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## Mast Ladders: Captain Al's vs. Mast Mate

Getting to the top of the mast for repairs to Lights, antennas and sheaves, retrieving or reeving halyards is a job no one likes to do, especially if you're prone to vertigo. There is, of course, an element of danger. Recently we took a look at two ladders, the Mast Mate (reviewed in the June 15, 1986 issue, and titled "The Vertigo is Free") and Captain Al's Mast Ladder. Both are made of webbing and require sail slides. The main halyard is used to hoist the ladder to the masthead, though you could use another if the lead is fair.

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### Mast Mate

Like Captain Al's, the Mast Mate is made of flexible nylon webbing, but company president Gary Wheeler uses 2" webbing instead of Captain Al's 1 inch. The breaking strength is of course correspondingly greater - 3,000 lbs. vs. 1,000 lbs. And like Captain Al's, the Mast Mate has alternating steps (sewn at 17" intervals vs. 15") and twin rungs at the top. A No. 5 grommet at the top of the ladder is used for fastening the halyard. Mast Mate's sewing is first rate. The bottom of the steps are double thickness. Before going up the first time, we thought the step would collapse and that our foot would bend in at the ankle toward the mast. But this wasn't the case at all. Wheeler said he could see the advantage of PVC tubing on narrower webbing, but that it wouldn't be practical on his 2" webbing. We don't think it's necessary either on the sturdy Mast Mate. Price is \$250 for the 35' model, \$350 for the 50'. Both come in a nice bag for stowage. Wheeler also sells the Mast Mate Work Belt (\$75, \$50 if you buy a ladder, too), made of the same 2" webbing. It's used for holding tools and parts, and includes a tether to run around the mast.

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### Bottom Line

An interesting difference between Mast Mate and Captain Al's is that with the latter you naturally tend to grab the PVC rungs above your head as you climb; with Mast Mate you're more inclined to hug the mast. After trying each ladder several times, we decided we liked hugging the mast better as it holds your body in toward the mast, whereas grabbing the unsteady rungs tends to make your upper body pitch backward. No problem, we thought, we'll just grab the mast using Captain Al's too. Certainly it's possible, but not as easy, since the two outside vertical webs tend to get in the way. Both ladders provide a way to get to the masthead without relying on another crew to winch you up in a bosun's chair. We'd follow both manufacturers' advice and use a safety harness to fasten ourselves to the mast - above the spreaders and at the masthead. Of the two ladders, we prefer the Mast Mate because of its wider webbing and single vertical webbing, which doesn't swing from side to side as much as Captain Al's as your weight shifts. The difference in price is easily accounted for.