

Shootin' Straight

With TRAVIS FRENAY



CANOEING MIGHT LOOK EASY, BUT THERE'S A LOT GOING ON IN THOSE SEEMINGLY SIMPLE STROKES. IN THIS PIECE - THE FIRST OF A SERIES - OPEN-BOAT GURU TRAVIS FRENAY TAKES US THROUGH THE ART OF WIELDING A SINGLE BLADE, RIGHT FROM THE BASICS.

The thought of hopping into an open canoe, one of the oldest means of aquatic transport known, and going for a journey down a wild stretch of river can conjure up all sorts of romantic images. Put yourself in the scene, feeling the boat glide beneath you as you skim across the surface of crystal clear water, with the sun on your skin, the sounds of wind in the trees and birds singing songs of joy. For most people, however, their first experience of paddling a canoe is nothing like this. In fact, it can be so frustrating that they wonder how this daft craft has managed to stay around for so long.

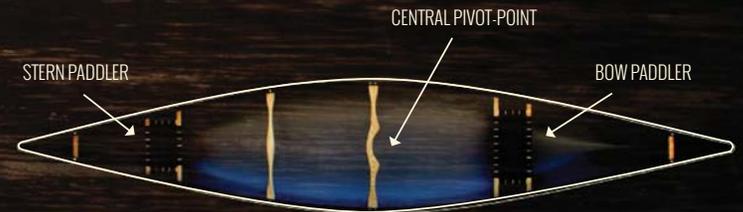
As canoe instructors we jokingly refer to canoes as 'Divorce Machines'. After a short time in a canoe a normally happy couple can become not-so-happy (or couply), and a pair of good mates can find themselves crossing each other off their Christmas card lists. There are two reasons for this: firstly, many canoes aren't overly streamlined and often lack a pronounced keel, so they don't easily track in a straight line; secondly, because each paddler has a single-blade paddle they only provide power on the side of the canoe they're paddling on, which usually doesn't lead to equal force being applied. Swapping-sides, zigzagging, bickering, and blame games often ensue.

This isn't necessarily the fault of the paddlers. Let's blame the boat... After all, this frustration isn't as often encountered with kayaks. Most novices find some success in their first venture in a ruddered kayak. It's easy: just paddle with the double-blade paddle and point your toes, and the boat roughly goes where you intend it to. It even goes straight. A canoe, however, is a different story.

In a tandem pair, each paddler has a different responsibility. The bow paddler (front) sets the paddling pace and spots any potential obstacles in the way and the stern paddler (back) has the dual role of trying to keep in-time with the front paddler while also steering the canoe by using a repertoire of different strokes. There's no rudder, no double-blade paddles, and two people with different roles in a boat that doesn't want to go straight... It's easy to see how frustration can ripple.

The reason that the person in the stern has the role of steering is to do with leverage. Canoes have a central pivot-point. Paddlers sit at locations in the canoe that are at varying distances away from this pivot point, thus, gaining leverage on this point. The stern paddler sits further away from the central pivot point, which means that they have a greater influence on the boat's direction. As the boat is (generally) moving forward, the theoretical pivot point actually moves forward too, which puts it even further away from the stern paddler meaning that they have even more leverage and therefore influence on the boat's course. (This concept is called the 'peripatetic pivot point'.)

Most new canoe paddlers struggle to keep their boat straight when they start out. Unfortunately, the technique involved in paddling in a straight line isn't necessarily intuitive. The good news, though, is that it isn't necessarily difficult to learn either. In fact, knowing the following three simple strokes can have you going straight on your very first day out:



The 'Stern Rudder'

"You could put Arnold Schwarzenegger in the front of the canoe and my Grandma in the back and she would still overpower him." These were the words of my first canoe instructor. We know that the stern paddler will usually overpower the front which means that the canoe is constantly turning away from their paddling side. A slight "rudder stroke" is a basic stroke that can correct this.

Hand and body position are the same as in the forward stroke. The difference begins as the stroke nears the body. As the paddle reaches your hips you begin to rotate your top hand (the one on the grip) so that your thumb points upward. Since the grip and the blade are parallel to each other this should result in the blade becoming parallel to the boat as well; or perpendicular to the water's surface. Continue the stroke past your body and finish with the blade behind you, still fully submerged.

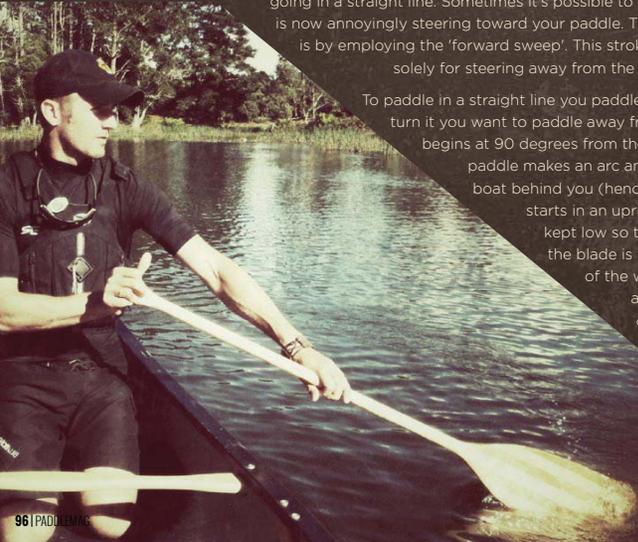
The stroke's effectiveness comes from a small outward push of the blade. As the blade pushes out the canoe turns toward the stern person's paddling side. Small adjustments are much better than large ones. Try to focus on a distant point and keep the canoe on-course to that point. (The 'Stern Rudder' is an introductory stroke which helps to travel in a straight line. In the next instalment we'll cover the "J-Stroke" which is much more efficient at achieving this aim.)



The 'Forward Sweep'

The 'stern rudder' is a corrective stroke, meaning that it's used to fix your direction if you're not going in a straight line. Sometimes it's possible to over-correct (too much rudder) and the canoe is now annoyingly steering toward your paddle. The best method for steering it "the other way!" is by employing the 'forward sweep'. This stroke has many uses, but in this instance it is used solely for steering away from the stern paddler's side...again, a corrective stroke.

To paddle in a straight line you paddle close to the boat, so naturally, to intentionally turn it you want to paddle away from the boat. For the stern paddler this stroke begins at 90 degrees from the boat, in-line with your 'hip'. It finishes as your paddle makes an arc and comes almost in contact with the 'tip' of the boat behind you (hence we say to paddle from 'hip to tip'). The body starts in an upright forward-facing position and your arms are kept low so that the paddle is almost horizontal. Make sure the blade is fully submerged yet still 'sweeping' the surface of the water. The power comes from the core muscles as the stroke moves from the 'hip' and the arms can help accentuate the final part of the stroke at the 'tip' of the canoe. The last part of the stroke (near the 'tip') is the most effective part of the stroke as this part of the boat has the most leverage on the canoe's pivot point. Usually one or two effective forward sweeps will see the boat turn strongly away from the stern paddler's side.



The Forward Stroke

Even canoe veterans might find something useful here. As the most often-used stroke in canoeing it is definitely worth getting this one nailed. Hold the paddle with one hand on the top (the 'grip') and the other hand on the shaft. You'll want your hands to be at least shoulder-width apart so that you can get some power. Your body should be upright and facing slightly toward the side on which you intend to paddle. You can sit or kneel, depending on your canoe and your physical comfort. The power in this (and most other) strokes should be derived from your core muscles rather than your shoulders and arms. The more torso rotation you're able to incorporate into your strokes the less fatigue you'll feel in your arms and shoulders. Keep your head up and look where you're going rather than at the paddle. Good form will follow and that equals less energy expenditure.

To perform the stroke there are two simple concepts to grasp: 1) Paddling close to the boat reduces the amount of leverage (turning force) that you're applying to the boat which is a good thing since your aim is to go straight, and 2) The best way to paddle close to the boat is to have a vertical paddle shaft and the only way to do so is to have both of your hands outside of the boat as you paddle. The stroke starts as far forward as you can reach and finishes just beyond your hip. Any further is wasted effort. Try paddling with your elbows locked in a straight position. This will cause you to have to exaggerate your torso rotation in order to keep a vertical paddle shaft. Once you've got the feel of it allow your elbows to bend, but only slightly. If you can paddle in time with your partner it means that the boat will receive equal force from both sides at the same time which will hopefully assist in going straight. It still won't though, so you'll need to know a couple more strokes. The following are for the stern paddler.



Summary

Learn to paddle comfortably on both sides. Paddle in time with your partner. Communicate and try not to get frustrated with your partner. Use your core muscles to get power into your strokes. Realise that canoeing is about finesse and grace - fluid motion. Be aware of where

you're trying to go and where you need to push water in order to get there. Understand that canoeing is a sport that takes time to learn - it doesn't take long to become competent but it may take a lifetime to master. In the next instalment we'll get into a few more advanced techniques.