

Road RAGERS

A how not-to guide for the trailer-borne boat owner by Bob Maxwell

NEVER MIND lee shores, dragging anchors, currents and tides; the unprepared trailer sailor can get into worse strife before he even glimpses the briny blue.

This series of two articles grew out of the spate of mishaps on the road experienced by some of my fellow club members and myself over the last few Christmas/New Year holiday breaks; despite all of the hapless skippers being proficient handymen.

A friend of mine who shall not be named, but who would be instantly recognisable to his fellow club members, had just about every trailer disaster one could expect; in one day.

On a sweltering hot Boxing Day, he was towing his trailer-sailer on a 300km trip from Perth down south to Geopraphe Bay for the Christmas/New Year break. The total load on the tandem trailer was

easily nudging the two-tonne legal limit for a ball-and-socket towbar and the wheels were non standard.

He shredded a tyre, then soon afterwards, shredded another tyre. Having run out of spare tyres and without a tyre specialist open in the southern hemisphere that day, he left the boat on the roadside with his family. He undertook a round trip of about 150km to where he knew a fellow club member, with similar small-sized wheels, was hanging out, to beg (or steal) a spare for his trailer.

While he was away, more than a couple of highway vultures had to be shown that the boat was indeed "in possession". Finally, after returning with the precious replacement, he firmly (he thought) attached the borrowed wheel. Once more he was on the move, thinking: "I'm sure nothing more can go wrong."

Famous last words. The wheel studs

had been well greased in preparation for the journey. Considering the dust, flies and heat and his eagerness to get going, he did not tighten the wheel nuts sufficiently.

The borrowed wheel, obtained under so much sweat and anxiety, detached itself and spun off into the distance. By the time he discovered that he was towing with only three wheels on his trailer, he had no idea where the liberated wheel had gone.

With a bit of luck, he did find the wheel, which had crossed the verge, leapt a fence and careered along a railway line adjacent to the road. Luckily, it had not derailed a train. Bringing back the errant wheel, he then found most of the studs on the naked hub either sheared off or with mangled threads! Although he is the most laconic of Aussies, his first mate swears that after the last little problem, she didn't know if he was going to cry or have a temper tantrum.

He held his cool; just. But the first mate was so spooked by all these goings on that she has refused ever to be involved in any towing expeditions, ever again. So be warned!

Personal experience

The advice I am about to offer on towing boats does not come from a self-satisfied position of high virtue, but rather from the hard experience gained both from my own mistakes as well as those of others.

Over the years my exploits include inadvertently leaving on the brake anti-override (which prevents the brakes working if you want to reverse) in place and nearly burning out the brakes on my car on a steep descent.

On another occasion when I left the anti-override on, I found myself career-

ing along with all tyres on my wagon locked and smoking, with little indication that we were going to stop in time for traffic which suddenly banked up.

I've also had the trailer hand-brake come on of its own accord when I would rather that it didn't, shredded a tyre, disintegrated a wheel bearing and had the wheel nuts come loose resulting in a wheel disappearing into the bush, never to be seen again.

As a consequence, I had a similar problem with my first mate, who wouldn't be involved in any more towing expeditions, ever again, even though there wasn't even a hint of derailing trains.

On my trailering holidays I have passed boats on the side of the road that have left their trailers, trailers with wheel-less hubs that have plowed furrows in the bitumen. I have also seen the odd caravan near the highway in a state of matchwood, which is warning to those of us who tow boats.

All of these mishaps conjure visions of what terrible injury a runaway wheel or rampaging trailer might cause to some innocent person walking along the side of the road or driving in the opposite direction? The mere thought makes my stomach turn.

Mr Murphy?

"Why? ... " I hear you ask, "... in ten, 20 or 30 more years of motoring, have I never had similar problems with my car?" In 30 years of driving I have traversed outback Western Australia and Queensland many times, crossed the continent twice or thrice and done the usual commuting from an outer suburb.

Never have I lost a wheel nor shredded a tyre from my car, nor have I ever been too concerned about the torque on the wheel nuts or the state of the wheel bearings on my car. If a wheel bearing begins to make slight complaining noises, providing it was on a car, it could always be fixed next week or a bit later.

But the nature of trailering a boat is such that if something can go wrong it will. This is not due to Mr Murphy's influence, but due to the stresses which are placed on the brakes, bearings, tyres and other critical trailer parts, all of which are subjected to the worst kind of wear and tear possible.

This includes loading wheel assemblies and tyres to the limits of design,

frequent immersion in sea water and long idle periods in the blistering Australian sunshine, not to mention the favourite Aussie habit of towing trailers with second-hand, retreaded or just badly worn tyres.

The majority of trailers, up to the legal ball-and-socket towbar limit of two tonnes (WA), carry hubs, bearings and studs designed for the HD/HT series Holden. That sturdy line of vehicles is not known for frequent sea water immersion or designed to share a load of up to two or more tonnes.

In contrast, the design philosophy for boat trailers seems to be: "If you can do with one less axle, why not? Who would



want to put up with the expense and maintenance of an extra axle with attached tyres, bearings and springs?

It is the combination of high loads, sea water intrusion and poor vigilance regarding the status of tyres and bearings and studs that all add up to holiday hassles.

However, the scenario is not all doom and gloom. With the care and maintenance that I suggest in the follow-up article (*Australian Sailing* February), you may happily tow for thousands of kilometres with never a problem.

A few of my fellow club members and I have towed our boats right across the continent with nary a problem, purely because we were well prepared and vigilant.

To trail or not to trail?

A major decision I faced when looking

for a boat was whether to moor, pen or hard-stand the boat on a trailer.

If you are thinking of buying a boat of more than 30ft length, you will, in all likelihood be restricted to the expense of a pen or the vagaries of mooring.

For boats less than 30ft overall, trailering a boat is an attractive proposition considering that the costs of keeping a boat in a marina pen can be prohibitive for many, especially in WA on the ocean front.

So I decided to go for a club that offered a high-security hard stand with excellent nearby public-launching facilities.

I also believe that the maintenance problems associated with keeping a boat in the water — marine fouling, roosting sea birds, osmotic damage among them — far outweigh the hassles of maintaining a trailer; it's just that the consequences of poor trailer maintenance could be very risky.

Furthermore, most ordinary people like myself can just about afford the state, club and insurance requirements for a boat kept on a trailer. But we tend to avoid the responsibilities of keeping a boat on the hard stand and just hope that, "She'll be right" when we hook up the boat and head for distant holiday horizons.

Trailering also has the benefit of being able to tow your boat to favoured holiday spots that would otherwise take days or weeks of sailing time, usually battling against the prevailing winds for at least one direction of the trip.

The disadvantages of hard standing a boat include: The time it takes to launch and retrieve, unfamiliarity with reversing an oversized trailer, the hassles and damage or wear and tear that can go with berthing at a pier rather than in a pen, having to own a vehicle capable of pulling the combined load of boat and trailer.

But launching and retrieving quickly becomes a routine and the skills required for reversing a trailer into the water or into the hard stand parking bay soon become second nature, although it may take ten attempts to reverse your boat onto its hard-stand bay for the first few weeks.

You just need to be thick skinned and ignore smirking by the "old hands"; after all, a real man not only doesn't eat quiche, but he also knows how to reverse park his boat!



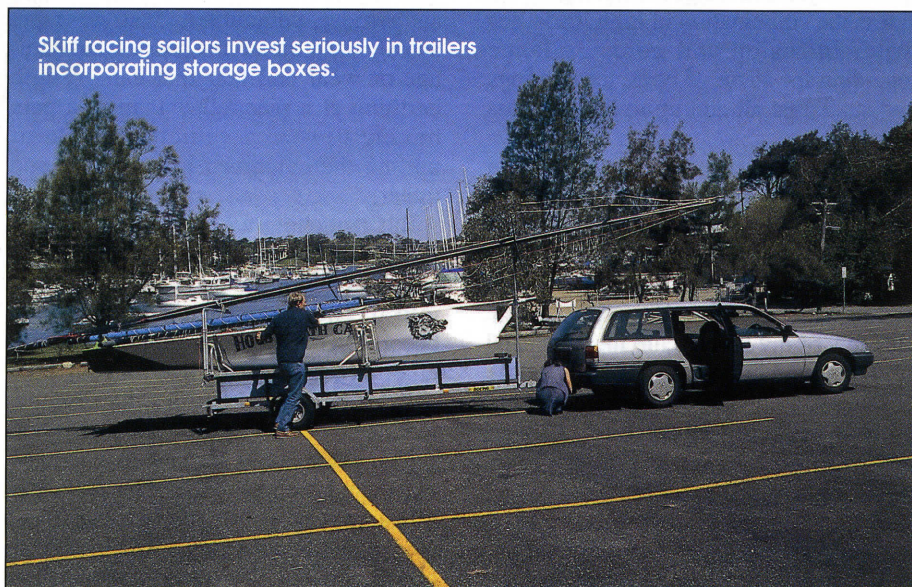
ABOVE: Trailering can get you to desirable locations beyond reach by sea, like Lake Macquarie for this congenial raft up. **RIGHT:** Etchells and a dinghy ready for the road.

Berthing at a pier requires crew that is calm and confident and can react quickly, because they have been properly versed by the skipper. It also requires a skipper who can bring the boat to smooth stop without any scrapes or dented pulpit rails; all of which comes with practice, especially as trailer sailers usually carry the smallest motors one can get away with to minimise weight.

However, berthing in strong winds can



Skiff racing sailors invest seriously in trailers incorporating storage boxes.



try the skills of the most experienced of skippers and the odd dent and scrape to paintwork are inevitable.

Tyre fenders on docks and even your own fenders can leave inevitable marks and wear and tear, but these blemishes pale into insignificance compared with the expense of coping with the insidious damage caused by marine growth and osmosis.

You do need a vehicle with the extra grunt required for boat retrieval. But most people drive cars with far more power than they would ever really need in a month of Sundays anyway and it seems to be only the cost-conscious minority who are cautious about the size of car they drive.

NEXT MONTH: How to avoid the many pitfalls in towing.