

CLIMBING THE LADDER

The transition
from cockpit to
helm comes with
tremendous
responsibility

BY CAPT.
JEN COPELAND



JESSICA HAYDAHL RICHARDSON

Fisherman, mechanic, medic, business asset manager and more: The job of a professional sport-fishing captain can be demanding, but it's also hard to beat the scenery.

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ost of us dream about running our own boat one day. It's in a fisherman's DNA, and there isn't a deckhand alive who hasn't at least once thought they could do a better job than the skipper on the bridge. But making the transition to the helm isn't for the faint of heart.

With the title of captain comes a whole new set of challenges, and most of those are never seen or shared with the crew. Going from a neck-down, mostly physical position as a deckhand to a neck-up job that requires expending mental energy isn't easy. Instead of taking direction, you are giving it. Not only are captains responsible for a very expensive boat and all its maintenance and repairs — preventive, emergency and otherwise — they are also responsible for the lives of everyone on board. And unless you are a fish whisperer, go ahead and pile fish-finding on the skipper's plate as well.

The captain is essentially an asset manager. They must possess the meticulous organization skills required to run a flawless program, and not only from a paperwork, licensing and documentation standpoint. Captains are usually expected to handle the travel arrangements, cruising permits, food, drinks, bait and any other purchase that goes along with keeping the program running, whether it is charter, corporate or private. It can become overwhelming.

PLAN FOR YOUR GOALS

When I started fishing in the Florida Keys 16 years ago, I didn't really have a plan. I had my license and knew I wanted to run a sport-fishing boat for a living, but wasn't sure how to get there. I tried to get a job in Palm Beach, but at the time, female fish-heads were almost unheard of, and I got shot down plenty of times. So, with the help of some good contacts, a few more hidden tears and a move to a smaller, more tightknit community, I started out where many others also begin their careers: on the charter docks.

Making a plan is an important step. How exactly are you going to get there? The sport-fishing business is like every other: You start at the entry level, and move up. This can mean washing the boat or helping the crew with bait rigging and maintenance. By showing you are eager and hungry to learn, drive can easily overpower lack of experience, but you must dig in, work hard and never, ever complain.

HAVE A TIMELINE

In almost every job interview, we are asked, "Where do you want to be in five years, or in 10?" The reason: Potential employers want to see if you are a goal-oriented individual. Without having a timeline for advancement, at least in your own head, you show a lack of drive and interest in advancement. And no captain wants to spend their valuable time and energy on someone who has no interest in absorbing their knowledge.

From a captain's perspective, we want to be sure the deckhands we hire know enough to do what is expected with little to no supervision. Anyone can be taught how to fish — it's not brain surgery — but it is very time consuming when you are faced with training yet another newbie. I have trained a few charter-turned-private deckhands over the years, and I can say it's daunting when you invest significant time with someone who then moves on and you're faced with starting from scratch once again.

For captains with many years at the helm of the same operation, there is always the thought of retirement. This is a hard job: It's challenging on the mind, and physically demanding on the body. Seasoned captains are constantly sizing up their deckhands: Is he a good candidate for my replacement? And while we are passionate and possessive about our boats, most longtime captains feel it is their responsibility to bring up, train and then confidently suggest

The best captains and deckhands are also good teachers. The ability to show others how to perform difficult tasks under intense pressure (like quickly pitch-baiting a blue marlin on a teaser 20 feet from the transom) requires practice and a special skill set. This applies to private and charter operations in any hot spot in the world.



RICHARD GIBSON (LEFT), JESSICA HAYDAHL RICHARDSON (OPPOSITE)



THE SUCCESS STORIES



CAPT. BRIAN KOMER
Factory/Demonstrator Captain,
Viking Yachts
Bass River, New Jersey

Brian Komer started fishing professionally at the age of 18 on Capt. Rick Haveland's charter boat *Captain Hook* in Key West, Florida, after showing up for two weeks straight, washing the incoming boats and asking each one if he could go out with them the next day. Finally, Haveland extended an invitation.

Komer bounced back and forth for

the next 12 years, working as mate, then captain and back to mate again, before he finally made the move to captain for good. He admits he wasn't sure what it took to make that transition but says, "You'll know when the time is right for you to take the next step in your career."

Today, more young captains are taking the helm, and Komer believes this can be a double-edged sword: "Hiring a young mate-turned-captain can gain a more eager, aggressive performance in the

fishing aspect, but unfortunately, some of the younger mates who try to move up too quickly also learn that it's not just fishing."

Now in his eighth year at Viking Yacht Co., Komer maintains there are no shortcuts when it comes to moving from the cockpit to the bridge. You still must pay attention and listen, all the while respecting the boat and its owner. "You realize very quickly when running your own boat that there's no one else to turn to. The final decision is your own."



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SHOWING YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE ON A DAILY BASIS WILL ALLOW YOUR CAPTAIN TO OPEN UP TO YOU, SHARE INFORMATION AND ULTIMATELY ALLOW YOU SOME WHEEL TIME — EITHER TO DRIVE ON FISH OR DOCK THE BOAT.

their deckhand as a replacement when the time comes to retire or move on to another position.

INCREASE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Coming to the fishing business with a captain's license in hand does not automatically advance you to the bridge. Running a sport-fishing boat requires a whole new set of skills, and you always learn best when starting at the bottom.

Whenever you are able, ride along with another team on the bridge. As hard as it might be to stay out of the cockpit and away from the action, focus instead on why you started fishing in the first place. I sometimes have this dilemma myself. I know that riding along with a different boat always advances my own knowledge because I truly believe you should learn something new every single time you

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go out. Simple observation is one of the best ways to gain knowledge.

Watching the way different captains drive on fish, sit on an edge or work a seamount can drastically improve your own skills. By working for different people, you take the best of each of them and create your own unique style along the way. While many fishing techniques and skills are handed down through generations of crews, there will always be one or two things you do differently from your predecessors, and chances are that you learned this strategy through someone outside your circle. Whenever possible, step out of your comfort zone.

VOLUNTEER TO LEARN

In the early years of a deckhand's career, the main

THE SUCCESS STORIES



CAPT. CHRIS KUBIK
Owner/Operator, Point Runner
Oregon Inlet, North Carolina

Chris Kubik breezed into the Outer Banks from Atlanta in his early 20s with a packed car and a mission for fishing. Shortly after taking a job on an inshore boat called *Risky Business*, Kubik was decking for Capt. Fin Gaddy aboard *Qualifier*, where he stayed for the next 10 years.

Now the proud owner/operator of a busy, successful charter operation in the Outer Banks, Kubik admits his daily anxiety level still stays very high. From the unpredictable weather to crossing the bar at Oregon Inlet on the way to and from the fishing grounds, Kubik relies heavily on prayer. "I don't tell a lot of people this," he says, "but I worry less about finding fish than I do about navigating my own inlet."

Kubik absolutely believes you should pick your captain's brain at every opportunity. "If you spend time on the bridge, this shows you have an interest in what is happening up there." He insists this is the best way to learn responsibility, especially in North Carolina, where navigation can be especially tricky and captain turnover is relatively low.



Most deckhands begin their careers washing boats, with the hope of an invitation to go fishing the next day. Along the way, they learn critical skills, such as helping with engine maintenance and managing the tackle and cockpit gear (above). Hard work and the desire to learn may eventually lead to a full-time position.



Most captains will admit that fishing is actually the easiest part of the job. Professional skippers are entrusted not only with the lives of the passengers but also with the maintenance and safety of what can be a multimillion-dollar asset.

giving you a better understanding of your vessel's performance and quirks.

Showing you are responsible on a daily basis will allow your captain to open up to you, share information and ultimately allow you some wheel time — either to drive on fish or dock the boat. Being a professional fisherman is about loving all aspects of the job. Wanting to learn without the expectation of payment is a signal to others that you genuinely want to succeed, and that you are interested in continuing your education on the water. Find a captain who is willing to take you with him and let you watch. To become a captain, you must be able to take all your education and apply it without doubt.

INVESTIGATE THE REQUIREMENTS

Experience is required to understand the job's real scope, and just having a captain's license in no way means you have the know-how to run a boat. It does mean you know, or should know, the rudimentary basics: the rules of the road, paper-chart navigation and general deck knowledge.

Insurance companies often give boat owners who employ licensed captains premium discounts, so chances are, if you are to be considered for a driving job, you'll need to obtain your ticket. And it's mandatory for charter operations.

If you want to move up, you must show an interest. Be interested in what your captain is

doing on the bridge. Have the initiative to learn. You might be Supermate on your own, but without the guidance of a good captain, you're left to figure it out on your own. Don't be greedy, and don't think you can't learn because you aren't getting paid. Some of my best learning experiences are those that resulted in no pay.

Be careful what you wish for. It might seem like the best job in the world, until it's yours. Just because you are now the commander doesn't mean you have the right to stop learning. Technology and practices change very rapidly in this business, and failure to keep up with the times will soon have you off your 70-foot custom boat and back in line at the charter dock. Hard work will always pay off, no matter the industry, so the more you can learn, the better off you will be.

Some people are meant to be captains, and some are better off as deckhands. Professional skippers wear a lot of hats, and fishing is the easy part. From managing the crew and the maintenance schedule to overseeing the boat's budget and travel schedule, responsibility is a very important component in this process. Without the ability to perform these tasks, you will soon find yourself in over your head and back at the square end of the boat. 🐟

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Capt. Jen Copeland is a 20-year marine-industry professional who enjoys telling a good story, especially about big-game fishing. She currently runs the Viking 50 Three C's in North Key Largo, Florida.

THE SUCCESS STORIES



CAPT. NICO MELENDREZ
Charter Captain, *A-Fin-Ity*
Casa Vieja Lodge, Guatemala

Responsible for close to 40,000 billfish releases in his lifetime, Nico Melendrez runs the 39-foot Billy Knowles *A-Fin-Ity*, and says at Casa Vieja Lodge, it all starts at the bottom. "Most of us start out as washdown boys, working for tips and hoping we get an invite to go fishing," he says.

In a high-profile charter business such as

Casa Vieja Lodge, Melendrez points out that having a worthy mentor able to effectively teach you is part of the process, and names Capt. Chris Sheeder and award-winning angler Tim Choate as two of his. "Mr. Choate made sure we all perfected our fish-handling techniques, and Chris has an understandable reason for doing things the way we do. He is always calm, and his spread is flawless."

The only way to stay humble is to watch and learn from others — the good and the bad. There will be times you learn more

from others' mistakes, but whenever in doubt, Melendrez insists, "You should ask, and most importantly, don't ever think you are above anyone."

Although he admits he does miss the cockpit action from time to time, Melendrez finds being the captain offers him the perfect mix of emotions. "This is where nervousness and anxiety become pure satisfaction, because once they start biting in Guatemala — and you know they will — all the anxiety goes away!"

JOSEPH BYRUM (TOP), JESSICA HAYDAHL RICHARDSON (OPPOSITE)



DON'T BE GREEDY, AND DON'T THINK YOU CAN'T LEARN BECAUSE YOU AREN'T GETTING PAID. SOME OF MY BEST LEARNING EXPERIENCES ARE THOSE THAT RESULTED IN NO PAY.

