The Spring Collection

For getting into — or out of — tricky docking situations, good old-fashioned spring lines can be an invaluable ally. ***By Jeffrey M. Stander***

Picture this: You and your partner are approaching a crowded dock in your single-screw monohull. The wind is against you, blowing off the dock. For some sailors, the notion of bow or stern thrusters, or an assist from a passing workboat, might come to mind. On the pier, a group of curious onlookers has gathered. What's worse, you wonder, damaging your ego or your boat?

However, if you're experienced and know how to maneuver using spring lines, there's no drama as you nose your boat into the slip. As one mate steps ashore and attaches the spring line to the dock cleat, the other powers forward as the boat seemingly draws itself onto the dock. The shoreside crew waves off any assistance from the bystanders while first grabbing and securing the stern line, then taking the bow line and cleating it off.

Every sailor knows about the conventional use of forward and aft spring lines; when docked, they keep the boat from moving lengthwise, and work in tandem with bow and stern lines to secure the vessel. But a spring line — above and beyond those associated with Paris runways — can also be a very useful tool when docking or exiting a tight spot.

Let's start with a bit of terminology. Spring lines can be secured to the boat either amidships, or at the bow or stern. Either way, a *forward* spring line is led forward from where it is attached to the boat, and keeps the boat from moving backward. An *after* spring line is led toward the stern from its attachment point, and stops the vessel from moving forward (see **FIGURE 1**).

When coming into a dock, spring lines are useful when the wind or current is against you, when a sharp turn is required to get into a slip (especially when the prop-walk is not working in your favor), or if you're shorthanded. First prepare a bow and stern line, and an aft spring line amidships. If applicable, run the spring line through the hawsehole and back to a cockpit winch; on boats without hawseholes, an amidships snatch block shackled to the toe rail will also work. Spring lines should be at least as long as the boat (spliced eyes for the dock cleat are also handy), and bow/stern lines, at a minimum, should measure half a boat length. I prefer to run all the outboard ends of all the lines to the lifeline gate so they are more accessible from the dock. In practice, the one and only line you will need to secure to the dock quickly is the aft spring line.

FIGURE 2 shows the sequence of employing the spring line when docking alongside against the wind. Approach the dock at a 45-degree angle, bringing the boat as close as possible so the crew member can *step off* — and never jump — onto the dock. We prefer to decline assistance from folks on the dock, as eager as they might be to help, as invariably they fail to follow our instructions.

With the wind blowing off the dock, you often have but a moment to loop the eye of the spring line onto the dock cleat. Once that is

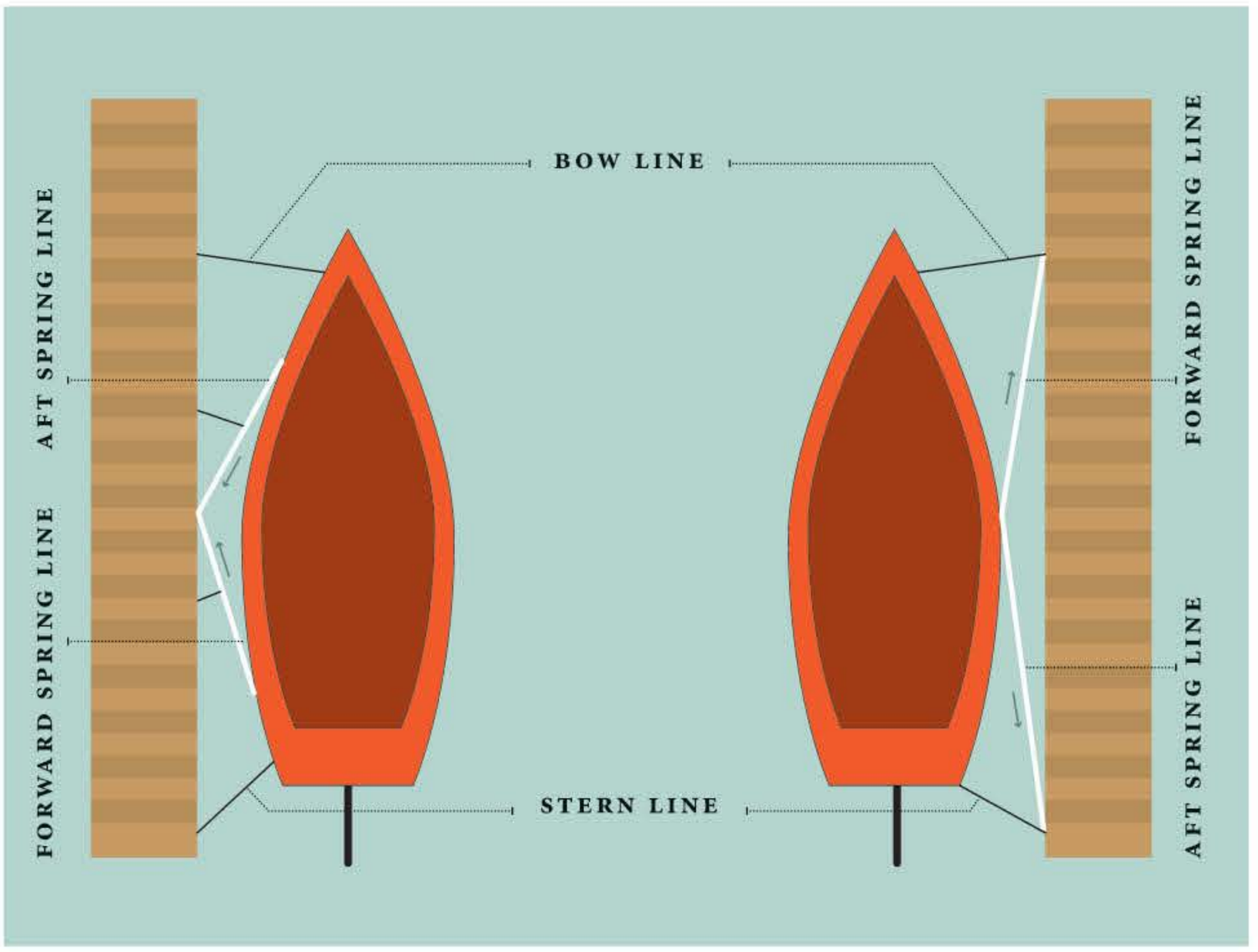

FIGURE 1

You can set up spring lines on your boat at the bow and stern , or amidships. Either way, the important thing to remember is forward springs lead forward and keep the boat from moving aft, and aft springs run toward the stern and stop forward movement.

accomplished, the helmsman or another crewman can control the line's length with the cockpit winch while the boat is driven gently forward. As the spring becomes taut, turning the wheel slightly to starboard, for the port-side landing illustrated, will swing the stern toward the dock. Then ease the wheel to port to put the bow toward the dock. For starboard docking, reverse these instructions.

Once you're situated, with just a touch of forward throttle on and the spring line keeping you parallel to the dock, the bow and stern lines — handy at the lifeline gate — can also be secured. This maneuver, done carefully but quickly, can be accomplished even singlehanded. The key is getting the spring line down. Once that's done, you can return to the helm, lock the wheel, apply that touch of throttle so the boat kisses the dock, and cleat the bow and stern lines.

Even when the breeze is blowing onto a dock, a departure from a side-tie berth or wharf can again be easily performed with a spring line. Depending on the exact situation, you might wish to use a forward or aft spring, but remember, it's always easier and better to power away from the dock in forward gear, if possible. So let's examine that sequence more closely (see **FIGURE 3**).

Begin by rigging a forward spring line from the stern and around a cleat or through a dock ring and double it back to the boat so it can be handled and retrieved by an onboard crewman. Have one or more fenders positioned on the stern quarter; in short order, these will be used to keep the fenders between the dock and the boat. Make sure overhanging items like dinghy davits and solar panels are clear of pilings and other obstructions. The skipper should then gently apply reverse thrust to swing the bow nicely away from the dock.

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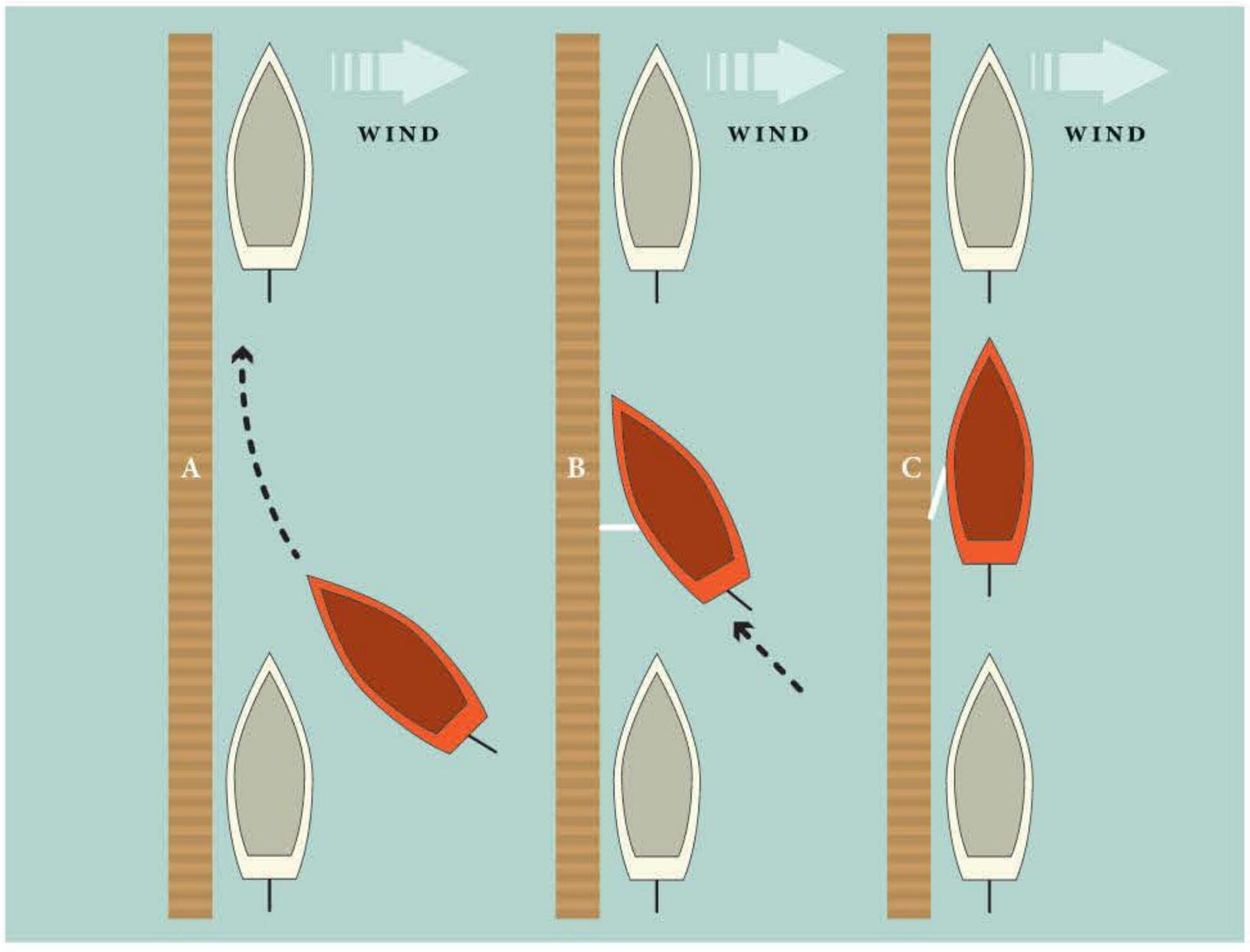

FIGURE 2

When approaching a slip, do so at a 45-degree angle and bring the boat as close as possible (A). Getting the spring down quickly is key (B). Once that's accomplished, a little forward throttle will situate you alongside, ready to rig bow and stern lines (C).

In stiff winds, be prepared to power away from the dock with dispatch as soon as there's clearance. Haul in the spring line smartly so there is no chance of it dragging in the water and getting tangled in the propeller. Position the rudder amidships or, very slightly, in the opposite direction of the dock so the stern is clear as you power away. Once the bow and stern are both clear of the dock and other boats, add throttle to push the bow farther off and into open water.

As we recently discovered in Opua, New Zealand — where we picked up a heavy-displacement 46-foot cruiser for delivery to Australia — getting away from the dock can be a bit trickier when it involves backing the length of a slip. In Opua, there was a strong tidal current running across the marina's narrow fairway between the pontoons. It became clear that if our departure time was wrong, we'd have to back out against the current which, as soon as we managed to turn the boat, would push us back toward the slip and a possible collision with the pier or another vessel. Worse, the boat's prop walk shoved the stern to port in reverse, when in this case we needed it to swing to starboard. But by using a spring line to turn the boat in

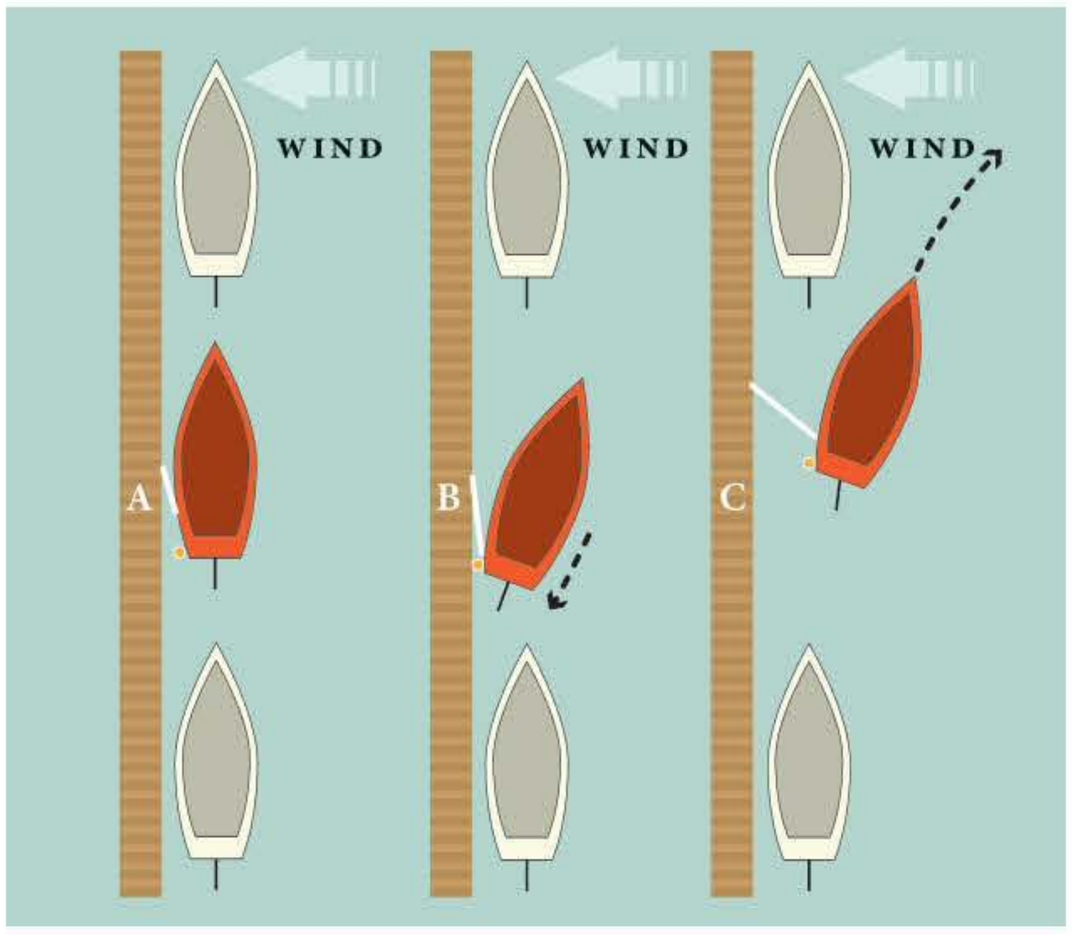

FIGURE 3

A fender on the aft quarter and a forward spring line work well when leaving a dock (A). Apply reverse power to swing the bow away (B). Once clear, motor out (C).

the right direction once it had left the berth, we remained in total control and easily powered out of the fairway.

In this scenario, there are a couple of options, the first being the use of a forward spring line from amidships to pivot the boat out of the slip. For this exercise, however, we'll go with the method we used in New Zealand, which employs a forward spring line rigged off the boat's aft quarter (see **FIGURE 4**). Though it requires a long line, about 2½ times the length of the boat, it provides better turning leverage in a tight seaway.

The spring line is run from the stern, around a cleat at the end of the dock, and back to the boat; this way, it can be manned from the deck to control the entire backward thrust of the boat, but it can also be quickly released and pulled aboard. Begin by untying all lines with the exception of the bow and the spring. If just two are aboard, the crew needs to move quickly to release the bow line and hop on deck to handle the spring while the helmsman remains at the wheel.

The helmsman should begin to ease the boat out of the slip with small bursts of power so the rudder will have some steerage between bursts. Next comes the tricky part. The bow of the boat must clear the slip *before* the spring line becomes fully taut. To facilitate this, the line handler pays out the spring line as the boat backs up until the bow pulpit is clear of the dock and other boats. At this point, the helmsman should call, "Belay the line," while the crew cinches the spring around a cleat. The bow will sharply swing away from the line, and the boat will pivot into position to power away. The helmsman then says, "Let go the spring," at which point the crew will toss off the bitter end of the line and haul it aboard.

Note: Belaying a line requires a wrap with a single or double crossover on a cleat

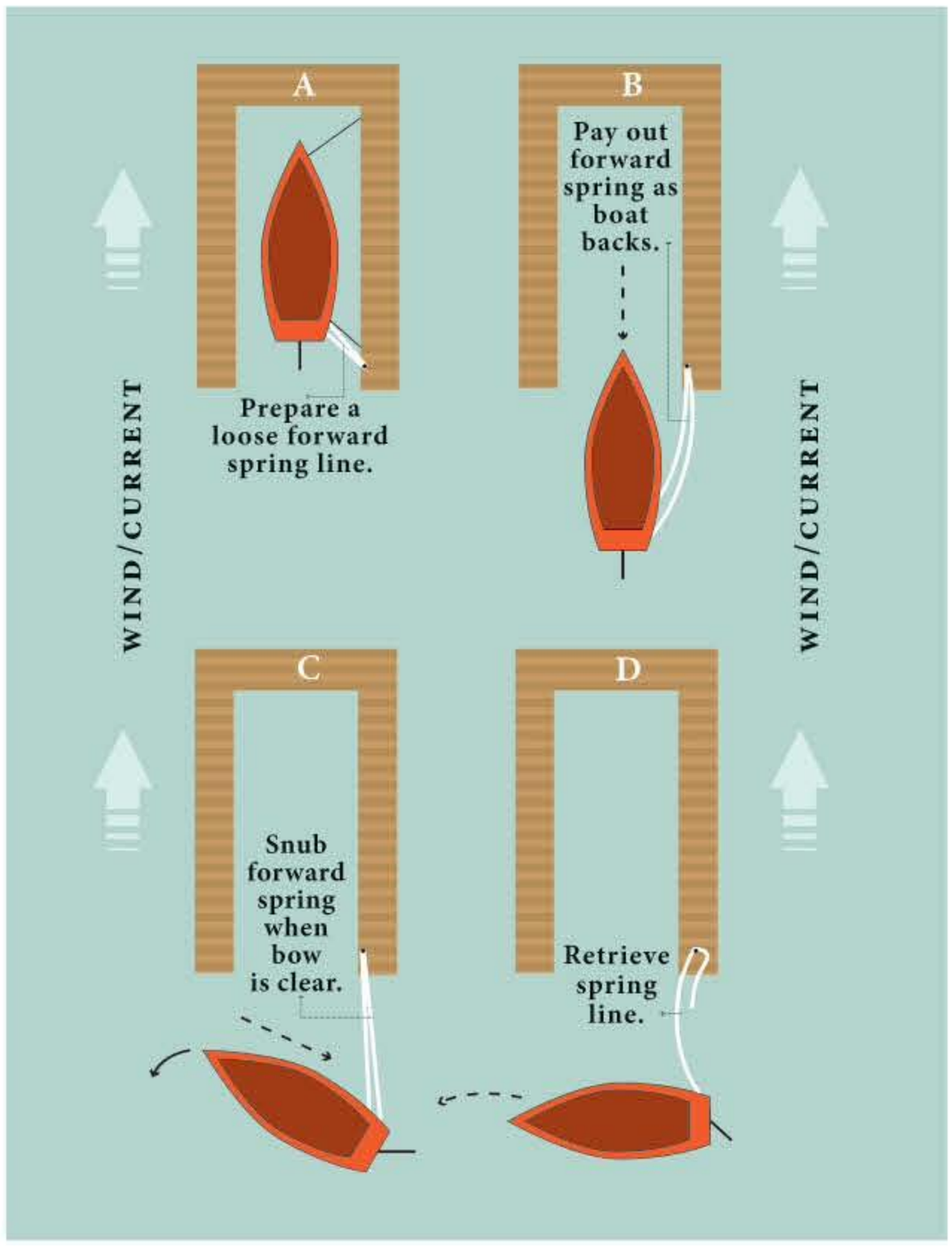

FIGURE 4

Long spring lines are incredibly useful when maneuvering against wind and current. The helmsman and line handler must work closely together in this scenario.

without any locking turns or hitches. Leading the bitter end to a cockpit winch is also an option. There is no way this maneuver can be performed by a person simply holding the line. And, as always, there should be a sharp knife within reach to cut the spring line in the event it becomes fouled.

All these techniques are applicable to any boat but are most useful for more traditional moderate- to heavy-displacement monohulls. Sailboats with fin keels and spade rudders back very easily, and won't always require the same procedures.

Still, whenever maneuvering into or out of a marina, make sure the crew knows the plan well in advance, so assign responsibilities beforehand according to ability and capability. And remember, it's always OK to slow down and wait while all fenders and lines are deployed and the crew is calm and ready, or to swing around for another try if you bobble an approach. Pay no attention to the "dock birds." The safety of your boat and crew is all that matters.

Jeff and Kathy Stander live aboard Beatrix, *their Kelly-Peterson 44, and have cruised Alaska, Mexico, the South Pacific and Australia. Currently in the Aussie state of Queensland, they're planning on setting out on a North Pacific voyage next season.*