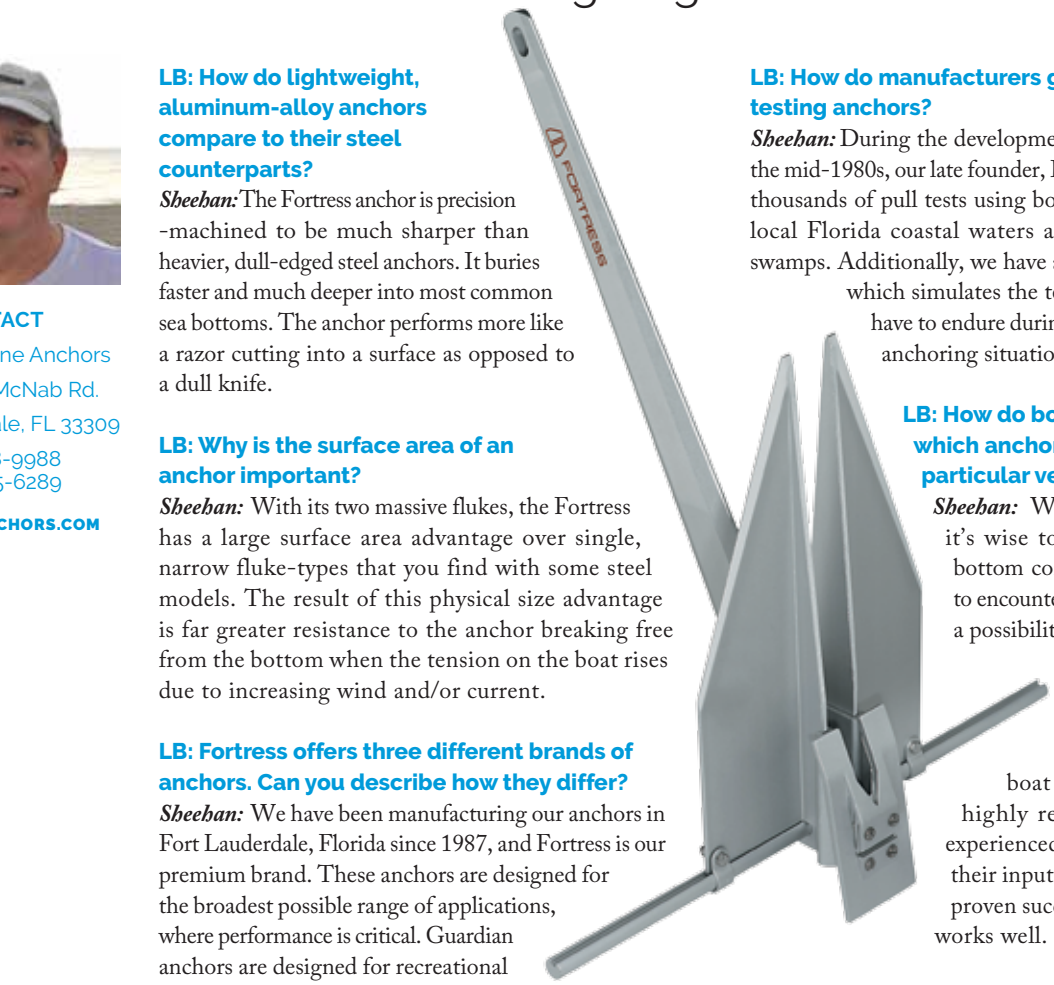
by Elizabeth Altick

Locking it Down

Fortress Marine Anchors' Brian Sheehan tells Great Lakes boaters what to look for in a cutting-edge anchor.

CONTACT
Fortress Marine Anchors
1386 West McNab Rd.
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33309
954-978-9988
800-825-6289

FORTRESSANCHORS.COM



LB: How do lightweight, aluminum-alloy anchors compare to their steel counterparts?

Sheehan: The Fortress anchor is precision-machined to be much sharper than heavier, dull-edged steel anchors. It buries faster and much deeper into most common sea bottoms. The anchor performs more like a razor cutting into a surface as opposed to a dull knife.

LB: Why is the surface area of an anchor important?

Sheehan: With its two massive flukes, the Fortress has a large surface area advantage over single, narrow fluke-types that you find with some steel models. The result of this physical size advantage is far greater resistance to the anchor breaking free from the bottom when the tension on the boat rises due to increasing wind and/or current.

LB: Fortress offers three different brands of anchors. Can you describe how they differ?

Sheehan: We have been manufacturing our anchors in Fort Lauderdale, Florida since 1987, and Fortress is our premium brand. These anchors are designed for the broadest possible range of applications, where performance is critical. Guardian anchors are designed for recreational applications, such as for a lunch hook or fishing, where the boat is constantly being monitored. We make the compact Commando as a small-craft anchoring system with an anchor (a small Guardian), rope, chain, and shackle, all of which fit inside a rugged nylon bag.

LB: What should Great Lakes boaters look for in an anchor?

Sheehan: It's my understanding from speaking with Great Lakes boaters over the years that bottoms are typically a harder soil — a combination of sand and mud, in which most anchors should perform well, particularly the Fortress and other Danforth types. As for rocky bottoms, it's always best to avoid them, if possible. If that's not possible, a grappling hook or plow-type might be best. A fisherman's-type anchor reportedly works well in grass and weeds, as well as in rocks.

LB: How do manufacturers go about testing anchors?

Sheehan: During the development stage of our product in the mid-1980s, our late founder, Don Hallerberg, conducted thousands of pull tests using boats and bulldozers off the local Florida coastal waters and in the nearby inland swamps. Additionally, we have a pull test machine onsite, which simulates the tension that an anchor will have to endure during both typical and extreme anchoring situations.

LB: How do boat owners choose which anchor is best suited to their particular vessel?

Sheehan: With regard to anchor size, it's wise to consider the wind and bottom conditions that you're likely to encounter while at anchor. If there's a possibility of high wind conditions (e.g. 30-plus knots), going up one or two sizes over the manufacturer's recommendation for your boat length is a good idea. I highly recommend talking with experienced boaters in the area to get their input, as one cannot argue with proven success and what consistently works well.

LB: Will having one anchor on board suffice?

Sheehan: An old adage says "There is no such thing as the perfect anchor." It's true that no one anchor type will perform optimally in all bottom conditions. For the serious cruiser, having an arsenal of anchors aboard and at the ready is a must to guarantee maximum safety.

LB: How do I know that my anchor is properly set?

Sheehan: In addition to your depthsounder reading, you should add the distance from the waterline to your deck when calculating how much anchor rode to pay out. Once you have let out a 5:1 scope and fallen back slowly and the boat is no longer moving in reverse, it's a good idea to give the sediment a few minutes to "heal," so to speak, around the anchor. Afterwards, you should "power set" the anchor and simulate a wind force by gently backing down on it to make certain that the anchor is well dug in and buried. ★

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Elizabeth Altick specializes in recreational marine, cultural and human-interest subjects. She was formerly executive editor of a recreational boating magazine.