

To Tend the Tiller

One man's aid to spectacle cleaning and apple fetching

While planning to singlehand *Maria*, my Coronado 23, from Philadelphia on the Delaware River to Tom's River, New Jersey, via Cape May, I contemplated the "tiller fever" I would experience on the 200-mile inland trip. When sailing alone, such mundane activities as fetching an apple or cleaning salt from your glasses can become major chores, to say nothing of reading the chart or taking a bearing. Mine was the age-old mariner's problem of needing someone or something to hold on to the tiller and steer a course while I, the skipper/crew/navigator/mechanic/cook, was doing something else. Modern technology has brought us some elegant and sophisticated solutions to this problem, but they all have one major defect: cost. And sheet-to-tiller steering, while classic in its simplicity, is not effective when motoring or when following a narrow winding channel.

For years I've tied the tiller when I needed a third hand, but I never seem to tie it in the right spot. I also tried tying a block to

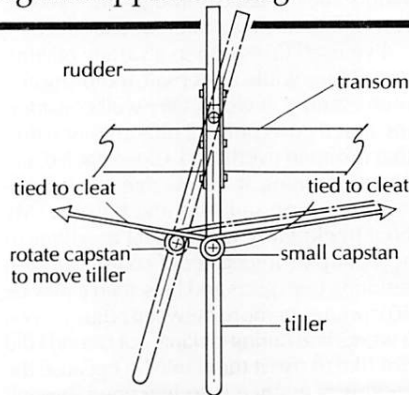


Fig. 1 What was needed was a fixed line tied between the stern cleats and a small capstan on the tiller. Rudder position is held fixed by the friction of the line on the capstan, and is adjusted by rotating the capstan.

each of my stern cleats and running line through these in a continuous loop that attached to the tiller. This worked fairly well as small adjustments were possible, but I couldn't keep it tight enough to prevent rudder movement against the action of waves.

Those familiar with the inland water-

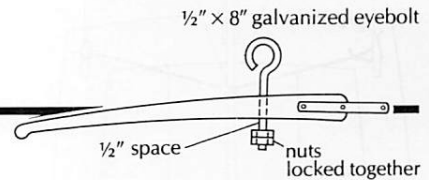


Fig. 2 My "instant capstan" was fashioned by a long eyebolt attached to the tiller.

way from Cape May to Barnegat Bay know it as a beautiful but circuitous route. This means continual course adjustments. So my requirement was something cheap and easy to install that would hold the tiller position but would allow fine adjustments without a hassle. While pondering this situation, it occurred to me that if I fixed a line across the tiller between the stern cleats, and could adjust the tiller position *relative* to that line, I'd have it made. What was needed was a small turnable capstan on top of the tiller around which the line could wrap thus providing both adjustments and friction (see Figure 1).

Next comes the cheap part. I purchased a 1/2-inch by 8-inch-long galvanized eyebolt, drilled a snug 1/2-inch vertical hole through the tiller, stuck the eyebolt through with the eye end up and locked a couple of nuts on the threads that projected out

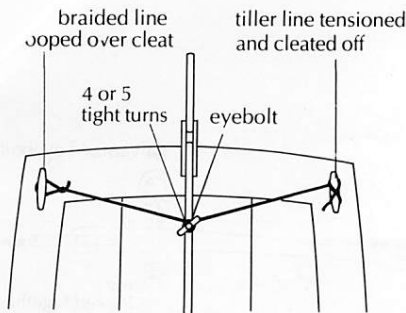


Fig. 3 By attaching a line to the stern cleats and eyebolt, the simple "tiller tender" was ready for operation.

the bottom of the tiller. Eureka! I'd rigged an instant capstan (see Figure 2).

For adjustments, I use a 3/16-inch braided line, throw a loop over the starboard cleat, take four or five tight wraps around the eyebolt, pull tight and lay on to the port cleat (see Figure 3). Tiller adjustments are made by turning the eyebolt. In no time you get to know which way and how much to turn.

My boat is 23 feet LOA and I placed the eyebolt about 1 foot forward of the rudder pintles. By accident I found this to be an ideal location that gives good adjustment sensitivity for most conditions. Moving the eyebolt farther forward would reduce sensitivity; aft would increase it. Moving forward increases the amount of turning needed to give a particular rudder movement, but reduces the force needed by your hand to turn the eyebolt. Moving aft

does the opposite, reducing turns but increasing force. You would have to experiment to find the ideal location for your boat and conditions. Of course, if it's too hard you could turn the eyebolt with a wood stick passed through the eyebolt, sort of like having a tiller on your tiller.

I've used this setup in a variety of wind conditions while under sail, motoring and motorsailing. It works very well considering that it costs only \$2 plus a 1/2-inch drill that dropped overboard. Close-hauled and close reaching it allows me to concentrate more on sail trim and balance. My boat tracks fairly well and if I'm willing to accept up to 10 degrees of course variation resulting from gusts and lulls, then it may be 10 minutes or more between adjustments. It works fine during tacking, but I found I did not like to use it then, maybe because the tacking sequence is so ingrained through years of repetition that this added step is like an intrusion on something I like doing. Broad reaching and running are limited to low-wave days since the rudder movements needed to cope with sluing seas are too large and too fast for this tiller helper. Motoring is absolutely terrific. Following a winding channel or approaching a port while preparing decks is simple when sailing shorthanded.

I found that getting my hands off the tiller added a whole new dimension to sailing. Instead of worrying about tiny

course corrections to pick up every puff or lull *all the time*, I can, at least part of the time, allow these variations to have their way while I look around more and enjoy my wonderful surroundings.

Of course, the monstrosity of an 8-inch galvanized eyebolt may not appeal to everyone. But it may have some other saving graces. My son Peter, for instance, tied a line about 4 feet up on the backstay, put a snap hook on its bottom end and hooked it to the eyebolt. He thus made a topping lift for the tiller that has for five years been irritatingly grinding across the top of the transom. Now, when someone at the dock asks "What is that thing?" I simply reply that it's my tiller lifter. Scrutinizing the eyebolt—which is large enough to lift an automobile or the whole stern of the boat—I anticipate their next question with the comment that I sometimes lean heavily on the tiller.

Of course you could add some pizzazz to this tiller helper by fashioning it from stainless steel. You could also add a special handgrip with finger indentations. And you might put a smartly knurled surface where the line wraps, and....

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