

# SCHOOL of

**GET SMART**—Want to become a master helmsman? You can learn the hard way, or you



can steal these lessons from those who have graduated at the head of their class.

FEW MARINERS HANDLE a boat as competently as a working charterboat captain. Whether an owner-operator, or in someone else's employ, these professionals are at the helm and on the water every day. That kind of sea time—and the experience that goes with it—makes for a skill level that few part-time captains or private boaters can match. To find out what a weekend warrior can learn from the members of this elite fraternity, I asked an all-star lineup of professional skippers to share the tips that have proved most important to their success at the helm. You'd expect the lessons that follow to be steeped in sea-sense. And you're right.

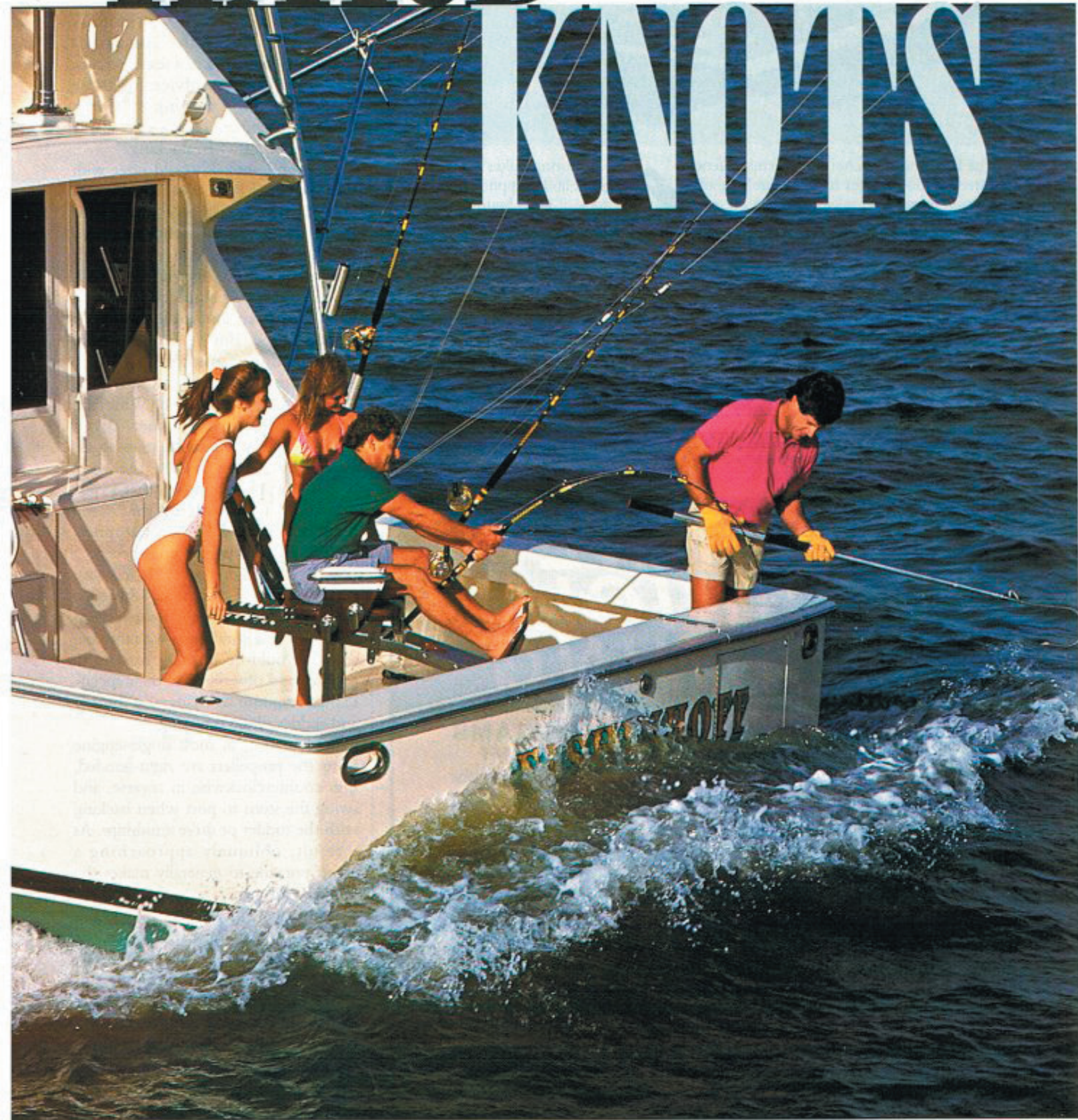


# HARD

Perfect your seamanship skills with these secrets from charterboat captains.

by Kevin Falvey

# KNOTS



outboards, the process is similar. If you happen to run bracket, or Euro-transom-mounted outboards, a tip is to trim the motors up just enough so that the column of water from the reversing propeller isn't thwarted by the transom. You'll probably find that what you lose in steerage is more than made up for with better stopping power and a more pronounced kick.

In all cases, the key is understanding how your boat responds to changes in throttle, rudder and direction. Once this becomes second nature, you'll be better prepared to concentrate on the variable challenges of wind, current and tight spots.

### **Being Weather-Wise Beats Being Otherwise**

Mark Twain once recounted having seen 136 different kinds of weather in a single day. Few boaters would dispute that the weather can and does change fast on the water. Our experts agreed, adding that having a Captain's license is no substitute for rough-weather seamanship experience. Lacking the opportunity to be at sea every day, how can you learn to contend with Mother Nature?

The pros attest there's plenty to be said for following your gut and using your head. Capt. Nick Savene of the charterboat *No Time*, insists above all that you have to learn to trust your instincts and develop what he termed a "seaman's eye," paying special attention to the workings of wind and current; the interplay between them can drastically affect local sea conditions.

Remember that current and tide are distinct, the former describing water's horizontal movement and the latter referring to its vertical rise and fall. Both can be timed, but bear in mind that wind can wreak havoc with man-made schedules. For instance, onshore winds cause current and tide changes to occur late, while offshore breezes produce opposite results.

The point is that when the current turns and sloshes a gazillion gallons of water against a prevailing breeze, the pros know that sea conditions will differ and they time arrivals and departures to various areas accordingly.

Of course, a current table, like *Eldridge's Tide and Pilot*, can help you avoid the recipe for discomfort bred when wind and water go head-to-head. But the crux of the sea-sense

referred to by Savene may lie in exercising your powers of observation. Read the weather signs by being aware of the environment. For instance, suddenly perched flocks of birds often mean a hard blow is on the way. If the direction and period of swells changes, look for the wind to start coming from that same direction. And if your mate's voice begins sounding distant and hollow as he asks you why dewdrops are hanging from the bowrail, chances are the pressure is dropping and fog may soon materialize. The savvy skipper adds these precursors to wind, rain or fog to his forecasting repertoire. Using these almanac-style weather predictors is hardly scientific, but combined with experience and an up-to-date NOAA forecast they can help you anticipate those fast-moving, local anomalies that don't always make the broad-based, pre-recorded report blaring from your VHF.

### **Be Sense-Able**

Whether you bust your own knuckles or pay someone else for the privilege, the captains agreed that engine, electrical and mechanical systems' maintenance is a requisite for running like a pro. "It's crucial for safety and smooth running," notes Capt. Potts, whose *Blue Fin IV* cruises almost daily.

Though he also finds himself at the helm of other boats, Potts says that he is most comfortable aboard his own because he's developed an intimate knowledge of how it sounds and feels when underway. "There are things about the boat that only I know," he declares, recounting the time he picked out the noise of a bum water pump through the din of the throbbing diesels.

Although most of us can't go boating every day, we can follow Potts' advice and listen to our own internal warning system while afloat. For instance, periodically look to see if the color of the engine's exhaust smoke changes. Learn to sense changes in vibrations at cruising rpm—you can feel it underfoot while at the helm. Be sensitive to smells, so you'll be able to pick out the acrid odor of burning electrical equipment.

The pros use tangible indicators like these to assess and address a potential problem. But even if you haven't reached that level of self-