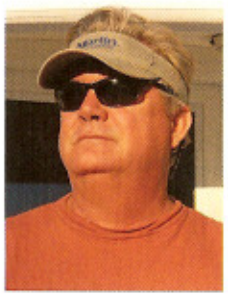
A Coat of Many Colors

Nothing Spruces Up a Boat Like a New Paint Job

By John Brownlee



If you're anything like me, you probably spend quite a bit of your time surfing the Web looking at boats. I've been accused of spending an "inordinate" amount of time doing so, but that implies that my time would be better spent doing something else. I can't imagine what that other thing would be, other than actually riding around in boats searching for fish.

During my online research sessions, I often see older boats referred to in glowing terms with captions that shout out, "Totally refurbished just last year!" But when you read the fine print, you discover that "refurbished" just means new carpet and a paint job. The 20-year-old diesels still belch smoke and need a rebuild, and the port transmission slips a little, but by golly, she's shining like a new penny.

What's really amazing is how often that sales approach works! Mechanical problems seem remote and esoteric to some folks, but a dull and lifeless hull jumps right out at you and can kill the sale of even a mechanically sound boat. There's no doubt that a fresh coat of paint can make even the most rode-hard-and-put-away-wet charter boat look like she just came off the showroom floor.

If you have a boat that needs painting, there's a lot of research to do — painting a boat's exterior is a complicated process usually best left to professionals, but going in armed with a bit of knowledge will enable you to get the best paint job at the best price.

The first thing you need to understand is that labor stands out as the biggest cost involved. Preparing a boat for painting is a huge undertaking and technical know-how is paramount. "When painting a boat, the paint costs $1 of every $10 you spend, and labor accounts for the other $9," says David Halcomb, vice president and general manager of Awlgrip North America. In order for a hard polyurethane paint to dry completely smooth, it must be applied to a surface that's been thoroughly cleaned, sanded and faired properly.

I learned that lesson the hard way many years ago. I owned a 17-foot Hewes Bonefisher that desperately needed a paint job. A painter friend and I stripped the boat and went to work sanding the hull with progressively finer sandpaper. We spent three weeks sanding and washing the hull down with acetone until we both swore it was as smooth as the proverbial baby's rear end.

My buddy, who knew how to work a spray gun, shot the hull with Awlgrip, and when the paint dried, the shiny new coat looked like the calves of an 80-year-old — covered in a web of varicose veins. Tiny, virtually invisible scratches and cracks sucked the hard paint down, forming a web of unsightly trails all over the hull. We had simply not sanded enough, and after sanding off the new paint, we started again. The boat eventually sported a beautiful, scratch-free paint job, but not until after we created a ton of extra work for ourselves.

Marine coatings come in one-part and two-part formulations and have a polyurethane base. (You can apply one-part paints right out of the can, but they are much less durable than two-part paints.) Higher-end paints dry slower and are much more technically challenging to apply. You must add catalysts to two-part paints to make them harden at an

AWLGRIP PHOTO COURTESY BILLY BLACK

Applying marine-grade paint can be hazardous to your health — it's best to leave this work to professionals with the knowledge and equipment to safely paint your vessel.

acceptable rate, and you have to take variables like temperature and wind into account when mixing the formula.

You can choose between a couple of different kinds of polyurethane paints — polyester-based polyurethanes and acrylic-based polyurethanes. "Acrylic paints came from the automotive industry," said Tripp Nelson, sales and marketing manager for Alexseal. "Acrylic paints dry faster and are more easily repaired, but they're not as durable as polyester-based paints."

Nelson says that the top-of-the-line polyester-based paints last the longest due to some recent advancement in coatings technology. "Improvements in the base resins, UV filters and pigments allow the paint to last longer than ever before, and they also enhance ease of repair." You'll appreciate that ease of repair factor the first time a mate lumberjacks the new paint job with a gaff.

The type of paint you choose usually comes down to how much time you want to invest in the painting process, and often, the size of the boat. "You often see acrylic polyurethanes chosen for use on smaller boats," said Jim Seidel, assistant marketing manager for Interlux, "but all larger boats and yachts typically use polyester-based paints."

Either way, the key to a great paint job lies in the preparation, and that's why professional expertise is so crucial. It pays to get the work done by someone who does it every day. Most paints can be applied with either a brush, a roller or via a spray gun, and the application process is critical. "Some people can do it themselves, but it all depends on your skill level," says Seidel. "If you know what you're doing, you won't be able to tell the difference between application methods in the finished product."

That conversation did bring up a funny story, though. Seidel said that many years ago, an enthusiastic customer service employee had reassured a potential customer that, "Our paints are so smooth, you could apply them with a broom!" This was merely a figure of speech, of course, but after the customer really *did* paint his boat using a broom — with the less-than-desirable results you might expect — only conventional brushes, rollers and spray guns were recommended.

When choosing a paint, you have several criteria to consider. You'll want a paint that delivers high gloss and keeps that shine through resistance to wind, sun, salt water and abrasion. And, of course, you want one that requires the least amount of maintenance.

And the biggest part of paint maintenance is waxing. Although experts disagree on the subject, most knowledgeable painters discourage the use of wax on painted hulls. "Traditional waxes are soft and melt in the heat of the sun," says Nelson. "This can trap dirt and other particles in the wax.

PHOTO COURTESY ALEXSEAL

Hours of hard sanding result in a mirror-smooth finish.

Then, when you go to buff the hull, you can actually scratch the surface."

High-quality polishes offer a better maintenance solution, and a new generation of polymer sealers is replacing traditional waxes. These sealers create a protective layer on your exposed hull surfaces, much like sunscreen on your skin. These sealers are especially useful in areas where water runs off a boat, leaving ugly, black streaks in its wake. After you apply the sealers, cleaning up those streaks becomes a breeze.

Traditional polyurethane paints contain quite a bit of chemicals that make the paints easier to apply. These same chemicals (mostly solvents) also make the paints hazardous to your health, providing another strong argument for professional application. The EPA classifies these as volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, and future EPA regulations will restrict VOC emissions even further, so most companies are heavily involved in R&D to create more eco-friendly paints.

"The high solvent levels make the paints flow better," says Halcomb, "but we're creating new paints that will work great with a much higher percentage of solids and much lower levels of solvents."

"Just as boatbuilders have increasingly turned to epoxy resins to lower emissions and have installed systems to recapture pollutants like sanding dust and water runoff, we are designing new products that will undergo rigorous field trials for a long time before reaching the public," says Halcomb. "It's easy to create great stuff in the laboratory, but in the real world, it has to work equally well in California, Wisconsin, Maine and Florida — all very different environments. We do the research so we never have to ask our customers to be guinea pigs."

Paint manufacturers will formulate future paints using a high solids ratio of 65 to 70 percent, compared to the current solids ratio of 35 to 40 percent. Raising the level of solids substantially lowers the amount of VOCs in the paint. One published reference paper suggests that raising the percentage of solids from 20 to 40 percent lowers VOC emissions by 62 percent.

The trick is coming up with a formula that delivers a low-emission product that is still easy to apply. "The goal is to produce a polyester-based urethane with low VOCs that works like an acrylic," says Halcomb. "That would be the ultimate."

It's only a matter of time. The paints of tomorrow may soon offer the best of all worlds, with fast dry times, superior gloss retention, excellent durability and ease of repair. But they won't be able to solve the labor issue. There are only two ways around that one — either become intimately acquainted with sandpaper or break out your checkbook.

Paint Manufacturers

Alexseal Yacht Coatings
314-783-2110
www.alexseal.com

Awlgrip NA
888-355-3090
www.awlgrip.com

Interlux
800-468-7589
www.yachtpaint.com/usa

Pettit
800-221-4466
www.pettitpaint.com