

DRAGON-CLASS SLOOP GLOUCESTER'S ADVENTURE SELF-STEERING

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THE MAGAZINE FOR WOODEN BOAT OWNERS, BUILDERS, AND DESIGNERS



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The TillerClutch

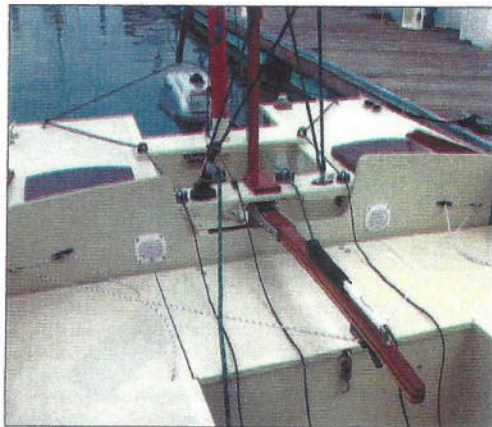
Reviewed by John Tuma

The TillerClutch from WaveFront, Inc. is a nifty solution to the age-old problem of tending the tiller while sailing shorthanded or eating a sandwich. It is ideal for small boats that lack the battery power to support a tiller-mounted autopilot, and would complement an autopilot on a larger tiller-steered boat as a means of conserving battery power. As with most passive steering systems, the TillerClutch is at its best when the boat is sailing at or above a beam reach in reasonably steady conditions. However, it is better downwind than most passive solutions because of its unique lever engagement and the speed with which small adjustments can be made.

The clutch mounts neatly under the tiller with two wood screws. A control line passes through the clutch to cyestraps mounted on the coamings or the back of the cockpit, and is held in position with jam cleats ("V" cleats, in the product literature). Cam cleats are an alternative to the jam cleats, and neither option is included in the kit. Cam cleats, in my opinion, would be a better choice, and worth the extra investment.

The TillerClutch is machined from anodized aluminum with passivated stainless steel internal parts. It is attractive, and would not look out of place on a boat with a yacht-level finish. The lever action is positive but does not require any extra effort to release the clutch when under load.

I mounted a TillerClutch on my Chebacco daysailer—the wonderful 20' cat-yawl designed by Phil Bolger. Installation, including the time spent determining where I wanted the eyestraps and jam cleats, took a little over an hour. The instructions are clearly written, in English, and the accompanying drawings are



The TillerClutch's control lines are best led to eyes that align athwartships with the tiller's pivot point, so the tiller may be lifted at will.

clear and concise. I placed the TillerClutch a little farther aft on the tiller than specified, but I wanted to stay clear of the tiller extension and avoid weakening the tiller from too many screw holes drilled in close proximity right down the center.

Care must be taken when installing the control line and eyestraps. Ideally the eyestraps would be mounted in an athwartship line with the tiller pivot so the tiller can be raised without loosening the control line. On my Chebacco this was not possible, since the bulkhead at the aft end of the cockpit is forward of the rudderpost. In addition, I have cockpit cushions, and the eyestraps and cleats had to be mounted high enough so the cushions would not interfere with the control line.

With the TillerClutch in place, I spent the rest of the day and much of the next testing the unit. Winds ranged from 0 to 15 knots, mostly in the 7–8 knot range. The water was flat, although the occasional ferry wake offered the opportunity to test the unit in waves.

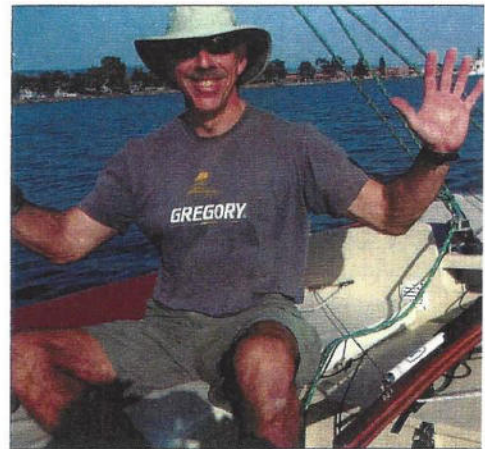
According to the product literature, the clutch mechanism is calibrated so it can be overpowered in emergencies or to relieve stress on the steering system when sailing in heavy conditions. I tried this feature at the dock, but did not have an opportunity to test it in more dynamic conditions.

Sailing close-hauled, the TillerClutch performed well in winds above 7 knots. In lighter winds it was quick to set and adjust, but hard to set accurately be-

cause there was so little helm. In very light conditions found it easier to set the clutch and adjust the mizzen in or out slightly to hold a steady course. In 12 knots of breeze, the TillerClutch really started to shine. My boat would self-steer even through the ferry wakes, and at one point I was able to leave the tiller tied off for over four minutes. I am sure the TillerClutch would have held a steady course for longer, but I was obliged to tack because of a rapidly approaching seawall.

The TillerClutch was less useful on a broad reach or a run, points of sail that require frequent steering adjustments to maintain a steady course. Even so, I was able to leave the tiller for brief periods—long enough to get the fenders out of the locker or get a drink out of the cooler without the boat wandering too far off course, as it would have done if the tiller were left completely untended. With the sails down and the motor driving the boat, the TillerClutch worked very well.

After two days of trials, I was very pleased with the TillerClutch. It is not the least expensive solution to the problem of self-steering, but it is much better than



Hands free sailing: The author demonstrates the simplicity of the TillerClutch's operation aboard his 21' Chebacco Boat.

trying a line across the cockpit—or any of the other commercially available products that I have tried. The TillerClutch comes in two models, the standard TillerClutch for small boats up to 27', and the TillerClutch for larger tiller-steered boats. Both models carry a lifetime warranty.

John Tuma is a boatbuilder working in Alameda, California.

TillerClutch prices range from \$77.59 to \$87.89. For more information, contact WaveFront, Inc., P.O. Box 1632, Pittsboro, NC 27331 www.wavefrontmarine.com. WaveFront, Inc. is currently developing a bronze version of the tiller clutch in conjunction with J.M. Reine & Son (www.bronzeblocks.com). Instructions for a shop-made tiller control appear on page 44.