

Getting Ready for Winter Storage

by Jim Grant

Another season of sailing is behind us and it's time to put everything away for winter storage. If the work is done well, we will all be able to get out on the water sooner next spring. I have found this end-of-the-year checklist useful in maintaining my sail and canvas inventories:

1. CLEAN AND DRY. Mildew does not grow on synthetic fabrics but does grow on any dirt that may have accumulated on the surface of the material. Unfortunately, cleaning sails and canvas can reduce their durability. If the cleaning process is too thorough, the resins used to stabilize sailcloth tend to break down and the coatings used to make canvas water resistant tend to be washed out. So any cleaning should be confined to spraying the surface of the fabric with water and lightly brushing stubborn spots. This actually proves quite effective if it is followed by a careful drying. It is not a good idea to dry sails by sunlight -- ultraviolet light is the number one enemy of Dacron and nylon. If your canvas is no longer water repellent, coat it lightly with 303 Fabric Guard.

2. PREVENT RODENT DAMAGE. Mice in particular like to eat Dacron sailcloth and acrylic cover cloth. I don't know why as it certainly cannot be nourishing, but whatever the reason, the ragged holes that seem to appear like magic in fabric during periods of storage are caused by rodents. There are two solutions to this problem. First, you can suspend your sails in bags from the rafters in the garage. I'm sure the critters could overcome this obstacle with effort, but it has worked for me quite well for a number of years. For practically guaranteed protection, hang from the rafters and add mothballs to the sail bag. Rodents apparently do not like the smell of mothballs. I sprinkle mothballs inside all of my boats to protect life preservers, cushions, line and even headliner material. One application lasts all winter long.

3. CHECK FOR WEAR. If you use your boat at all during the season there will be some damage done to the sails and covers. Edges are worn and frayed or stitches are abraded away. Both are easily repaired if they are caught early. Fold narrow widths of Dacron (we call this "sail tape") over those edges. Baste everything in place with double-sided adhesive tape and sew. The abraded stitches, if caught soon enough can be re-sewn easily. If the seam has actually separated, use double-sided tape to baste in place smoothly before sewing. The weight of the Dacron used in repair work and the size of the thread is not important. Any sewing machine should be able to handle this work; however, if your machine is not up to the task there is nothing wrong with hand stitching.

4. PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO BATTEN POCKETS.

Battens tend to cause the fabric surrounding them to abrade quickly, and the elastic sewn inside the inner end of the pocket tends to lose elasticity in as little as two years. So every couple of years pull your batten pocket assemblies apart at the inner end (carefully use a seam ripper). Replace the elastic and, while you have the layers of cloth separated, patch any areas that show signs of wear. As always, baste all patches in place with double sided tape prior to sewing to make sure everything stays flat and smooth. Any problems at the outer end of the pockets will be apparent without pulling the assembly apart. But, if repair is necessary, that end of the pocket assembly will have to be pulled apart as well.

5. REPAIR BOLTROPE SLEEVE DAMAGE. Those of us with small boats slide the leading edge of our mainsails up a slot in the mast. The sleeve that encircles the boltrope wears out and the sail eventually tears away from its rope. If caught soon enough, a proper repair makes use of a 3 - 4" wide strip of Dacron sailcloth (weight is not important but 5 oz. is normal). Fold this sail tape in half and sandwich it over the boltrope and sleeve assembly. Baste it in place with double-sided tape and sew. Place a final row of straight stitches just in back of the boltrope with a zipper foot in the machine to keep the patch material firmly round the back of the boltrope. This zipper stitch helps prevent future wear by keeping the tape away from the edges of the slot. If your sail has full length battens and batten pocket end protectors along the boltrope, it will be necessary to remove those protectors before repairing the boltrope sleeve. Boltrope repair in front of the headboard is difficult because headboard removal requires drilling out many rivets -- in the process the boards are usually damaged. I often sidestep this repair by hotknifing away the boltrope in front of the headboard. Secure the rope in its sleeve just below the board before you do this since you will probably cut away the hand work that previously tied the boltrope to the head of the sail.

6. CHECK ALL GROMMETS CAREFULLY. Grommets can pull away from cloth over time. A proper fix requires removal, repair of the fabric underneath, and replacement. Use a Dremel tool or vice-grip pliers to cut through the metal or "worry" the metal parts apart. Once the old grommet is gone, a layer or two of Dacron can be sewn over the hole. Cloth weight need not be matched here -- the end is just to get a healthy strength in the area around a new grommet. If a larger grommet is used in replacement, the cloth patch is often not required.