

PLEASE, BOAT SAFE CHICAGO

A boating accident in Chicago's popular Playpen helped launch a new safe boating campaign. BY DANICA UZELAC

Chicago boaters listening on channel 16 heard the captain's desperate cries. "The anchor let go," he yelled, "The anchor let go." The captain continued repeating these words. Another boater, Ted Widen, witnessed a boat traveling backward through the water just minutes earlier. "I knew it wasn't going to end well," Widen says, "I waded to get his attention, but he continued on his course."

In 2022, onlookers witnessed horrific tragedies in and around Lake Michigan. Initial reports of this accident hit the Chicagoland news outlets early in the evening of August 13, 2022. In the boating hotspot known as the Playpen, people floating on a raft were run over by a charter boat. Two women were severely injured after being struck by the boat's propellers.

THE ACCIDENT

Lying in the shadow of the John Hancock and other iconic Chicago buildings, the Playpen hosts Chicago's most popular boating party scene. Ted Widen, the founder of CHICAGO SCENEBOATPARTY.COM, has hosted parties in the Playpen for over 20 years.

"It's the one place in Chicago where everyone wants to go," he says. "People come from all over the world, and they all want to go to the Playpen. Everyone wants

to be there anchored, partying, soaking up the sun and having a great time."

According to the Illinois DNR Boating Accident Report, weather conditions were perfect on August 13 — a clear day with good visibility, calm water and a light wind. The boat moved slowly as the captain tried to anchor the 2003 34-foot Four Winns 348 Vista in the Playpen. But how did an experienced captain wreak such havoc?

The captain stated his vessel began drifting when the windlass malfunctioned during his anchoring attempt. The captain reportedly floated toward a boat and reversed to avoid impact. The captain stated that he did not see the raft carrying multiple individuals floating in the water behind him, and while moving astern, he backed over that raft.

This report contradicts what Widen witnessed.

"That boat traveled over 100 yards backward through the water," he says. "The only time anyone backs up in the Playpen is to set anchor. It's just too dangerous to maneuver backward with all the people and boats in this area. If the captain was trying to anchor, why was he facing the opposite direction of every other boat anchored properly with their bow into the wind?"

Two people on the raft were reportedly struck by the propellers, while others

escaped off the raft's sides to safety. Widen says his colleague, Captain Mark Kaplan, was nearby cruising alone on an AMP 280 Estero amphibious boat.

"Mark was like an angel sent to save these people," Widen says. "The rigid, inflatable AMP boat is made for the military and has cutouts designed to get injured bodies into the boat. If Mark had been on a standard boat with sidewalls, he would not have been able to rescue two people, a woman who was bleeding profusely and a man drowning as the panic-stricken, bleeding woman submerged him. Mark was in the right place at the right time, and on the right boat to save those people."

Emergency personnel transported the injured to a nearby trauma center. One of the injured parties suffered a traumatic finger amputation and a forearm laceration. Another suffered traumatic amputation of both feet. The vessel also collided with a boat, striking the swim platform and causing extensive damage.

A CRITICAL MISTAKE

Obstacles abound in the Playpen. Maneuvering in this crowded area surrounded by cement walls challenges even seasoned mariners. The older-style cruiser boat involved in the accident

PHOTO BY GAUTAM KRISHNA

LEARN MORE

Boat Safe Chicago classes begin in April, offering affordable recreational and commercial training classes. Boat Safe Chicago also offers private training. Find more information at BOATSAFECHICAGO.COM.



operates with forward and reverse gear shifters on the steering wheel's port side and the throttle on the starboard side of the steering wheel. Why is this important?

"I think the captain panicked," states United States Coast Guard Licensed Master Captain Jon Meyer, "As the captain backed up this older boat, he eventually realized he needed to change course. Unfortunately, he [likely] confused the starboard and port controls. He meant to go forward but instead advanced the throttles, increasing the engine RPMs and thereby increasing the rate that the vessel reversed, backing into the raft and those women. Almost all new boats have shifting and throttle controls on the right side of the steering wheel. When that captain accepted a job on an older cruiser boat, he was [likely] not familiar with or forgot to shift on the left and apply the throttle on the right. A critical mistake."

Four Winns updated its 348 Vista series from bilateral, independent throttle and gear shift levers to single starboard lever control between the 2004 and 2005 model years.

Widen states the winds were not calm as described in the accident report, and weather records confirm his statement.

PHOTO BY ANTOINE TISSIER

"The wind was gusting at over 20 mph from the southwest — it wasn't an easy day to anchor," he says. "With a strong wind, if you put your boat in neutral, you will quickly get blown into other boats or hit a Playpen wall. However, theoretically, if you reverse into a strong wind, it might feel more like neutral as the reverse momentum counteracts the wind. It's absolutely crazy, but I believe the captain thought he could fix the windlass while traveling in reverse. He [likely] thought he'd move more slowly than in neutral. And then he lost control, moving rapidly in reverse when he meant to go forward."

A CALL TO ACTION

Acutely aware of all the preventable accidents occurring in and around Lake Michigan, Master Captain Meyer, along with a team of other licensed master captains, organized Boat Safe Chicago. Their objective? Working with the Chicago Harbors, yacht and sailing clubs, and maritime agencies, Boat Safe Chicago aims to improve boater safety.

"There wasn't a lookout on the boat," notes Master Captain Meyer, "Something as simple as having a properly trained first mate onboard could have prevented this accident."

Chicago's unique waterways require specialized training, including navigating the breakwalls, Dime Pier, the Chicago Harbor Lock and the busy Chicago River. Widen advocates for licensure to operate a boat on Lake Michigan.

"People forget boating basics when they haven't done it for six months or longer. A required refresher class reviewing the basics can make everyone safer," Widen notes.

Boat Safe Chicago educators possess the most advanced commercial licensing and have over 120 years of combined experience. The team includes maritime law enforcement experts, Chicago harbor staff, Navy veterans, water rescue professionals and more. The organization offers affordable basic and advanced boat safety training programs year-round, including nighttime lake, locks and the Chicago River; recreational boating 101; charter/commercial 101; and more. Most courses take place in the 31st Street Harbor Community Room, as well as on the water.

Educating boaters provides an opportunity to prevent boating injuries or fatal tragedies. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Learning maritime rules and knowing your vessel intimately will keep you, your passengers and other boaters safe on the water. ★