



## Living with Elvis Leg

Rock climbers call it Elvis leg. It usually struck me about two-thirds the way up the ratlines, where the rungs began to narrow. Then I'd make the mistake of looking down, and a combination of nerves and over-contraction of calf muscles would start the shaking reflex: "One for the money, two for the show . . ."

Cruising sailing is a sport—not a hobby or a past-time. Though life doesn't always allow us the choice, taking off on that Caribbean loop is much more enjoyable before our joints, muscles, and gray matter grows too soft. Ocean crossings are particularly demanding, mentally and physically. How many other sports require you

*An extra tether looped around the mast or a masthead jackstay can reduce swinging. Long pants are safer than shorts when working aloft.*

to go for days with only a few hours of uninterrupted sleep and then make mission-critical, possibly life-saving decisions? A trip to the moon takes four days; a voyage from the Panama Canal to the Marquesas Islands can take three to four weeks.

If going to sea is akin to space travel, then climbing the mast while underway is our spacewalk. Most times we can avoid going aloft at sea: A spare halyard can be rigged until we get to port, a backup VHF antenna can be installed at deck level. But sometimes there is no choice but to leave the safety of the deck.

The best way to be prepared for such an event is to practice good technique at the dock, but there are astonishingly few guides on going aloft safely. It was disappointing to see that only one manufacturer of the bosun chairs that we reviewed for this issue (see page 8), Brion Toss, provided thorough guidance on the skills and techniques for safely ascending a mast.

Most of the other bosun chair makers made sure to shield themselves with warnings, but offered very little instruction. When they offered advice, it wasn't always the best. For example, a couple of chair makers suggested what knot to use when tying on a halyard—a bowline with a bight.

While this is a fine knot for many uses, on a bosun chair it can leave you in an awkward position, a few critical inches short of the masthead. Toss advises a buntline hitch, a knot that snugs your harness right up to the sheave you're being hoisted on. Locking shackles are also fine. (Don't try to tie uncoated high-modulus halyards. These should have well-stitched splices.)

Not surprisingly, some of the better equipment and instruction for climbing a mast come from mountaineering sources. As riggers like Toss have long known, the gear and techniques used in making vertical ascents up rock faces or trees can be applied to climbing masts, too. Many of the tools and techniques Toss discusses in his excellent instructional video, "Going Aloft" ([www.briontoss.com](http://www.briontoss.com)), are adapted from mountain-rescue climbing. If you have any doubts about going aloft, the video is an excellent primer. It has not yet cured my bad case of Elvis leg, but as far as I know, there is no other resource that does a better job of introducing sailors to the challenges of working aloft.

*Cover photo: PS editor Darrell Nicholson puts tension on a halyard knot on the Harken bosun chair prior to securing a second safety halyard.*

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