

No More Mr. No Shoes

by Steve D'Antonio

Removing your shoes before going aboard is a time-honored courtesy that applies to all and is especially important for those working on a boat. When I ran a boatyard, I had run-ins with countless shoe offenders. Going aboard a customer's boat on the hard to check on the progress of two canvas makers, I was aghast to see that they had walked across the muddy gravel yard and straight up and across the deck, tracking clumps of earth and stones. The lack of attention and forethought, particularly for seasoned professionals, was mystifying and infuriating. Sadly, it was not an exception. On another occasion I stuck my head out of the engineroom hatch of a recently finished build to confront a pair of heavy work boots with stones stuck in the treads just inches from my nose. A mechanic from the engine dealer had come aboard to run commissioning tests, with no regard for the pristine, varnished sole.

While I fully appreciate the reasons for the no-shoes rule, after more than three decades in the business and too many stubbed toes, lacerated soles, and a few painful slips and falls, I've reconsidered this deeply entrenched custom. Who among us hasn't slipped on a varnished step tread when wearing socks? While I'm lucky to never have been seriously injured, I've also witnessed falls that resulted in hospital visits, plaster casts, dislocations, and rehab.

A few years ago, I was taking temperature readings and measuring alternator output in the gleaming, immaculately gelcoated engineroom while sea-trialing a modern trawler-yacht. My foot slipped off the deck just aft of the engine, touched the rotating coupling, and was drawn downward. For a split second I envisioned myself being wrapped around the shaft. The coupling's set-screw seizing wire had caught my sock and briefly tugged my leg, but thankfully, my sock slid neatly off my foot. I sat dumbfounded for a moment

looking at my sock whirling around with the coupling. That inspired me to change some of my inspection protocols. Among other things, I wear (reader) safety glasses almost continuously while working aboard, and I wear shoes in all enginerooms, engineering spaces, and bilges, under way or at rest.

On another occasion, while walking barefoot through a dimly lit saloon of a vessel being commissioned, I failed to notice a yet-to-be-installed, upturned, overhead grabrail lying on the sole. As I quickly walked through the space, two of my toes were neatly bisected by one of the rail's stainless-steel web supports. That deep, painful, bloody mess left me limping and took weeks to heal.

While socks offer some protection (they probably would have helped in my collision with the grabrail), I regard them as a liability. Coupled with a varnished sole (especially gloss) or a new or recently cleaned gelcoated deck, they remind me of the scene from the movie *Risky Business* where a stocking-footed Tom Cruise streaks across the family home's polished living room floor lip-syncing Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock and Roll" into a candleholder. Ultimately, if an owner or builder insists those aboard go shoeless, barefoot is in some ways better.

At what point did this industry deem it wise or desirable to varnish the treads of steps and ladders, or shower gratings? Just days before writing this essay, I inspected a motoryacht whose engineroom sole was made of removable, slatted teak deck plates, each one varnished. Any varnished surface is dangerous to traverse in stocking feet, and even in shoes if there's any liquid on that surface (as is so often the case in an engineroom). Some builders marginally offset this by adding strips of nonskid near, but usually not on, the edges of stair treads, which require the most grip augmentation. While better than nothing, a stick-on

solution simply offsets atrocious footing that is still far more slippery than a proper nonskid surface.

It's time naval architects, boat builders, yards, and owners revisit these long-held, yet dangerous customs. Regulations established by OSHA and others do not condone working shoeless under any circumstances. One shudders to think of the liability for those injured while working at businesses that actively require their employees to go shoeless. Regulations and litigation aside, it's common sense that those working aboard should be afforded every opportunity to work safely and comfortably; that includes being allowed, even required, to wear shoes. While I'm not giving a pass to those subcontractors who tracked mud and gravel onto the deck, I think tradesmen and women can dedicate clean shoes for onboard use only, especially in engineering spaces (in cold weather I wear rubber-soled slippers to work in cabin spaces).

I implore everyone in our industry to stop varnishing step and ladder treads. We don't varnish teak weather decks, and because of that wise practice they provide excellent footing. Why not do the same for interior steps and ladders? While I see too many sailing vessels with varnished companionway ladder treads, some remain traditional virgin teak, with varnished mahogany or teak vertical handrails. The steps are aesthetically attractive, safe, and functional, too—an example to be followed industrywide. **PBB**

About the Author: For many years a full-service yard manager, Steve now works with boat builders and owners and others in the industry as Steve D'Antonio Marine Consulting. He is an ABYC-certified Master Technician and sits on that organization's Engine and Transmission and Hull and Piping Project Technical Committees. He is also technical editor of *Professional BoatBuilder*.