How to Drive a Bass Boat

written by ***Wade Bourne***

Driving a bass boat is not difficult. It can be done by anyone who can drive a car and who has some basic sense of how an outboard operates.

The most important thing is to use good common sense and to never operate a boat in conditions you're not completely comfortable with.

Bass boats are commonplace on America's waters. Thousands are owned and operated mostly by fishermen, but also by casual weekend boaters. Many of these boats are capable of going faster than 70 miles per hour, and they are frequently bought and operated by people who have had little or no experience at driving a performance watercraft.

Actually, driving a bass boat is not difficult. It can be done by anyone who can drive a car and who has some basic sense of how an outboard operates. The most important thing is to use good common sense and to never operate a boat in conditions you're not completely comfortable with. Starting with this foundation, it's easy to learn how to operate a bass boat in its maximum performance envelope.

The first step is proper rigging. How well a boat performs and how safe it is depends in large part on how its component pieces are assembled. A boat that is rigged properly will deliver top performance. On the other hand, a boat that is rigged improperly will perform poorly, or even dangerously. Boat owners who have questions or who have experienced problems they suspect are related to improper rigging should contact their boat maker's factory representative.

I recommend that any boat rated for a V-6 outboard be outfitted with dual steering cables. Typically, such a boat is going to be loaded heavily and run in excess of 60 miles an hour. Dual steering is necessary to have the positive steering that is required to handle the boat safely at those speeds and with no slop in the steering. (Hydraulically-assisted steering is a very nice - albeit costly - feature which reduces wheel torque and operator fatigue. However, rack-and-pinion steering produces a more positive feel, and wheel torque is minimal when the boat is set up and operated properly.)

The other main consideration in rigging is engine height. If an outboard is set too high or too low on the transom, a boat that runs in excess of 60 miles per hour will perform poorly. So it is critical that the engine be set at the exact height recommended by the boat manufacturer.

I always tell folks that if they experience horrendous wheel torque at top speed, they should check their engine's height on the transom with their dealer or factory contact. At top end, a boat that is rigged and operated properly should have virtually no steering wheel torque.

Outboard Trip Operation

Trimming is a critical factor in proper operation of a performance boat. Trimming means raising or lowering the motor into the water.

For the fastest takeoff, trim the motor full down. With this trim angle, the propeller is trying to lift the transom, and the

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cavitation plate is serving as a trim tab of sorts. The effect of this is a faster planeoff, which typically occurs at 20-25 mph. Once the boat planes, start trimming the motor up immediately until the prop is roughly parallel to the bottom of the boat. This picks the bow up, making the boat easier to steer and relieving wheel torque. Finding the right trim setting is a matter of feel. I trim until there's almost no wheel torque; I can turn left or right with relative ease. Then I'll maintain this trim setting until the boat is running in the 50-60 mph range.

This is where some boat operators make a mistake -- they overtrim. They think that the higher they trim their engine, the faster the boat will go, but this is a misconception.

The most efficient angle for an outboard's gear case to run is parallel with the water. When you reach this position, the roostertail typically isn't any higher than the top of the engine. Steering wheel torque is minimal, and the front of the boat is slightly above parallel to the surface, not floating around 5 feet off the water. Most hulls actually slow down at that point.

One thing to remember is to watch both the tachometer and the speedometer. If you're overtrimmed, your tach may go up to 6000 RPMs, but your speed may actually be slowing down because the prop is losing its bite in the water. For top-end running, you're looking for the best combination of high RPMs relative to speed. So, when you're running in the 50-60 MPH range, get the boat cleaned up (trimmed properly so it's running on the pad), then ease in the rest of the throttle.

Handling Chine Walk

Chine walk is a back-and-forth wobbling effect of the hull created when hydrodynamic forces try to balance the boat up on the primary pad and the supporting lifting strakes on each side of the pad. Each time a propeller blade enters the water and another exits, they are constantly trying to throw the boat off the pad. Now, if the prop is getting too much bite, it creates chine walking. This is typically results from improper rigging - not setting the motor at the right height.

Chine walk can be dangerous and can cause a wreck if it gets out of control. Do not try to drive a boat through a chine walk. Some boat drivers think if they keep trimming and adding power, the boat will stabalice itself. This kind of thinking will get you in trouble. The only way to eliminate chine walking is to reduce power and solve the problem either by adjusting the engine height and/or learning the proper way to drive your performance hull.

Learning to Drive a Performance Boat

Say you buy a new boat that's capable of running 70 mph, but you have no experience driving a boat at this speed. How do you learn to do so in a safe manner?

The best thing to do is to ask a friend who knows how to drive a performance boat to go to the lake with you and help you get started. However, if you can't find anybody, you can teach yourself. Pick a day when the water's fairly calm, and ease into an open part of the lake. Start out running it in a straight line. Bring the throttle up until the engine is running at 4200-4400 RPMs, and trim until the boat is clean and running smoothly. This is the range where you'll get your best fuel efficiency.

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When you're comfortable at this intermediate setting, add power in small increments and experiment with the trim. But again, use common sense. Never run the boat any faster than you feel totally safe with.

Many boaters don't ever achieve maximum performance in their bass boats because they don't know how to drive at top end. They buy boats that should go 70 mph, but they can only get 60 out of them. They usually think they're rigged improperly, but many times this lagging is the result of poor driver technique.

Here's the scenario. The boat is trimmed properly, and the hull is running on the pad. When you try to get those last few miles per hour, the boat gets squirrelly and maybe starts wobbling a little bit.

Put the boat in a slow, sweeping left hand turn. Turning this direction counteracts propeller torque and helps you control the hull. Grip the steering wheel in your left hand at the 10 o'clock position. Now, pretend that you're holding a pocketknife, and you're trying to chop down a tree. Make short downward chopping movements - chop, chop, chop - no more than an inch of movement at a time. This helps you control the wobble and keep the boat balanced. By turning against the wheel torque, you're actually lifting the hull, which makes it easier to hold on the pad.

After you learn this technique in a slow left turn, you can start applying it to running straight. It's a matter of getting the right rhythm and learning how much control you need to keep the boat balanced at high speed. It doesn't take a lot.

Many people I've observed tend to oversteer in this situation. They'll place their hands at 9 and 3 on the steering wheel, and they'll steer up to 12 and down to 6. This is all wrong and why they never reach top performance. When you're running fast, you need small steering movements, that chop-chop-chop, to counteract torque.

Crossing a Wake

Every boater jumps some other boater's wake every day he's on the water, and there's a right way and a wrong way to do this. This is an easy procedure, but I can't tell you how many times I've been in the boat with a bass pro who didn't know how to cross a wake. I've been scared to death and almost beaten to death, both needlessly.

Let's say you're trimmed out and running down the lake, and you see a wake approaching. The right technique is to trim the engine down a little, and cross the wake at a 45-degree angle. If it's a wake from another bass boat, you might not reduce your speed. If it's a wake from a big cruiser or a barge, you'd better reduce your speed, maybe enough to take the boat off plane so you can ease over the rollers.

But the important thing is to trim that nose down so the bow can slice through the wake more efficiently. Just lay the nose down a little, and as soon as you cross the wake, bump the trim back up again. This will provide a safe, comfortable crossing for you and your passenger.

Running in Rough Water

There are different degrees of rough water. Sometimes when 50 boats are heading back for a tournament weigh-in at the same time, you'll have boat wake rough water - 1-1 1/2 foot waves coming at an irregular pattern. In this situation, trim the nose down slightly so the keel will cut through the waves, and you'll have a lot smoother ride. Now, this doesn't mean you can run full out trimmed all the way down. Again, common sense has to prevail. You've got to use some rationale about how rough it is. Am I breaking my rods? Am I beating up the fish in my live well? Am I scaring my passenger?

Let's graduate up to 3-4 footers. Now you've got to pay more attention to where the waves are breaking and how far apart they are. This is when I slow down, and I start thinking about tacking instead of going straight into the waves. Also, I'll trim somewhere between parallel and full undertrim so the keel is slicing nicely through the waves.

Reading waves and jockeying the throttle are important in rough water. Learn to look 100-150 feet ahead of your boat for any freak swells coming so you can adjust both your speed and the angle at which you approach the wave. You don't want to take a big wave head-on or too fast.

If you get caught in really rough water - 6-8 foot waves, don't take a chance. Find a protected cove and ride the blow out.

Always wear a life jacket, and keep your kill switch hooked up all the time.

I'd rather spend the night in the boat rather than chance getting capsized.

However, if you have to get in, do so tacking back and forth across the waves at 12-14 mph. Keep the nose up so you don't take a wave over the bow. And here's where you've got to read every single wave. You don't want to get hit broadside. Just quarter the waves, don't panic, and don't get in too big a hurry to get in.

Final Safety Advice

The more experience you have driving your boat, the better and more comfortable you'll become. Just remember, never drive beyond your comfort level or your ability. Be sensible about operating in rough water. Don't drive too fast in congested areas. Always wear a life jacket, and keep your kill switch hooked up all the time. And last, if your boat has a hand-operated throttle, always keep your hand on the throttle ready to reduce power. You don't know when you're going to hit a submerged object, and you want to be ready to react and slow the engine down.

Modern bass boats are products of high technology in terms of design and materials. They are true marvels of high-tech true performance crafts, yet they are easy and fun to drive. Just don't get in a hurry to go too fast too quickly. Get a feel for how your boat handles, and work your way up.