

Paint Comparisons

By Greg Gajcak

I tried to share some insights, but this is a topic that can polarize people so I hope not to be too offensive.

I have spent way too much time sniffing paint fumes and solvents over the last 25 years so you will need to consider the source here and realize that I am pretty delusional most of the time. I started working summers for an industrial painting contractor while in High School. After that, I worked for a custom yacht builder and was very involved with the painting and coatings side of the operation. We were building aluminum boats 80-100' and the painting was a pain. Later, I sold marine paints and have had exposure to quite a few of them. Many are generic aliphatic urethanes but by brand are marketed as being better for certain reasons such as having paid sponsors that we may like that race cars etc.

I am a believer that if possible, first attempt to restore gelcoat on a fiberglass boat. Others here have posted information that is beneficial on this process. It is a painful process, but you may be surprised if you are willing to put in the time, elbow grease (lots of it) and some money for the proper tools and materials that these old gelcoats can be made to look amazing.

If however, your gelcoat is too porous or you have had significant fiberglass repairs that it becomes almost easier to consider a repaint. My 35 commander was in pretty good shape when I got her but after cutting in the transom door and removing the rails and fiberlassing in the toe rails, and doing a few other modifications, I knew I would need to paint her in order to be happy with the finish. I used a combination of Awlgrip products (conventional awlgrip and awlcraft 2000). I had worked with this stuff before and I knew that I could get a pretty good result with it. There are many similar products available and some that may be better for various applications.

Awlgrip is probably the most widely used 2 part urethane in the marine industry. They market it hard to the custom builders and refit facilities and boat yards. I am a believer that awlgrip has the most complete system out there. They have a good solution for a boat built from any material. Their 545 epoxy primer is great and is a sanding surfacer primer that can be applied to almost any material. When you finish sanding it will give you a high gloss and then you know your ready for topcoat. If you are talking fiberglass (most of us are) then you can expand your selections to ignore corrosion and oxidation of steel and aluminum respectively.

Here are some key questions as you contemplate paints

Do you plan to brush or spray?

Do you want it repairable or more concerned about highest gloss and abrasion resistance?

Do harsh chemicals bother you to the point that you may have respiratory issues when exposed?

Once you answer these questions you can eliminate some choices.

In urethanes there are 3 types that I think are outstanding for marine applications.

Polyester Urethanes - 2 components mixed 1:1 normally CAN BE BRUSHED OR SPRAYED, HARDEST FINISH, HIGHEST GLOSS RETENTION, DIFFICULT TO REPAIR, MUST WEAR A CHARCOAL RESPIRATOR AT A MINIMUM, NON-SKID CAN BE ADDED TO THE PAINT AND APPLIED.

AWLGRIP (interlux now)

ALEXSEAL (new guy coming on strong)

STERLING

JET-GLO (sherwin Williams now)

There are others, but the names escape me. Each will argue theirs is the best. Awlgrip got bought by Interlux and has been loosing market share to Alexseal lately. Alexseal hired many of the awlgrip people and seem to be pushing hard to get high profile projects. In Europe many yards are prohibited from spraying paints so they chose products that are brushable and typically have a lower gloss in order to hide the brush marks. The 2 part urethanes require safety gear and lots of it to protect your skin, lungs and the environment from too much exposure.

Acrylic Urethanes - 2 components mixed 2:1 normally MORE EASILY REPAIRED, CAN BE WET SANDED, BUFFED, WAXED ETC., MUST BE SPRAYED, CAN BE REPAIRED (NOT EASY), MUST WEAR A CHARCOAL RESPIRATOR AT A MINIMUM, NON-SKID CAN BE ADDED TO THE PAINT AND APPLIED, SPRAYS SLIGHTLY EASIER THAN POLYESTER URETHANES PER MOST APPLICATORS.

AWLCRAFT 2000 (awlgrip/interlux)

IMRON FROM dUpONT

ACRY-GLO (sherwin Williams now)

Single component Urethanes

BRIGHTSIDES (by Interlux)

This is an amazing product that should be sold in all the big box stores in my opinion. It is just a great product. It is easy to apply in small sections. Great for striping, pretty darn hard and very durable. I haven't spray anything big with it and have only spray it with a preval sprayer. I plan to paint my of my interior trim with it someday. It is widely used as a boottop strip and on cabin sides of many boats. Boat yards love it and DIY'ers love it more. Great results with a low VOC product that has an amazing gloss and it is just single component. You can buy it at most marine resellers.

With any of these marine paints you need good prep work and that is 98% of the labor and probably the majority of the expense. If it doesn't look like a mirror before you paint, it likely won't after your coating cures. When you paint fiberglass you should sand the hell out of it, repair major areas, prime, sand, spot prime, sand, fix pin holes then spray, roll or brush your finish coat. Try to stay with only epoxy fillers as they perform better than the acrylic and polyester fillers which don't do so well in marine environments. A good Urethane will have a higher gloss (D-O-I = Distinction of Image) than gelcoat ever will. That is why people like Urethane, its the gloss. Gelcoat will outlast any paint. Once you paint, you can plan on repainting at some point in the future so keep that in mind.

Equipment: You need a good fine finish spray gun if you want to get a mirror like finish. These aren't cheap but you can pick up a good set-up for 200-400. A Binks Mach I, is the standard setup with a 2 quart pot and 5-6' hoses. I like these guns but I switched to a CAT (<http://www.spraycat.com/>) gun for my project and I loved it. Better atomization, easier to clean and easier to adjust. I spend alot of time with mine as I used it for all the priming and finish coating and my antifouling too.