



Would you trust your pride-and-joy to a cheap rope from the discount store? Here's the word on dock lines – and how to give your boat the protection it deserves.

Know the Ropes

BY CRAIG RITCHIE

Just for fun, next time you're walking along the marina dock take a look down and check out how many pricey boats are secured in place with El Cheapo rope from the dollar store. It's amazing to think anyone would trust their six-figure yacht to a \$5 rope they picked up at some gas station. But the truth is, there are precious few marinas on the Great Lakes where you won't see at least a few boats like this.

Crazy? Yes. Common? Amazingly. But in many cases this is a situation that arises from simple ignorance. After all, a rope is a rope is a rope — right?

Not exactly. Like most other things, rope comes in a huge variety of types and styles. But not all of them cut it as dock lines. Taking a few minutes to learn the differences between various kinds of lines will allow you to choose wisely, not only protecting your boat from damage, but also keeping you out of embarrassing or even dangerous situations. No one wants to be that guy, whose boat broke free in the storm and damaged several other nearby yachts.

Ropes are made from a wide variety of materials, but the most common are manila, polyethylene, polypropylene, polyester and nylon. Each has its own pros and cons.

PHOTO BY CRAIG RITCHIE



often for perch and walleye fishing. We also use the boats for tubing, waterskiing, entertaining and touring Cleveland-area locations. If we want to boat around Cedar Point, Put-in-Bay or any of the other islands, we can simply reserve a boat out of Sandusky or Catawba and leave from there."

One of the newest FBC franchises is the Chicago location at Montrose Harbor. Mike Ginter, a longtime general manager in the hospitality industry and former owner of a Highland Park dive shop, was introduced to the club through the Cleveland franchise and opened his own location in 2014. He says he's seeing a surge of interest from young families.

"Time is the driver," Ginter says. "Most of our members could afford to own a boat, but they want a no-hassle way to enjoy activities in and around the city. We took a leap of faith, because there was nothing like it in Chicago. We expected the 20- to 30-year-old singles, but the core of the club is turning out to be the urban family."

These families have a variety of interests and enjoy using club boats to watch the city's Fourth of July fireworks, visit downtown social venues, and participate in the raft-up revelry at "the Playpen."

"We share the boats with friends and use them as much as we can," says member Richard Coasby. "We took a boat out on the day of a Bears game, and we tailgated by Soldier Field. It was one of the best days we had last summer."

"Going out on a Freedom Boat Club boat is a total escape," says member Stephanie Saghy. "It's like our private backyard in Chicago. My husband and I are not distracted on the boat like we are at home. It's an escape that's just ours, and it's wonderful."

This summer, Ginter is planning to add a dock for private parties. Also, a new partnership with the neighboring Chicago Corinthian Yacht Club will give FBC members access to the yacht club's training and boating classes, bathrooms,

clubhouse, green space, patio, party facilities, social events, and community networking opportunities.

Both Ginter and Spreng are excited to see what the future holds.

"Boating is such a great way to bring families together," Ginter comments. "The community is still getting to know us; we're expecting to see faster growth as we go forward."

"Every day is a fun day for us right now," Jim Spreng says. "We're buying more boats, and we're providing a really good service. John has taken (Freedom Boat Club) to levels that we never dreamed possible." ★

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Manila

With its dull brown coloration and hairy appearance, manila rope is fairly easy to spot. A hard, natural fiber, manila rope is strong, doesn't stretch much, and holds knots reasonably well. And as a natural fiber, it won't melt when subjected to heat or friction as synthetic ropes sometimes will. It's also surprisingly resistant to sunlight.

The downside to manila — and it's a huge one — is that it doesn't last long around water. Put it away wet, and it will mildew overnight. Exposure to chemicals like oil or gasoline will only accelerate that process.

"The reality is that today, pretty well all the manila rope we sell is used for decoration," says Leo Reise, sales rep with Hamilton, Ontario-based marine equipment distributor Brewers' Marine Supplies. "In recreational boating, it's been completely replaced by synthetics. You still see it around, but most often because the person buying it simply didn't know any better."



Polyethylene

A staple of rural gas stations and suburban discount stores, the familiar, bright yellow polyethylene rope is the least expensive synthetic cord sold in North America today. Where boating is concerned, it's most frequently seen tied to anchors that someone made by pouring cement into an old paint can.

The biggest knock against polyethylene line is that it's wiry, so the stuff tangles like crazy. And God help you if you accidentally get a fishing lure snagged in it — even pliers won't help.

"It works fine for toys in a swimming pool, but that's about it," says Reise. "The other big problem with polyethylene is that it degrades very quickly with exposure to sunlight. It's not a good choice for dock lines, which obviously sit out in full sun every day. I get nervous when I see boats tied up with that stuff."



Polypropylene

Among the most widely used type of rope on North American waterways, polypropylene rope also is relatively inexpensive and is available in a wide variety of sizes, in both three-strand and full-braided versions. The fact polypropylene rope floats like a cork makes it ideal for ski-tow ropes, or for heaving lines. It's also perfect for securing tenders or dinghies, since any excess line that falls into the water isn't likely to become snarled in the boat's propellers.

Polypropylene rope doesn't absorb water, doesn't shrink when wet, holds knots securely, and remains flexible regardless of temperature. And like all synthetic ropes, it comes in a rainbow of colors, so you can match the boat's décor.

The two big strikes against it are that it's not terribly strong compared to other synthetic materials, and it doesn't have much stretch. A polypropylene rope of a given diameter is only about half the strength of a similar nylon or polyester line. Combined with its relatively



low elasticity, that means polypropylene lines will snap long before others will, making it a poor choice for high-stress jobs like dock lines or anchor rode.

Like polyethylene, polypropylene ropes degrade quickly with exposure to sunlight, so if you use them as tow ropes or heaving lines, be sure to stow them out of the sun. And because it has a fairly low melting point, polypropylene rope doesn't work well in applications where it will encounter any amount of friction. The fibers will either soon abrade, or melt together as if they were glued.

Polyester

Once the darling of 1970s fashion designers, polyester has really found its niche with rope manufacturers. You'll never see this stuff at the discount store, but upscale chandleries and marinas catering to sailors usually stock polyester line, since it's quite strong, remains pliable at a range of temperatures, doesn't stretch, and doesn't shrink when wet — attributes that make it perfect for use in sailboat rigging.

Although it's strong, polyester's complete lack of elasticity makes it a bad choice for dock line, since any stress from wind or wakes will transmit directly up the line to the boat's cleats. For the same reason, it's also a poor choice for applications where it will be subjected to any kind of shock, such as towing another disabled boat.



High Modulus Polyethylene

Remember those cheap polyethylene ropes from the discount store? Meet their steroid-enhanced second cousin: High modulus polyethylene, which is, ounce-for-ounce, the strongest, toughest fiber in the world. Known by a host of trade names including Dyneema and Spectra braid, high modulus polyethylene is all the rage with professional bass fishermen, since fishing lines made from the stuff offer tremendous strength and abrasion resistance, yet are so thin the fish can't even see them. Weave the stuff up to boat rope diameter, and you have a line strong enough to tow a Greyhound bus. Like polyester ropes, high modulus polyethylene has zero stretch and is made primarily for rigging in high-end racing sailboats. You're not likely to find it at the local chandlery, but if you do, you'll be able to spot it by price alone. Look for it displayed near a defibrillator.

Nylon

Representing an almost perfect balance of strength, flexibility, durability and stretch, nylon rope reigns as the Cadillac of dock lines. While it does cost a bit more than some other types of lines, this is one instance where you really do get what you pay for.

Nylon line comes in sizes ranging from about the diameter of a pencil to about as thick as a beer can, in both three-strand and fully braided versions. Both varieties hold knots well and maintain their knot strength when wet. Nylon lines also are highly resistant to oil and gasoline, so even a dunking in the bilge won't harm them.

Although nylon rope doesn't float like polypropylene, it offers the kind of brute strength few other materials can match — steel cable included. And while nylon line will absorb some water, it remains comparatively elastic no matter how wet it gets. This unique quality makes the stuff absolutely ideal for high-stress applications, like emergency tow ropes, as anchor rode, and as dock lines. Nylon has an extraordinary ability to absorb impact from a boat rocking in the breeze or bouncing from careless wakes, greatly minimizing the strain transmitted to the boat's cleats. It offers tremendous weather and abrasion resistance, too, so it can take a beating day after day without losing its shine.

When shopping for dock line, look for 100-percent nylon ropes.

"Nylon is sometimes blended with other materials," advises Reise. "For dock line, you want to ensure what you're buying is 100-percent nylon."





Line Size

Having narrowed down the material, the next step in selecting a dock line is choosing the correct size.

"I generally advise people to use the largest diameter line they can get through their cleats," says Reise. "Half-inch line is probably the most common, followed by five-eighths. The cost difference as you go up from one size to the next is minimal, so take the strongest line you can. When that inevitable summer thunderstorm comes along and the waves are pounding in, people never regret having a stronger line."

Apart from diameter, the other size consideration is to ensure your lines are long enough. As a rule of thumb, buy lines that are at least the same length as your boat. The last thing you want is to travel to a new marina and find your line is a foot too short.

Twisted or Braided?

Ropes come in two basic styles: Twisted or braided. Twisted rope is formed by coiling three individual strands together in the same direction, and opposite of the direction of the individual strands themselves. This keeps the rope from unraveling and prevents it from curling excessively.

Braided rope has its strands wrapped against each other in an overlapping pattern. Solid braid rope is manufactured by tightly wrapping several lengths of yarn together, and may be constructed from four, eight, 16 or 32 individual pieces (subsequently called four-, eight-, 16- or 32-plait rope). Solid braid rope is consistently firm to the touch and almost perfectly round in profile, so it easily passes through pulleys or winches.

Neither style offers appreciably more strength than the other, says Reise. The sole difference is cosmetics, so choose what you feel looks the best.

Line Care

It's important to check dock lines periodically for nicks, knots, frayed spots or kinks, all of which seriously can impair their strength. Replace any suspect-looking lines before they cause you problems. With normal wear and tear, dock lines generally last from one to two years. Exposure to sunlight will shorten the life of any line, as will repeated exposure to stress — if your boat is exposed to consistent wave action or a steady current, the line won't last as long. Use chafe guards to enhance the life of your lines, particularly those made from leather or fire hose, which shed both water and heat better than plastic.

It's usually a good idea to carry an extra dock line or two someplace on board. That way, should one snap while you're on the water, you're able to replace it right on the spot. It's like having a spare tire for your vehicle.

"Of all the expenses involved with owning a boat, dock lines are probably the cheapest," says Reise. "Yet I'm always astounded when I see someone go to buy dock line for their \$150,000 boat and balk at a \$25 price tag. And you have to remind them: You're using this to secure your \$150,000 boat that weighs 15,000 pounds. It's the only thing keeping it from blowing away. Do you really want to trust that to something you picked up on sale at the discount store?" ★

