***“GET YOUR MOJO ON”***

***PRE-TRIP INSPECTIONS***

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How many times have you been traveling down the highway and see a boat & trailer on the side of the road missing a wheel? Have you ever been out fishing or boating, and been flagged down by a boater in distress, or noticed a boat being towed in because they had broken down.

If you spend a great deal of time pulling your boat down the road, or on the water, chances are that eventually you will fall victim to one, or both scenarios. It’s impossible to know when your motor may break down due to mechanical failures, but if you invest a little bit of time with Pre-Trip Inspections in advance of heading out, you can certainly mitigate your risk of being stranded on the side of the road, or on the water.

Preventative maintenance on both our trailers and our boats is something that most of us think about on a regular basis, but unfortunately most tend to ignore it until it’s too late. The information contained in this article should be common knowledge to all boat owners. This article is meant to serve as a gentle reminder to take the time to conduct thorough Pre-Trip inspections, and ensure you have all required equipment onboard to mitigate the risks of being stranded or receiving a hefty fine from your local game warden.

**Pre-Trip Inspections**: Pre-Trip inspections don’t have to be time consuming or a big deal, but we all should have a mental checklist to help ensure a relaxing and enjoyable trip on the water. Whether you’re trailering your boat once or twice a month for a few miles to your local boat ramp, or trailering it daily for miles at a time, your pre-trip inspection may be different. Letting your boat sit-up in the barn can be just as hard on it as towing it every day. Regardless of how frequent, or how far you are towing your boat, you should make it a habit to carry out routine pre-trip inspections.

As a Tournament angler, I often trailer my boat for hundreds of miles at a time to fish a tournament. Below is a list of Pre-Trip Inspections that I will make before hitting the road to help ensure I have a trouble-free trip.

* **Boat Trailer Pre-Trip Inspections** –
  + **Tires –** Proper tire inflation will not only extend the tread life of your tires, but it will also help prevent you from being stranded on the side of the road with a blow-out. Always maintain proper tire pressure regardless of how far you are towing.

* + **Bearings** – It’s very difficult to know how many miles you put on your trailer between bearing inspections and greasing your hubs. And with some of the newer hubs & bearings that are on the market today, some may require a more frequent inspection than others. I try to pull my hubs to grease and inspect bearings every 6 months, regardless if I have been pulling my boat up and down the highway during tournament season, or just pulling it down the road to the local boat ramp. In either situation, before pulling my boat any distance, I do a quick walk around the trailer and inspect the hubs to ensure all bearing caps are intact, and take a quick glance on the back side of the hubs to ensure my bearing seals are not leaking on the backside of the hub. Losing a bearing cap or leaking seals will no doubt leave you stranded on the side of the road, even if you are trailering a short distance. Do yourself a favor and do not ignore signs of leaking seal, or a missing bearing cap.
  + **Trailer Lights** –

We have all witnessed a trailer being towed down the road without lights, or trailer lights that are not functioning properly. From my personal experience, lights seem to be an inherent problem with any trailer. However, they are very important will prevent you from being rear-ended by drivers not paying attention, and can save you money and frustration of having to pay a fine to the local officials if you get pulled over. If you are experiencing trouble with your trailer lights, often it’s nothing more than a loose ground wire or broken bulb. If you are experiencing problems with your trailer lights, start with verifying they are properly grounded, and then check your bulbs. If you back your trailer into the water and suddenly your trailer lights start working, there is no doubt you have a ground problem. Faulty trailer lights are often a quick and easy fix.

* + **Bunk Boards** –

Have you ever been at the boat ramp and happen to notice a bunk-board floating around the dock? Most bunk-boards on a boat trailer are secured by a single lag screw that over time can become rusted and sheared off, or work themselves out, leaving your bunk unsecured to your trailer. This can become a serious problem if you happen to lose that bunk-board completely while traveling down a rough road. You will no doubt have some serious damage to the bottom of your hull. Likewise, if that bunk-board floats off when you launch, chances are you won’t notice it until you go to load your boat back on the trailer at the end of the day. This situation will leave you stranded at the launch after a hard day on the water while you are scurrying around to replace it so you can load your boat back onto the trailer. I try to make a habit of inspecting my bunk boards after each launch. I will make a quick trip around the trailer with a tug on each bunk-board to ensure they are secure and intact. If I discover one may be loose, I will address the problem immediately. Another quick and easy tip that will mitigate your risks of being stranded.

* **Boat Pre-Checks** –
  + **Oil** – Whether you are running an inboard, a two stroke, or four stroke outboard, like all machinery, they require oil to run. Take a few minutes to verify you have plenty two cycle oil in your reservoir if you’re running a two stroke, and check your engine oil on four strokes. It sounds like simple common sense, but believe it or not, on more than one occasion I have been approached by another angler on the water who needed two cycle oil because their low oil alarm was going off in the middle of their trip. They failed to check it before heading out, and wound up stranded on the water as a result.

* + **Lower Unit Oil –**

Believe it or not, lower units do require gear oil, and they do require regular service to keep them in running trouble free. Properly checking the oil level of your lower unit, as well as servicing them is probably one of the most neglected service points with most anglers. Many anglers I run across have no idea on how to properly service their lower unit. As a charter boat captain and professional tournament angler, I will check my lower unit oil level weekly, and I will change it every 100 hours when I service the oil in my engine. I am running a shallow water boat, and the lower unit on my motor is working hard in the shallow water. Some might even say it is abused. Therefore, I make it a priority to keep it serviced with fresh gear oil every 100 hours. Others may not need to service their lower units as often as I do, but it all depends on how you run it and your manufacturer recommendations. Take care of it and it will last you for many years of trouble free time on the water. We should all be pulling our props on a frequent basis to ensure we don’t have fishing line wrapped around our prop shaft, which will eventually damage lower unit seal causing oil to leak out. After pulling your prop to inspect and grease your prop shaft, inspect the seal area of your lower unit to ensure its not leaking. Often, you will notice oil dripping out of your lower unit behind your prop if you have a damaged seal. This is something that requires immediate attention, and should not be ignored.

* **Required Equipment for Motor Boats 16’ and Less Than 26’ in Length** – We will review the list of equipment that is required by law in the State of Louisiana for all motor boats 16’ to less than 26’ in length. Although the list of required equipment is common from state to state, it’s strongly recommended that you take the time to verify the laws/requirements specific to your state, or the state you may be traveling to.
  + - **Valid Registration Onboard & Valid Decals Displayed** – Another one of the overlooked points for anglers is registration and current decals. We won’t spend much time on this subject, but do include it as part of your pre-trip inspection routine and it will save you some time and money.
    - **PFD: Type I, II, or III –** In the state of Louisiana, a motorboat that is 16’ to less than 26’ in length is required to have a wearable USCG approved Type I, II or III PFD, and it shall be readily available for each passenger on board. All children 16 years of age and younger must be wearing an approved USCG Type I, II or III PFD while underway on a vessel 16’ to less than 26’ in length. **NOTE:** **CO² inflatable PFD’s are not acceptable for children 16 years of age or younger** in the state of Louisiana. Verify this requirement as well as the minimum age requirement of your own state or the state you are traveling to.
    - **PFD: Type IV** – A motorboat that is 16’ to less than 26’ in length shall be equipped with at least one Type IV PFD. Type IV PFD’s are commonly referred to as a throw cushion, a ring buoy, or a rope bag. A type IV PFD is a safety device that is readily available, and can be thrown to a person who has fallen overboard. Type IV PFD’s must be readily available in the event of distress. If you must dig through compartments to make it available during a routine boat check, you may be subject to a fine. It must be readily available in the event of person overboard.
    - **Engine Cut-Off Device** – A motorboat that is 16’ to less than 26’ in length with a hand tiller outboard motor in excess of 10 horsepower designed to have or having an engine cut-off switch must have the link attached to the operator, operators clothing, or if worn, the operators PFD while the motor is running and the vessel is underway.
    - **Type B Fire Extinguisher** – A motorboat that is 16’ to less than 26’ in length shall have at least one Type B fire extinguisher onboard and readily accessible. Check your fire extinguisher frequently to ensure that it has not been damaged. Especially if you store your fire extinguisher in the bottom of a compartment on your boat. They will frequently get beat around in rough conditions and become inoperative. Ensure it is properly charged, and readily accessible. Most operators will hopefully never have to use their fire extinguishers. However, I have personally been in one of those unfortunate situations where I required a fire extinguisher onboard my boat to extinguish a fire. It’s not something that anyone wants to experience firsthand. But if you ever wind up in an unfortunate situation where you do require a fire extinguisher, you want to make certain it is fully charged and readily accessible, and not stored in the bottom of your boat locker under a bunch of gear. Especially if you are in a fiberglass hull.
    - **Navigation Lights** – A motorboat that is 16’ to less than 26’ in length shall be equipped with navigation lights. Just like the lights on your boat trailer, navigation lights on a boat always seem to be an inherent problem when it comes to keeping them working properly. According to the USCG, navigation lights are required at all times in condition of low visibility. Conditions of low visibility are common with fog, rain, heavily overcast clouds, as well as early morning and late afternoons. Ensure your navigation lights are working properly at all times. You never know when your trip may be extended late into the evening or night, because of unforeseen circumstances.
    - **Horn, whistle or bell** - A motorboat that is 16’ to less than 26’ in length shall be equipped with an auditable singling device. This can be in the form of a horn, whistle or bell. Regardless of the type you chose to have, just make certain your boat is equipped with one of these devices.
    - **Daytime visual distress signals** - A motorboat that is 16’ to less than 26’ in length shall be equipped with a daytime distress signal when operating in federally controlled waters (offshore & tidal coastal areas). Day time distress signals consist of flares, flashlights, a mirror, a gun with ammunition, or a distress flag that can be laid out on the deck of your boat. Something that can bring attention to you and your location in the event of distress.
    - **Nighttime visual distress signals** - A motorboat that is 16’ to less than 26’ in length shall be equipped with a night time distress signal when operating in federally controlled waters (offshore & tidal coastal areas). Night time distress signals consist of flares and flashlights.
    - **Backfire Flame Arrestor** – An inboard or stern drive vessel that is 16’ to less than 26’ in length must be equipped with a Backfire Flame Arrestor.
    - **Ventilation System** - A motorboat that is 16’ to less than 26’ in length shall be equipped with a ventilation system when the engine compartment is enclosed.
    - **Muffler/Underwater Exhaust** - A motorboat that is 16’ to less than 26’ in length shall be equipped with a muffler or underwater exhaust system.

Most of this information should be common knowledge to most anglers and boaters. However, time and time again we all seem to either neglect, or forget the importance of Pre-Trip Checks and Required Boating Equipment. This is evident by the number of boats and trailers we all see alongside of the road or towed in, and the number of tickets that are issued by local game wardens because anglers didn’t have their required equipment onboard. Regardless of what your pre-trip checklist looks like, or how you go about executing it, just ensure you have one, and it is appropriate for the distance that you intend on trailering your boat. A thorough pre-trip inspection is no guarantee that you will not experience problems on the road or in the water, but will certainly lower your risk of breaking down. Be certain that you are intimately familiar with boating laws and regulations of your home state, and any state you may be hauling your boat to.

Until next time, **“*Get Your Mojo On*”** and Tight Lines!

**Captain Steve Fleming**

**Mojo Pro Staff**

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