

Docking in a Tight Space

OR

How to Parallel Park a Sailboat

By Mike Huston

Let me paint a picture for you: There are two big power boats on a linear dock (say a custom's dock) with 50 feet of open space between them. Along comes a 42' trawler that pulls up next to the opening and uses bow and stern thrusters to neatly slide into the space. Its owner then casually steps off the boat and ties the dock lines. Ever wish you do that with your sailboat? Well, you can – this article will explain how. And, no, it is not about installing thrusters!

The maneuver involved is actually quite simple but it is also counter intuitive. I think it would be helpful to describe it first. If I were to dock our 43' Jeanneau in the space described above, here are the steps I go through (Figure 1 shows the basics):

- While at an idle, I maneuver so the boat is running perpendicular to the dock.
- I aim her bow about 5 feet from the left side of the opening or where I want the stern should come to rest.
- I carefully maintain the boat's speed at just over 2 knots.
- I shift into neutral as needed but for sure shift as I start the turn.
- When our bow is half a boat's length from the dock (20-25 feet) I quickly swing the wheel hard to starboard.
- Shortly after cutting the wheel over I shift into reverse and bring the RPM's up slightly, to about 800-900.
- Once the boat has turned about 45 degrees I slowly start to bring the wheel back to center.
- As the boat's forward momentum dies, I shift into neutral.

At the end of this maneuver our stern should be within a foot of where we had aimed the bow (near the power boat on our port side as we came up to the dock) and we should have gently nestled up to the dock. And, we too, could casually get off and tie the dock lines (this, of course, assumes no wind).

Most boats, even full keeled ones, can do this maneuver but there will be differences in the details. Therefore, *it is important to practice with your particular boat*. There are a couple different ways

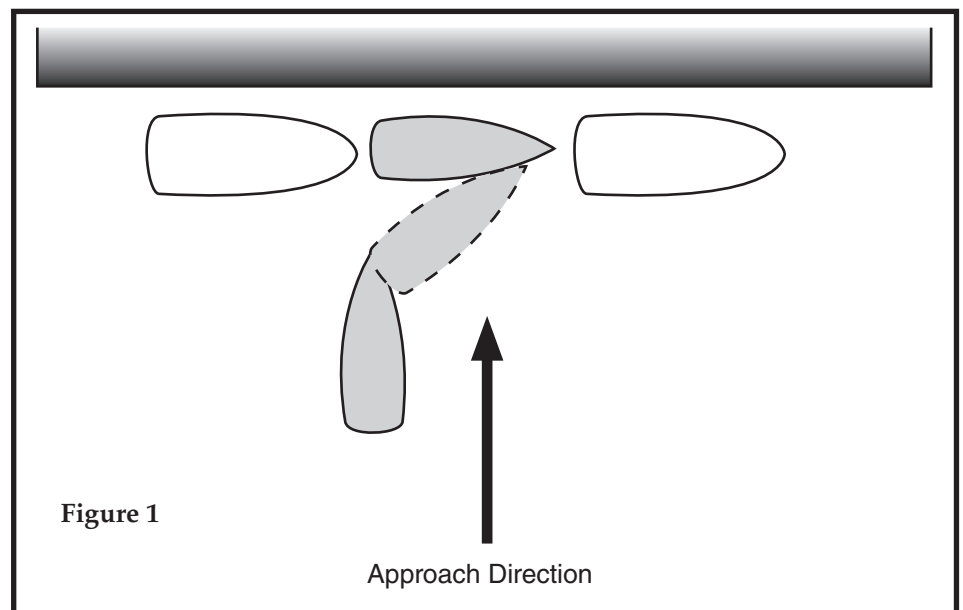
to do this practicing: The first is to find an empty dock space that you can easily maneuver around and approach at a right angle. The fuel dock, when they are closed, or the guest dock will work. To start, practice by starting your turn when you are a full boat length from the dock. This way you will end up about 20 feet from the dock – close enough to see the results but far enough away to be safe. As you gain confidence and comfort start, working further in.

The other way to practice is to find a set of finger piers with an open aisle way (see Figure 2). Then run along these fingers about half boat length off. Pick one and pretend it extends out into the aisle and start your turn when you are half a boat length away. When you finish you should be parallel to the finger pier and be close enough to the pretend extension so that you could get off on it. It is okay to have just a bit of sideways slide that might take you into the pretend dock as your fenders would cushion you should this have been a real dock.

Note that this practice maneuver also has a practical use: once it is completed you are in a great position to then back into the slip. This works best if you start the turn a couple feet sooner so that you have room to back without being right on the dock. It beats having to back all the way down the aisle way.

Here are some further details that should be helpful:

- Boats with right-handed propellers do this maneuver using a turn to starboard, left-handed turn to port. This way the prop-walk will help the turn and pull you toward the dock.
- The biggest variable is the speed of the boat at the time the turn is started. I have found that smaller boats usually need less speed. For example, I had to slow to about 1 knot on a 32 foot Catalina, whereas our 43 foot boat requires 2.1 knots. If you complete your turn but end up too far away from the dock (assuming you did not start the



turn too early) you will need more speed; the extra speed translates into more sideways slide.

- Because it is so important to this maneuver, watch your speed closely as you approach the dock. And at times, you may have to add power on the final approach. And, yes, it does feel like you are going to ram the dock the first time you try this!

- The second biggest factor is the timing of bringing the wheel back to center. The effect is to slow the spinning motion of the boat. Centering too early will leave the stern off the dock and centering too late will allow the stern to swing too much leaving the bow off the dock. If there is wind affecting your bow this timing will need to be adjusted to compensate. Getting a feel for this simply takes some practice.

- If you start your turn too late and are worried about the bow hitting the dock, applying some extra reverse power early will 'pull' the bow off the dock a bit—but it also slows the spin so the centering

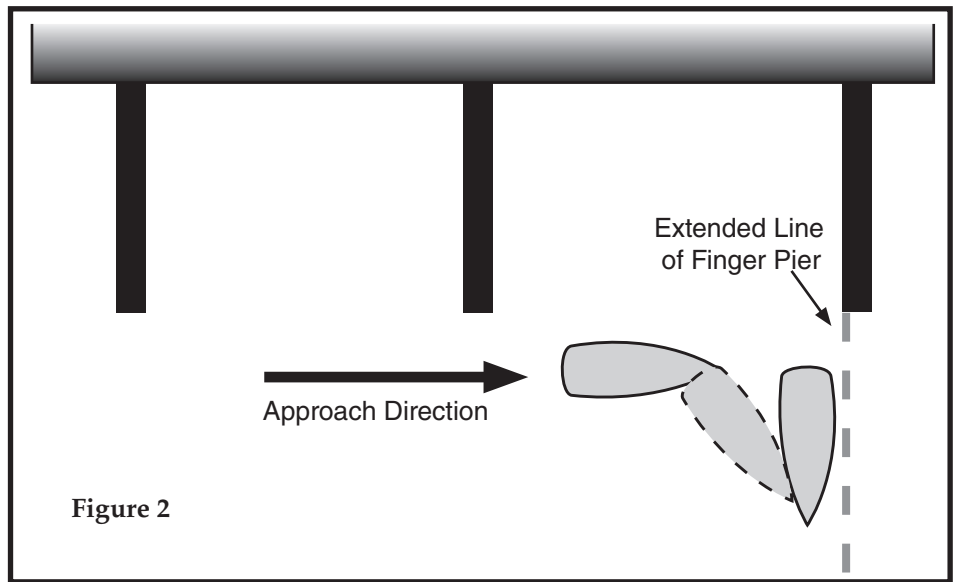


Figure 2

of the wheel will probably need to be delayed.

- If you come up slightly off the dock it is practical to 'walk' the boat to the dock by turning the wheel back hard to starboard and then giving the engine just a bit of forward thrust. Followed by some reverse to kill any speed. Both will move the stern toward the dock due to prop wash and prop walk,

respectively. If you have more room behind you, simply reverse the order – do reverse first then a bit of forward to kill the speed. The results will be the same. This can be a very useful docking tactic but it does take some practice.

Mike Huston will be speaking at the Seattle Boat Show. Check boat show speaker's schedule starting on page 18.

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