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planetFear / Latest articles / Learning to Raft for Endurance Races

Learning to Raft for Endurance Races

Article by Pete James

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A white-water raft is an incredibly buoyant and stable watercraft capable of carrying large weights and negotiating high grade white-water. It is very slow on flat water and can be hard to manoeuvre. In extreme white water you may either be required to race with a helmsman provided by the race organisers, or to control the raft yourselves.

Navigating the raft accurately down the optimum line on a river will usually make more difference to your overall speed than how hard your crew paddles in a straight line. Your ability to work as a team in response to commands is often crucial to the ability of the helmsman (or helmswoman) to steer the raft. Paddling in unison will make any effort your team exerts vastly more effective, whether keeping the raft moving forward or performing a turn.



If you are required to helm your own raft, obtain training from a recognised centre for as many team members as possible. For the purposes of this article we will concentrate on how you as a racer can prepare to perform as well as possible with an experienced guide (or experienced racer) at the helm.

As the raft's speed is low compared to that of the water, the boat has to be manoeuvred across the river much more than a canoe or kayak. It is quite normal to be sideways on to the direction of flow. The helmsman must constantly look ahead and anticipate where the raft needs to be on the river. While in some circumstances it may be useful to bounce the raft off obstacles to change direction, a clean line that avoids impact will generally be faster and less risky to the integrity of your craft.

The person helming should be located at the very back of the boat – ideally able to switch sides if necessary. Other team members (the “crew”) sit in matched rows down each side of the raft. Each crew member sits on the side tube of the raft with their “inside” leg pushed back into the thwart (tube running across the raft) behind them, and their “outside” leg pushed forward against the thwart in front of them. This position allows the paddler to reach out well beyond the side of the boat, and to obtain maximum power by using the whole of their body in the paddle stroke.



In order to manoeuvre effectively in rapids your helms person may use a number of important commands to determine who is paddling when, and in which direction. Commands may vary a little from place to place, but here are some examples:

- “All forward” – everyone paddles forward
- “All Back” – everyone paddles backwards slowing the boat or moving it backwards faster
- “All Down” – everyone gets down in the middle of the raft, maintaining their grip on the “T” (top) of the paddle with one hand (to avoid taking anyone else's teeth out) and holding on to the side of the raft with the other hand.
- “Stop” – everyone stops paddling
- “Left Forward Right Back” – Crew members on the left paddle forward, those on the right paddle backwards (turning the boat to the right)
- “Back on the job” – Get up and get paddling again!

























In all cases it is important for both speed and efficiency that everyone paddles in time. Allocate one crewmember in the front of the boat to set the rhythm, and make sure that everyone is matching them as closely as possible. If you can't see them, watch the paddler in front of you.

As the boat is too heavy to surge forward in response to individual paddle strokes, there are subtle but important differences in paddling technique from that used in a canoe. Instead of planting the blade in the water and pulling the boat past it, you must plant your blade in the water and maintain pressure on it as the raft moves slowly through the water.

Unless you have easy access to a raft, the best training is single bladed paddling in an open canoe – the slower the boat the better. Kayaking (with a double blade paddle) will also help train the right muscles in your back and, less importantly, in your arms. General upper body strength/endurance work with weights will also help. In particular, try to develop good strength and rotational mobility in your back.

Even without a raft, your team can still do some useful preparation together. Create an imaginary raft and sit on it in the positions you expect to use during the race. Get somebody to call commands and “air paddle” in time down an imaginary river. It might feel a bit silly, but it will help you prepare for the real thing.

Always wear a suitable buoyancy aid and helmet on or near the water. Safe swimming in moving water requires you to float on your back with your feet out in front of you, allowing you to see ahead, push off obstacles and (most importantly) avoid trapping your feet between rocks and drowning. For this reason, do not stand up in fast moving water. You may be required to carry safety equipment such as throw lines, river knives, and recovery gear such as carabiners and pulleys. For your own safety and that of your team members, find out how to use it! Using a throwline effectively (for example) requires practice.

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