That challenge was all it took to boost his confidence; he made it look easy.

Day wasn't particularly surprised by his young pupil's progress. Over the past 12 years, he's introduced hundreds of neophytes of all ages and lifestyles to the cruising fraternity. Most often, his students are couples who are either new to boating or who wish to hone their skills before moving up from small boats to live-aboard cruisers. But he has also hosted families with children, and, in general, he feels youngsters really start to get it at about 12 and up.

As the course progressed and Nash's confidence and skill level continued to rise, I realized that one of the shortcomings of my own teaching methods had been saying too much too often. Rather than go into a long lecture on lateral markers, I should just take him out into

the bay and let him try to figure out the way home. "Red right returning" means a lot more when you have to live by it instead of memorizing it from a textbook. And despite my good intentions, I was sometimes guilty of being a "helicopter" parent when he was at the helm — circling too close, providing far too much advice and information in rapid fire and sometimes usurping command rather than allowing Nash to work out new problems or assume full responsibility for a task or skill.

In this respect, our father-son relationship wasn't all that different from that of the couples Day works with, he told me. "You may have a couple where one is really enthusiastic but the other is just going along for the ride or has just enough knowledge to play the overbearing know-it-all," he said. "If you can get both parties involved as a team, they end up learning more and having a better time. Even if the wife never plans on getting down in the engine room, it's a great confidence-builder to understand how everything works."

Proof of this concept came on day three when Nash marshaled all of his newfound nautical knowledge and took command on a voyage of discovery. Day placed a nautical chart on the salon table and pointed to a cove some 10 miles from our position. "Right there is a restaurant that serves a good cheeseburger," he said. "Think you can get us there?"

Day wasn't just talking about steering the boat. Nash first sat down with charts and dividers to create a detailed log of headings, distances and estimated times to waypoints. He then performed a complete prestart inspection of the ship's systems, fired up the diesels, instructed us on line handling and coned the boat out of the slip. Three channel junctions and an hour and a half later, he eased us flawlessly into a side-tie slip at Cape Harbor, just down the wharf from Rumrunners restaurant. The burger was good, with mustard and ketchup, but a healthy dose of newfound confidence made it that much better. ♣