

The Other 20% -- When Wearing a Life Jacket Is Not Enough

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Boating accident statistics show that drowning is the single biggest cause of death in recreational boating accidents, accounting for more than 70% of boating deaths. The great majority of these drownings were precipitated by unexpected entry into the water, which means the victim had no time to grab a life jacket before entering the water. Our data also show that over 80% of drowning victims were NOT wearing life jackets when found. We know from other data that most of those victims could have been saved had they been wearing a life jacket before the mishap occurred.

But, you ask, what happened to the other 20%, the ones who were wearing life jackets, but drowned anyway? How come they drowned? Those are good questions, and they deserve an honest answer. There are actually several reasons why persons wearing life jackets occasionally drown.

A significant number of these drowning victims were paddlers, such as canoeists and kayakers. Now canoeists and, even more so, kayakers, actually have a pretty good PFD wear rate, at least compared with most other boating populations.

However, paddlers also have a few things that work against them if they should have a mishap. Paddlers tend to boat in remote areas, far from rescue resources or help from passersby. They frequently paddle alone or with only one other person, and the vessels they use are by design relatively unstable and prone to frequent capsizings. And paddlers are particularly at risk for a dangerous situation called entrapment.

Entrapment occurs when the vessel or the boater becomes snagged on rocks or debris at some hazardous point, then goes under due to the severe hydraulics of the water, and the boater is either unable to escape the craft or unable to escape the hydraulic pressures on him or her. The boater is unable to escape the forces on him/her no matter what kind of PFD the boater has on, and the resulting cause of death would be drowning.

Other causes of drowning while wearing life jackets generally involve some sort of injury or impairment that, by itself, doesn't kill the boater, but is severe enough to prevent him or her to do those things necessary to keep the boater's face out of the water or prevent what we call "mouth immersions" from restricting the victim's airway over time.

A person who gets hit in the head by some object on land may fall to the ground unconscious. When that person wakes up, he or she can then seek medical attention with no other harm done. If that same person gets hit the same way and lands in the water instead, it's a very different story.

Wearing a PFD that turns the unconscious victim face up is one way to avoid that problem, and, unfortunately, most of the more comfortable PFDs – those labeled as Type III or some Type V PFDs – will not turn an unconscious victim face up, at least not consistently. What most such PFDs will do (all but manually-activated inflatables) is bring the person, whether unconscious or not, back up to the surface, which enables those nearby to quickly bring the victim to safety. Unfortunately, it sometimes happens (not very often) that no one is nearby to help the unconscious victim, and the end result is drowning.

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I mentioned mouth immersions earlier. Once a boater is in the water, waves continuously splashing over the victim's mouth cause a small amount of water to be ingested, some of which may enter the lungs. The more forcefully and completely the waves cover the mouth and nose, the more water is ingested. These are called mouth immersions. There may be injuries or circumstances that make it difficult for a boater, especially over time, to prevent mouth immersions even while wearing a PFD. Eventually those mouth immersions do the same thing as having the boater's face in the water: they eventually cause the boater to drown. It is an awful and terribly protracted way to die, but it does happen.

No PFD, not even a SOLAS-certified PFD, can prevent all mouth immersions. Mouth immersions will happen; it is the frequency with which they occur in a specific PFD model that is a major factor in determining the classification of the PFD being tested and whether or not the Coast Guard can approve that PFD for wear.

Those are the primary reasons boaters wearing life jackets sometimes drown. Either the boater is unable to free him- or herself from some type of entrapment, is unconscious or otherwise unable to keep his/her face out of the water, or eventually drowns from numerous mouth immersions over a prolonged period of time.

We know that the greatest cause of death among boaters is drowning due to unexpected entry into the water. And since you as a boater don't know when that entry might happen, the time you need to have your jacket on is before you ever get on the boat! But we also know that boaters in general HATE wearing life jackets, because they know how hot and uncomfortable those stupid PFDs are! Is that what you think, too? Ah, but things have changed in the last ten years! If you haven't done so already, you really need to take a look at "today's" life jackets, because many of the styles available today are so attractive, so practical, and really and truly comfortable, you may be very pleasantly surprised! You may have to go to a specialty store or shop online to find one that even you could be coaxed into wearing, but they are available, many at prices that are very reasonable.

Once you find one that you'll wear, it's also extremely important that you keep it securely fastened while you have it on. Otherwise, the scenario we frequently see in fatality reports goes something like this: the victim has a life jacket on but not secured; the victim falls into the water; the victim's body goes under the water while the jacket remains on the surface, and the jacket immediately slips off or separates from the victim, and the victim drowns. Avoid an untimely separation between your life jacket and YOU: make sure you're securely buckled, zippered or otherwise strapped into that thing!

Can we always prevent people who wear PFDs from drowning? No, and I hope the explanations given here answer any concerns you may have about their effectiveness. Wearing a life jacket whenever you are out on the water is by far the single best thing you can do to prevent drowning.

Just remember, it's not the life jacket that saves lives; it's you and me wearing them that saves lives! Boat smart from the start – WEAR your life jacket!
