



BY JASON Y. WOOD

# No Talk, All Action

IS ANYBODY LISTENING? VHF MAY SEEM STRANGELY QUIET TODAY.



Capt. Mark Henderson's ICOM VHF's take center stage.

start to every departure, yet so many people seem to say, *I'm not going that far, and I have my cell phone.* I don't know how your cell coverage is, but mine fails often enough to make me wonder if it even counts as a layer of protection.

"I'm not hearing a lot of chatter," Ellison continues. "I kind of like that. I remember coming from Maine through Long Island Sound and suddenly hearing so much traffic on 16 or even 9—people calling each other—it was really annoying and I didn't want to hang out on those channels. But it doesn't seem true anymore."

I spoke to a couple skippers who have definite ideas about how they use their VHF systems in conjunction with the rest of their electronics. One thing is for certain, they know it's there, and they know it's ready for action.

Capt. Mark Maus is a fishing captain who uses a Simrad RS90 VHF that's connected to his helm system via a NMEA 2000 connection, so he's got charting of AIS targets that makes his VHF an even more powerful tool. In case you have forgotten, the automatic identification system is a silent, radio-based data system that collects data from other boats in the area also equipped with an AIS transceiver. If you have the right kind of system, it also transmits data about your vessel to them. The data includes the vessel name, hailing port, speed, course over ground, and more.

"We're a registered vessel with AIS, so we're able to transmit our position and receive the signal on our boat," Maus says. "So any other vessels in our area that are AIS vessels can see me on their screens. And on my screen, I'm able to just touch that target and hit my information page to get all the information about them."

Since AIS is primarily a collision-avoidance technology—it makes it easy to call a boat by name on the VHF—I figured Maus would use it mostly in low-visibility conditions in a crowded harbor approach, but he told me when it really comes into play.

"I don't worry about it, to be really honest with you, in close quarters," he says. "I utilize mine more when I'm offshore. When you're 120 to 200 miles offshore, and you're out there for three days deep-dropping or trolling or whatever you're doing—we set up at night for swordfish—so we'll set our zones up on our radar for a 3-mile zone and do the same 3-mile zone on our AIS. We like to keep track of the tankers, things like that out there, and for safety reasons we use

that technology very heavily." Speaking to the bridge watch on a tanker can sure let you relax on your fishing spot, knowing that they see you and will not run you over. Even better, you have enough time to take evasive action if the watch on that ship doesn't respond or seems to have fallen asleep.

Beyond safety, Mark Henderson of Liquid Fire Fishing Team uses his VHF setup—consisting of two ICOM IC-M506s on his SeaVee 390 Z. When he fishes tournaments all over the Southeastern United States, from Louisiana to Maryland, Henderson takes care to set up his VHF to track what's going on in the tournament, and the rest of the fleet that may be fishing independently of his event. "Most fishermen I know tune their radios into tournament fishermen or commercial guys," he says. "We set one radio to monitor those channels. And then we have one on scan which picks up traffic on other channels that we know people use to communicate. If someone is talking on another channel it can be handy to learn how the bite might be somewhere else, and key information like what depth the fish are at in their location." Henderson also transmits on a low-power setting to allow for easier communication with boats that are nearby.

ICOM also offers a scramble feature, which is something that's been around a while; it allows Henderson to speak to teammates on other boats in a tournament without giving information away to the fleet. "They have two different channel frequencies to talk privately, so no one else can tell what you're saying," he says. "We use a channel that most people don't use,

since we don't want to be disrespectful to other boaters. They can hear you but it's scrambled to the point where they can't understand anything you're saying. It's a really nice feature when you're coordinating with a couple other teams."

While it's great to have features such as these, VHF is the best solution for talking to the boats around you, the closest help available if an emergency should happen on your boat. You probably don't know anyone's cell number out there, if your phone even works.

"One thing that many people don't realize: Rescue 21, the Coast Guard communication system, has direction finding," Ellison says. "They can generally locate you with that. So if you come up on 16 saying *Mayday Mayday*, they're apt to hear you, and people will talk to you, and will know where you are even if you're fumbling around looking for your latitude and longitude on your cell phone."

The bottom line: VHF is imperative as a safety device. If you don't have an MMSI number—find out how to get one for free at [navcen.uscg.gov](http://navcen.uscg.gov)—get one and key it in to your GPS-connected VHF, then double check the number you entered to make sure you have it right. Then, if you have people on your boat who don't know what to do if you're incapacitated, make sure they know about the radio distress button, behind the red, spring-loaded door. That way, they will be able to summon help in an emergency. Because there are some times when the peace and quiet at sea is too quiet. And you're not ready to rest in peace. □

In a day and age for which the term "oversharing" were seemingly invented, I find it amusing that people have clammed up. No, I'm not talking about a sudden and striking lack of posts on social media, nor am I talking about the flow of email, text messages, voicemails, and yes, even phone calls coming to a grinding halt. Those are all still at dangerously bloated levels.

What I'm talking about is the VHF on the helm. Simply put, beyond the level of close-quarters marine chatter—think calls to bridge tenders, marina staff, fuel docks, and yes, even an occasional boat-to-boat call on 13 to make sure the watch on the bridge of that ship sees us—there's a shocking lack of VHF traffic.

Have you noticed that? *Power & Motoryacht's* Senior Electronics Editor Ben Ellison certainly has. "Cruising down the East Coast to Maryland it was very quiet," he says with a chuckle. "I began to wonder if the VHF wasn't working right." Every mariner knows that the radio check is a key

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