# Smarten up your Topsides

1. **Introduction.** The majority of cruising yachts receive inadequate attention to topsides and as the years pass by, there are several phases of breakdown in condition and appearance.

The first phase is loss of shine and gloss with progressive fading. This takes place through natural wear and tear and a degree of UV degradation. Inevitably, there are minor scuffs from fenders, the occasional scratch and a number of chips from hard edges, such as at the stern and transom.

As the surface becomes progressively worse, so impurities in the water penetrate the gelcoat. This happens particularly where the water is used by commercial traffic or has effluent of various types. This results in a staining around the water line, which progressively leads up the topsides and is often worse at the bow. The original styling stripe or cavita line has almost certainly suffered damage from fenders or other abrasion and may even have had a replacement line fitted, which is neither level nor straight!

This article covers the various steps that you can take to improve topsides appearance without recourse to boatyard fees. All the work can be done by the average boat owner, having a degree of enthusiasm and energy for grappling with this winter task.

2. **Preparation of topsides.** The first step is to thoroughly wash the topsides with fresh water and a mild detergent. This is ideally done by the yard when the boat comes out of the water, since they generally have pressure wash facilties.

The next step is to clean the topsides with a proprietory brand of GRP cleaner. Either do this by hand, or better still with a mechanical circular-motion buffer. There are a number of cutting pastes, cleaners and polishes now available from local chandlers - farecla is popular with the trade. Having cleaned off the topsides, the remaining stains will be more evident and these should be tackled, initially using a mild process and getting increasingly severe with the surface, until the problems have been resolved. It is advisable to work at two or three feet at a time, so that you can judge the effect of your efforts.

The first step in dealing with stains is to use acetone, which is very effective and will take out stains which have not penetrated into the gelcoat. Please note that acetone is harmful to the skin and rubber gloves should be worn when using it. In the absence of acetone being available, then try Jif or a proprietory brand of stain cleaner.

The remaining stains that are difficult to remove, will be because they have penetrated the gelcoat. The thickness of gelcoat is between 20 and 24 thousandths of an inch (0.5 to 0.6 mm), which does provide considerable scope for taking the top surface off the gelcoat. This will certainly be necessary when staining has occured around the water line and at the bow. For this purpose, use a heavier grade cutting paste, or alternatively use a fine grade wet or dry paper (say 2400 grit) and use this with plenty of water.

All but the worst stains will be removed using the above process and if necessary, you should use a slightly coarser grit glass paper and penetrate the gelcoat further - then finer grit to finish off. In this case however, I would suggest consulting a surveyor or GRP repair specialist, who will advise you how far to go.

3. **Dealing with the boottop.** Presuming you are happy with the position of the boottop in relation to the water line and the width of the boottop stripe, then give it a good rubbing down to prepare for new paint. Because the boottop merges into the gelcoat, you need to be careful not to scratch the gelcoat surface with the wet-or-dry paper. A precaution in this respect would be to apply masking tape over the gelcoat and then you can rub down the boottop paint with rather more effectiveness at the edges.

Should the boottop require adjustment, now is the time to measure this up on the boat and apply masking tape to provide the limits of the new lines.

Boottop paint is supplied by International or Blakes and is in effect, a hard scrubbable antifouling.

4. **Gelcoat repairs.** These repairs fall into the category of either star cracks or stress cracks, or alternatively, chips out of the gelcoat. The solution here is to subcontract this work to the local yard, where repair of superficial damage is not likely to amount to more than £50 to £150. In fact, instructions for doing gelcoat repairs would occupy a whole article and therefore details are not included here. Should you wish to do this work yourself, then acquire directions from a local tradesman or a GRP material supplier.

5. **Attending to cavita line.** This is likely to have suffered some damage around maximum beam position as a result of fenders rubbing, coming alongside and so on. Providing the damaged area does not exceed say 2m each side, then it is a reasonable decision to do a repair. However, if the damage extends further than this and a degree of fading has taken place, then it is worth considering removing the whole cavita line on both sides and replace with new. In practice, a certain amount of fading may well have taken place and it will be difficult to match old with new and maintain a reasonable colour match.

In this report, I will tackle the job of replacing a section of cavita tape and secondly replacing the tape along the whole length of the boat and the end logos.

5.1. **Repair cavita line.** Having cleaned off the hull and recovered the colour and gloss of the gelcoat, the next job is to remove the damaged cavita line. This is quite simple to do and the only equipment required is a hot air blower (or hair dryer) and a "soft" straight edge, preferably made in plastic. This is so as not to damage the gelcoat surface underneath.

Begin at one end of the damaged cavita line and carefully warm it up over a length of about 20cms and you will find you can peel off the old cavita line. Should you apply too much heat, the film will soften and be difficult to peel, too little heat and you will not be able to get it off. With a bit of practice, you will find how much heat to apply to be able to peel off the cavita tape in long strips. As you get it going, you will find that by keeping pressure on the piece you have lifted and maintaining the heat just ahead of where it is stuck on, you can progressively move along the length of the cavita line.

Having removed all the damaged vynil tape, clean up the ends with a sharp blade such as a "Stanley" knife. Be careful not to penetrate the gelcoat. The next step is to clean the surface underneath the old tape with a solvent such as methylated spirits, so as to provide a clinically clean surface for the new tape to adhere to.

Now lay on masking tape to bridge the gap that has to be covered with the new tape. The upper edge of the masking tape provides a guide for the lower edge of the new cavita tape.

Next prepare a length of cavita tape, slightly longer than you require. Then put a mixture of water with a small of amount of Fairy Liquid, in a small spray gun like a garden rose spray. Thoroughly wet the surface onto which the cavita tape is to be laid. Now as you remove the backing tape, gently position the new cavita tape in the space it has to fill, "floating" it down on to the masking tape. Next press it into position using an applicator (like a plastic spatula) and cut off both ends slightly over length. Settle the tape into position, and begin to "stroke" out all the air bubbles using the applicator. The joint at each end should be an overlap joint of about 10mm. Do not attempt a butt joint!

Once the tape is properly in position, remove the top plastic coating which has hitherto maintained the upper and lower band at the correct distance apart. Now finally stroke out any further bubbles. Really obstinate ones can be removed by pricking the bubble with a needle and allowing the air to escape.

The above procedure sounds more complicated than it is. With a little patient practice, you will become quite expert. It is helpful if weather conditions are moderately warm with preferably no wind.

5.2 **Replacing complete cavita line.** Adopt the same procedure as for a repair, in that all the old

tape must be removed including logos and be fully cleaned with methylated spirits. Then set up the required line with masking tape. Next prepare the new tape, determine where it is going to start at the bow (or stern), fully wet with spray and steadily work along the whole length of the boat, unrolling the tape as you go. Follow the same procedure as for repair work. Fitting the logo end pieces is relatively straight forward and these should likewise be settled downwards onto carefully positioned masking tape. You may wish to trim the aft end of the stern logo to match up with the angle of the transom.

6. **Final wax polish.** Having dealt with the cavita line and logos, the final step is to give the hull a complete wax polish and buff with a polishing mop. There are several proprietory brands of wax polish available and I would use the same make as you used for the initial cleaning compound.

7. **Conclusions.** Attending to the various jobs as described in this article, will produce a dramatic change to the boat out of all proportion to the time, effort and expenditure involved.

Should you require any of the cavita tape (red and blue up to 1988 and grey blue there after), I have now been able to secure a supply at attractive prices for members of the Association. It is also possible to obtain replacement fore and aft logos incorporating the SY emblem.

Whether your intention is to smarten up the boat to sell her or to keep her for the next few years, the job is well worth doing.

Best of luck and good sailing next Season.