



Applying blue dye to the hull highlights areas that need to be filled and further sanded for an even finish.

Topside Painting: Tools and Tricks of the Trade

Before a brush, roller, or spray gun is hefted, a DIYer must understand the value of surface preparation. Finish quality hinges on a smooth, evenly sanded surface that's been primed and resanded down to a 320-grit finish. However, surface preparation begins well before any sanding starts.

Step 1 is a thorough washing of the hull and/or deck. After the surface dries, it should be wiped down using clean cotton cloths and the paint manufacturer's preferred "wipe down" solvent. The purpose of these first two steps is to clean off dirt, wax, and chemical residue that could be driven deeper into the substrate during the sanding process.

By-the-numbers sanding usually begins with 80- or 100-grit paper, and Round 1 is meant to create a solid anchoring pattern for the primer recommended by the paint maker. Naturally, any serious damage, scrapes, and gouges should be repaired prior to the paint-prep process. Many professionals find a dye—like the Dykem steel blue layout fluid (No. 80660)—helpful during



the filling process. The dye reveals areas that need to be filled or further sanded. Scratches and gouges should be filled with a sandable fairing compound like those from Interlux, System Three, and West System.

Using the proper tools for prepping and painting topsides makes the task easier. For rolling-and-tipping, we recommend a clean, soft, long-haired natural-bristle brush (like badger hair) and small high-density, high-quality foam rollers. Awlgrip suggests Deluxe Mohair rollers from Redtree Industries, and Epifanes has a line of brushes and rollers.

One of the most often asked question is, "Do I really need to go through the primer step?" The answer is usually "Yes," particularly if this is the first time a fiberglass, wood, or metal boat is being painted.

Careful prep prior to priming pays off in the long run, and many pros recommend a two-part epoxy primer even if a one-part modified urethane enamel is to be used as a top coat. The former insures the best of bottom-layer adhesion and adds up to a tougher overall finish. Most importantly, there's less likelihood of "first coat" adhesion problems as the paint ages, and a future redo of the topcoat will be a simple, straight-forward scuff-sand and paint endeavor.

Boat painting involves chemistry, and cohesion and surface tension are part of the first lesson every painter learns. Regardless of whether you choose traditional enamel, single-part urethane, or two-part epoxy and linear polyurethane (LPU) systems, there are specific reducers for each product. Often referred to as "thinner," these solvents are used to decrease viscosity and make the paint more willing to flow despite inter-molecular attraction.

Never has the "too much of a good thing" rule been more applicable than in the case of adding reducer to paint. The idea is to keep the paint flowing just long enough to allow gravity and the material's cohesive traits and surface tension to self smooth the skin. The process eliminates minor roller and brush marks, and causes the "orange peel" that haunts a spray painter to blend together into an even, glossy surface. Too much reducer can cause the film to flow excessively, resulting in curtains, hangs, and sags—apt descriptions of every painter's worst nightmare.

The next challenge involves the actual application process, and underscores why spreading technique is such a big deal. Regardless of whether he's are applying an alkyd enamel or a paint that's actually a catalyzed plastic resin, a deft hand is a painter's best friend. High-quality finish work relies upon balancing volume control, temperature, solvent evaporation, viscosity, and paint-spreading dexterity.

In essence, the flow characteristics of the paint being applied need to be in sync with the application technique of the painter. Some painters are able to apply slightly thicker coats without sags and work with less reducer (slightly more viscous material). Others hold fast to a gameplan of many thin coats being the best approach. Those learning the craft should start

Prep taping and masking take up much more time and effort than the actual application of a sprayed-on finish. Each step is key to overall success.

DIY NOTEBOOK

Whether applying paint by brush, roller, or spray, get to know how the paint you have chosen flows and reduce it just enough to eliminate brush strokes or orange peel.



SPRAY PAINTING ON YOUR OWN

Like sewing your own dodger or rebuilding a diesel, spray painting isn't for the average amateur sailboat maintainer. It's a talent built upon considerable patience, caution, and practice. It can become a useful skill in the advanced DIYer's repertoire.

There are important awareness issues and safety procedures associated with handling the chemicals. Technical knowledge ranges from knowing usable weather patterns to how to coat the boat and not the windshield of your wife's car.

Atomized LPU paint must also be kept off the painter's body parts and especially out of the respiratory system. This being said, the sailor-craftsman who has a Sear's compressor and siphon-cup spray gun can learn enough of the tricks of the trade to get acceptable results on small parts. Little things like moving the gun before pulling the trigger and keeping the nozzle parallel and equidistant from the surface are good starting points.

Beginning with a light mist or dust coat and making subsequent passes heavier, are also part of the learn-by-doing process.

Those who try their hand at spraying a locker lid, boom, spinnaker pole, or perhaps even a rigid dinghy develop skills incrementally. The rule of thumb is to start with small projects, reduce the paint to about milk consistency (12 to 20 seconds of drip with a No. 2 Zahn cup) and apply very thin coats, allowing the solvent to escape before recoating.

Make sure you mask and cover everything that's not getting painted, including yourself. Invest in a quality respirator approved for the solvents you are working with. Gloves, coveralls, and eye protection are a must.

Start with a clean, well-sanded surface, and spray properly mixed and reduced epoxy primer. Finish-sand down to 320 grit, reclean the surface, and apply the LPU coating with the same "less is more" mindset during each pass.

What separates the pros from the amateurs is the feel for the final pass and how wet it can be without developing the sags and hangs that must be block-sanded prior to respraying. Prep work is key, and cleanliness remains the rule of the day, but in the final act, it's the skill of the applicator that delivers the bright, glossy, smooth finish.

reducer in the mix, almost all roller dapple may disappear, but with extended "open" time, there's more likelihood that the paint will be pulled downward, forming drips, hangs, and a dozen other, more colorful descriptions of disaster.

When such "paintmares" start to occur, a dry brush and roller can be used to soak up excess paint and limit, if not fully remediate, the disaster. If such intervention is omitted, serious sanding efforts will become necessary once the paint is dry. This is best carried out a day or two after things went astray. The timing is based upon a need for the paint to cure, but not completely harden. If the sandpaper clogs rapidly, more cure time may be necessary.

A good painter looks into the surface rather than at it, and what is seen is the evenness of the coating being applied. The side-on view shows holidays (bare spots) and sags in the making. It also shows how the "cut edge" or overlap point is merging.

On hot days, a paint/reducer mix that began as a perfect blend can suffer from solvent evaporation that causes the paint to become too viscous, and brush and roller marks

ng remains "open," a reference ty's leveling effect and can be With lots of slow-evaporating

remain visible. The simple solution is to add a bit more reducer during the application, and also to keep any additional mixed paint covered with a lid or piece of aluminum foil.