



VARNISHING TIPS *from a pro*

by Geo Tamblyn

Varnishing Tips from a Pro

All Grand Banks owners know the joys and headaches of maintaining their beautiful wood varnish. For nearly 20 years I have been varnishing on my own boats and I am now regarded as something of an expert on the subject in my business. Susan Bland, Editor of the Newsletter and Website for the Puget Sound Grand Banks Owner's Association, asked me to share some of my trade secrets for those of you who want, or think you want, to varnish your own boat.

I have tried many products along the way. For example I have experience with the following: Deks Olje, Cetol, Epoxies, and many different types of traditional spar varnishes. I have used Man of War, Crystal, Epifanes, Interlux, Awl-Grip, Rivale, Z-Spar Captains 105. Recently I have experimented with the new Bristol Finish that is supposed to be the lifetime solution to varnishing. I have not been convinced and seem to always return to the old school philosophies and products.

For the past 5 years I have been using almost exclusively Z-Spar Flagship 2015. At Lake Union Yacht Center we have two fully enclosed boat houses with controlled environmental conditions. That is how we produce our signature finish. When people ask a longtime varnish customer of ours and producer of the Waggoner's Cruising Guide, Bob Hale, how he keeps his varnish so beautiful year after year, he often jokes, "I use a checkbook. It's quick, my clothes stay clean, I don't get stiff and sore, and the results are terrific!"

Varnishing can truly be an art. However, it can be broken down to simple procedures, that if followed, even the uninitiated can produce great results. A high quality finish is the result of:

- proper preparation
- proper climate control
- proper application

Preparation

Proper preparation is the first step in doing a quality job with your varnish project.

- 1) I always start off with a good mineral spirit wipe down of the surfaces while, at the same time, identifying all repair areas. This “cleaning and mapping” technique helps avoid contamination and overlooking of small dings, joint fractures, and wear-through.
- 2) Tape off all surfaces. Be careful not to tape too close because a small overlap provides a necessary seal between the two surfaces. You can take a pen and mark on the tape where your repair areas are so you don’t lose them when building your future coats.
- 3) All repairs need to be lightly scraped back and feathered in to 100gr sandpaper.

****PRACTICAL TIP****

It is good to blow out all bare wood with high pressure air to remove the dust from the grain and provide a better bond when you seal it with 50% varnish and 50% thinner.

- 4) Brush your sealer in well so it penetrates the bare wood and don’t go out further than your sanding. A light Scotchbright pad over the repair areas is all that is necessary between coats.
- 5) The second coat should be thinned down approx. 30%. The seal coats are imperative for a long lasting bond. Apply another Scotchbright sand and a spot coat with no thinner.
- 6) Now start sanding with 320gr. between coats.

****PRACTICAL TIP****

Alternate the size of the spot coat from small to larger so you don’t get a high build up on the outside of the repair; that will be difficult to feather in at the end.

Once your millage is built up to the surrounding areas you are ready to sand the whole surface with a 320grain paper thoroughly. Sand the tight areas first, such as next to stanchions, and then the large open areas up to them. This will help avoid burn-throughs. A very thorough vacuum with a horse hair attachment is an excellent way to avoid scratching for clean up. Again, high pressure air is great for removing dust from cracks and open screw holes.

Application

During application I use a badger hair brush. The brush must be thoroughly cleaned and worked through with your hands to remove as much dust and loose bristles as possible.

****PRACTICAL TIP****

A new brush does not make a clean brush. It takes a good 15 minutes to thoroughly clean a new brush. Work your brush in separate buckets of mineral spirits. Progress from one to another as the brush gets cleaner (save the dirty thinner for cleaning after your application.) A brush spinner really helps the situation.

When you are ready to apply I recommend against putting additives in the varnish. Products such as penetrol, thinner, or driers decrease the built-in UV protection, gloss, and strength of your chosen product. To avoid 'holidays' (dry spots where the varnish doesn't completely cover your sanded areas) and to ensure an even coat always apply your varnish going against the grain. Your final stroke should be from dry to wet, with the grain.

****PRACTICAL TIP****

Do not put a fully loaded brush up against a tight adjacent object or surface. This will help avoid puddles and sags. On flat areas, such as cap rails and table tops, varnish can be applied quite heavily, it will provide a high gloss and flow out well.

Teamwork is a great strategy for applications on cap rails and handrails. A second person really helps. One person works applying the top with a heavy brush while another works out the excess product a few feet behind using a dry brush (this helps to avoid sags). On the handrail one works the top and sides while the second follows behind underneath.

****PRACTICAL TIP****

As dust is one of our biggest enemies try to move slowly and don't look back. If you try to fix errors you will make them worse. It is really hard to resist the urge to pull out a sag or fix a holiday after the fact, but trust me, it won't work. Remember, most blemishes will bug only the varnisher. They'll go unnoticed by everyone else. Walk away and don't look back until the next day.

The Effects of Our Northwest Climate

A clean job is a high quality job but we cannot forget the effects of climate. Rain, sun, wind and temperature are our enemies. Here are some strategies to cope with NW weather.

A covered area such as a boat shed is a must for a professional finish. However, I realize that this is not available for most do it yourselfers and even many professionals. Here was my game plan for outside coating: do all of your prep for final coat one day and then get up at sunrise to wipe the dew off, tack off, and quickly apply the varnish coats before the sun got over 65 degrees F. If you are confident it won't rain it is great to coat on a cloudy day. Wind is detrimental and generally picks up in the afternoon here in the Northwest.

Completing the Job

Now the fun part. Carefully remove the tape. If you have heavy buildup it is a good idea to score the tape line with a razor blade to avoid unwanted pull-up. Bleed-through under the tape is common and can be easily cleaned if quickly attended to with a small thinner rag. Wipe excess thinner off the fresh varnish lightly with a clean soft rag. Any hardware installed or reinstalled on varnish should be bedded in Dolphin bedding compound. Dolphin maintains a good bond to surfaces, yet allows easy removal for future varnishing.

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