

# Make your Topsides SHINE

By Alex and Jack Wilken

Spring is here! ... (We think.) Nevertheless, the season of better weather and getting the boat ready for summer is upon us. Polishing and waxing your boat to protect the finish is an annual ritual for many of us. Before you go off and begin the sometimes daunting, but potentially satisfying, process of shining up the finish, let us share with you some of what we have learned about polishing boats.

Why polish your boat year after year? It is not simply an aesthetic consideration. We all enjoy a shiny boat, but by maintaining the shine, the finish will actually last longer.

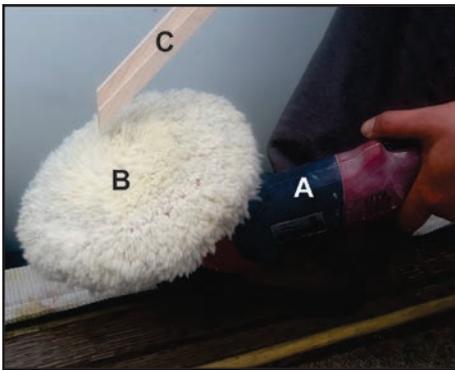


Figure 1: "A" is a rotary polisher, "B" is a Microfiber pad, and "C" is a clean piece of hard wood for cleaning the pad.

Whether it is gel-coat or paint, as soon as it is exposed to sun and water, it will begin to lose electrons, a process more commonly known as oxidation. An oxidized finish will appear to be dull, rough, and chalky. If oxidation is left uncorrected, its effects will accelerate. The rough, deteriorated surface will retain water inside its top layer more than a smooth, hard, shiny, protected surface.

The basic process involves using a polishing compound, followed by a wax. Polishing compounds are fine abrasives that remove the thin top layer that has deteriorated, as well as fine scratches and surface discoloration. Polishing agents are also what create a glossy surface. Wax creates a temporary

UV-protective barrier atop the finish, increasing its shine and providing additional protection.

How often you polish and/or wax your boat is dependent on your use, storage method, and the local climate. The Pacific Northwest is less punishing than, say, Florida, but our environment still takes a toll. The most conservative protection program would be to polish once or twice a year and wax every month. Many boat owners polish and wax at the beginning of the season and then simply wax before winter. For many others, once a year is sufficient. If you keep your boat under cover in winter or when not in use, the finish should take less of a beating. At a minimum, we recommend you polish and wax annually, though the best rule of thumb is to polish and wax if the boat is losing its shine.

**Tools:** Unless you are polishing entirely by hand, which can be done but is not for the faint of heart (or frail of arm), you will need a polisher. For maintaining a relatively new finish on a small boat, a lighter duty polisher should do the trick. If you have heavier oxidation to remove or a larger area, you might want to look at a more professional model. If you are going to be using it a lot, it is better to have the better tool.

There are two basic kinds of polishers: rotary (Figure 1) and random orbital, or some can do both (Figure 2). The random orbital is easy to use, is less aggressive, and virtually cannot damage the finish. The rotary requires more strength and skill but can power through most jobs with ease as it is more aggressive, making it better suited for removing material to eliminate deeper scratches and pits. An important feature to look for in rotary polishers is variable speeds (Figure 3), particularly low speeds down to 600 rpm if

you need to remove heavier oxidation.

There is also a range of pads to choose from. The two main types are foam (Figure 4, page 38) or microfiber (Figure 1). Both have their pros and cons. The foam pad generates more heat, is harder to control, and does not cut into the oxidation as quickly as microfiber. However, it also tends to finish better and hold more polish for longer. Microfiber pads tend to require more product, need to be cleaned frequently, and require more skill to finish without swirl marks, but they don't build up as much heat, are easier to control, and cut into oxidation faster.

**Products:** Once you have settled on what tool to use, you need to pick a product. Rubbing compound, polishing compound, machine polish, medium polish, fine polish, ultra-fine polish, finishing polish, and glaze. These are just some of the various names and terms used by manufacturers and detailers. Many are interchangeable, and even for those that are clearly different, there is not always a clear line where one ends and the other begins. Additionally, we haven't even mentioned polish with wax in it.

Most of these include some kind of abrasive. As a reference, let us begin with 1500 grit sandpaper (the most aggressive grit you would want to consider with regard to polishing, and is still at that point really aggressive) and work progressively less abrasive. From here there are 2000 and 3000 grit sanding pads. Stepping down in abrasiveness would be rubbing

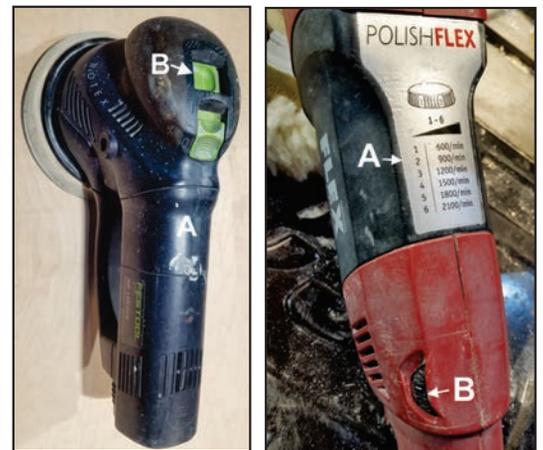


Figure 2 (left): "A" is a random orbital and rotary polisher, "B" is a switch to toggle between random orbital and rotary modes.

Figure 3 (right): "A" is a speed setting key, "B" is the speed setting dial (set to 600rpm).



Figure 4: This is a foam polishing pad

compound (more aggressive), and then polish (less aggressive). Beyond polish, the other products should not contain abrasives.

Glaze has nothing to do with gel-coat; it is only for returning paint to a just applied look. It generally uses oils and wetting agents to revitalize the look of the paint and create a uniform, deep "wet" shine.

Wax is a temporary clear protective coat over the finish that will last for a few weeks to a month.

Since products can vary so much from one manufacturer to another, we have found it best to stick with one system; at least for the polishing process. You could change up the wax if you prefer.

**Cleaning:** Now, you've got your tools and your products chosen, and the real work begins. There are several ways to attack the buff and wax ritual, and there is probably not one right way for everyone. However, some approaches get better results than others, and the following has worked well for us.

To start the project, the first thing you do is wash down the boat thoroughly. A power washer can cut down on the elbow grease needed, but some scrubbing may be necessary to remove all salt, dirt, grease, mold, and stains.

You could break this down into two stages, depending on the condition of the hull: general cleaning and stain removal. Begin by using appropriate brushes and good biodegradable soap like Serious Soap by Mer-maids. Some stains will need special attention. Rust stains can be removed with Rust Away or other similar products. Other stains can be removed with either a specialized product or vigorous scrubbing. You can polish out a stain with compound, but it will get your

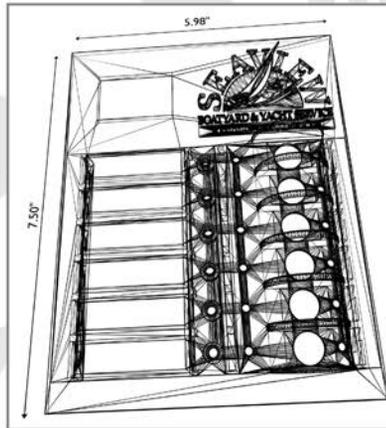
pad dirty and then you need to be careful not to spread it. The cleaner the boat, the cleaner your buffing pad, and the better the polishing will go. Take care when scrubbing since, for example, Scotch-Brite pads range in abrasiveness from almost 60 grit to 2000 grit at the finest.

**Polishing:** Once the boat is dry, one of the next things you do is remove any deck hardware that can be easily removed, and tape off what cannot be such as cleats, stanchions, and window edges. Apply the compound using a 1½" paintbrush in three horizontal strips in a one-by-three foot area. Try

to carry the compound down the side of the boat using a side to side motion. Then, once you get to the bottom, make a few passes back and forth with the compound. A microfiber pad should be used for more oxidized surfaces and a foam pad works for less faded surfaces.

When you start working, do a test area. Proceed through all the steps instructed by your chosen product in sections within the test area, leaving a section at each step. This way, you have a visual reference of what each step should look like as you do the rest of the job. Finish the test area after you complete the rest of the hull.

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**Alex and Jack's Polishing Tips**

- If you apply the product to the pad, don't start or stop the buffer unless the pad is pushing firmly against the surface. Otherwise, you'll shoot the product all over the place.
- Anytime you're using a rotary buffer with microfiber pads and compounds, it's a good idea to wear safety glasses.
- Work section by section. Polishing a boat is a big job.
- Don't use too much of the product. If you do, the pad will not be able to do its job but will skid across the gel-coat like a hydroplaning car.
- Take your time, use the right equipment and material, and you'll take the intimidation out of making your boat look great.
- Each manufacturer has recommendations on how to use their product. Use them, at least until you discover something that works better for you.
- If you have two or more colors, use a different pad for each, or at least do all the white first so as not to transfer colors.

Only apply as much compound as you can polish before it dries, as it needs to be wet to work. It would be preferable not to do this job in direct sunlight, which dries out the compound faster.

Avoid banging your buffer against stainless steel hardware, because it will create a black mark on the buffer pad that will transfer to the gel coat. To avoid this on pieces you cannot remove, tape over them.

As you polish, there should be no visible scratches. Each step should look just like your test area. If there are visible scratches, you may need to wet-sand. Relax, this is not as scary as it sounds. Working by hand, use quality sandpaper like 3M's Imperial 2000-grit product, keep it wet, and work in small areas to remove scratches. If you want to start with a heavier grit, make sure you follow with progressively lighter ones until you get to 2000 and then follow up with compound.

Swirling is a bigger issue than burning your gel-coat. To avoid swirls, clean your buffing pad regularly. You do this by scraping the surface of the pad with a clean piece of hardwood

while the buffer is turned on. Even on a relatively small job, stop to clean the buffer pad of caked compound.

Using a different pad for each product is best, particularly the wax. After you are done, you can throw the microfiber pads in the washing machine.

**Wax:** After the boat is polished, it's important that you seal and protect the finish with a good wax to maintain the gloss that you just acquired. You can apply the wax with a rag or brush. Use the machine to buff out an even coat, and, as a final touch, go behind with a microfiber cleaning cloth to take off any extra wax that may be left behind, bringing out the shine.

Now you have the reason, the knowledge, and the process you need to restore your boat to its shiny state. This project protects an essential part of your boat, promising more happy years on the water. "Wax on wax off" may be meditative, but it's not as good as sailing.

*Jack and Alex Wilken are experienced boat builders and have cruised extensively. They hold USCG Captain's Licenses and are the owners of Seattle Boat Works.*

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