

Marlinespike Seamanship

In the days of great sailing ships, working with rope was one of the most important skills a seaman had. It was called *marlinespike seamanship* and to master it, a sailor had to learn knots, *splices*, *chafing gear*, and other “high-tech” rope work. Sailors *did* master it, because the lives of everyone on board might depend on how fast a man could tie the right knot.

Sailing these days doesn't call for that much expertise, but it does call for some. Some say a small-boat sailor needs only three knots and a hitch. Others say the number is nine. Take your choice—but don't worry if you know more than three. You might need them all someday.

In general, knots do three kinds of work: They join two ropes together. They secure a line to a post, tree, spar, or ring. Tied at the end of a line, they keep the line from slipping through a pulley or ring bolt.

All line or rope used for a knot is considered to have two parts: The end that is made fast (tied) to something is called the *standing part*. The opposite end is called the *running end*, *free end*, or *bitter end*.



When two pieces of line cross each other in forming a knot, one must go over, the other, under. If you get the wrong one over (or under) you'll have a wrong knot on your hands.



About Rope, Knots, and Lines

No matter how many knots you can tie, you should know something about rope itself. Before synthetics, rope was mostly made of natural fibers such as hemp and cotton. Today these are rarely seen; instead, we see nylon anchor ropes and Dacron halyards, sheets, and *gyres*.

Synthetic ropes, though more costly, do a lot of things right: they're stronger, easier to handle, resist abrasion, run easier through blocks, and don't swell when they're wet. Since they don't rot or mildew, they don't need to be dried before storing.

Nylon is about three times as elastic as manila and linen yacht rope, which makes it great for anchoring and docking line. Dacron is more stable than nylon, and also has considerable tensile strength—which makes it ideal for halyards and sheets.

Both nylon and Dacron tie and untie easily, but polyethylene line kinks and snarls somewhat.

Speaking of kinking and snarling, you can help prevent it by coiling yacht rope clockwise. Why? Because some rope is made up of three strands that are “right laid,”—which means the strands spiral upward to the right when you hold a piece vertically. Therefore, “strands right, coil right”—clockwise, that is.

Keep your line free of sand, mud, slime, and other dirt by regularly hosing it down or skoshing it in a tub of clean water. Wash that grit out before it has chance to work its way inside and grind up your expensive nylon line.