**Aberdeen Surf Lifesaving Club**

**Surfski Paddling – The Basics 20240120, Steve Olivier**

**Introduction**

This is a very basic introduction to surfski paddling. I’m writing this without reference to any materials (there are plenty of online links to paddle technique, remounting, training schedules, competition tactics, downwind paddling etc. – if you struggle to find these or need a demo, let me know). It is simply what I have picked up through around fifty years’ experience in locations around the world, including South Africa, Australia, Hawaii, Scotland, and in various European destinations. Although my background was ski racing, this intro won’t include any race or competition tips, as that can come later. Reading this will help, but the only real way to learn is to get out there and do it, as often as you can, in varying conditions. I’ve been doing this for a long time, and I’m still learning.

**ASLSC Taster Sessions**

Starting early in 2024, we’ll run a few taster sessions as follows:

* Me and someone else in the double (me in front to start, as lead paddler in a double steers the ski and sets the stroke rate). It is really important that the rear paddler times his/her stroke to EXACTLY match the front paddler in a double
* As soon as someone is comfortable in the back they can move to the front, and have someone else in the back, with me paddling along in a single
* Multiply the above so that more people get comfortable
* Once comfortable, and happy with balance, add a fourth paddler in the single spec ski (this will be significantly tippier than the double)
* After that I’ll leave the Club Captain to sort out what the conditions/rules are for taking the equipment out
* People will tell you to never paddle alone. This is sensible from a safety perspective. Unfortunately, I always paddle alone, partly out of necessity (very few people paddle skis in Scotland, partly out of preference, and also because I’m experienced enough to (hopefully) get out of bad situations on my own Having said that, I’d recommend to always paddle with someone else if you can

**Safety Considerations**

I’m going to turn the old surfing adage around – for ski paddling, IF IN DOUBT, DON’T GO OUT. Yes, you can only learn by extending yourself in more and more difficult conditions but do this gradually. A ski is a clunky, largely unmanoeuvrable craft and if you are caught inside on a big day or if you have to remount constantly then you are in trouble.

So:

* Check the conditions, both current and forecast. What is the surf doing, where are the rips, what are the tidal movements over the next several hours, how cold is the water, what time will it be dark?
* Don’t paddle further from shore than you can swim, taking into account wind, swell, tide, and water temperature
* Does anyone know that you are setting off? It’s always a good idea to tell someone. Either call the coastguard by phone or VHF (Channel 16, then ask them to call you back on 67 VHF), tell them your plan, describe your craft, and tell them that you will check in on return to shore. Alternatively, let someone else know, or you can download and use the SafeTRX app on your phone
* Check that you have the necessary safety equipment (see below), particularly if you have opted to paddle alone
* Hugely important rule – if in trouble, STAY WITH YOUR SKI. It is pretty difficult to think of a circumstance where you should swim, unless it is a short swim and you can’t save your ski. Compared to a head or body in the ocean, a ski is highly visible and even if holed should provide flotation. Searchers are much more likely to spot a ski than a swimmer

**Safety Equipment**

This is a reasonably comprehensive list. I’ll try and stay away from expressing personal preferences here, as I don’t use all of this, but I’m happy to chat with people individually on merits, demerits of these. The wetsuit, booties and jacket section below can be significantly modified in summer.

* Wetsuit: depending on the length and intensity of your session, a Long John gives much more shoulder flexibility than a full suit. While I prefer shoulder flexibility over warmth, modern suits are now quite flexible, so unless you are planning either a really long paddle or intense intervals, a full suit should be fine
* Booties: try for narrow ones (depending on ski footwell width) and avoid those with wedge or accentuated heels. A hood for icy days, perhaps
* Paddling jacket: make sure that there is good shoulder/armpit flexibility, that it is windproof, and ideally get one in a bright colour
* Leg leash: normally attached to either the attachment point or footstrap of your ski, and then above your calf. This must NOT be attached in and out of surf of any significant size. Attach to your leg after getting out beyond backline, and remove before coming in
* Paddle leash: attach to footstraps and paddle. Also detach in and out of surf as above (some people prefer to leave their paddle leash attached, though). Some people use both leashes, some use one, some none. On flat days I might use none, on bigger/windy days I’ll use the paddle leash, and on a hairy or very cold/windy day, both. Both is safest, but practice your remounts and learn how to deal with things when they get tangled up with each other, or with you. A leg leash is more secure in terms of keeping the boat from rolling away, while a paddle leash allows you to work hands-free, for example if you have to help someone else, or make a repair
* Personal Flotation Device: make sure it is not too loose on you. The ones we have bought are nicely adjustable, have high visibility, with good pockets and attachments for other safety equipment (e.g. VHF, PLB, whistle, knife, reflective safety blanket)
* Phone in a waterproof case, secured to your PFD (background apps off to save charge, except for SafeTRX if you are using that)
* VHF radio: if you are going to use this, get a waterproof, marine one, preferably floating. Generally speaking you will see a rescue boat before it sees you (a ski sits low in the ocean), so you can use a VHF to guide them to your exact location
* PLB: wonderful things, but learn how to work it, test it as per the instructions, and attach it securely to your PFD
* Reflective stickers on your ski, bow and stern
* I wear earplugs if I am practicing remounts in our cold water, to prevent further deterioration of Swimmer’s Ear after a lifetime in the water

**Before You Set Off**

Warming up is a personal preference, but I now do it as I’m getting long in the tooth. If you do it, don’t just do shoulders, as you need to think of core rotation, lower back, and leg drive as well. Speak to me if you want to see a simple, 3-minute paddling warmup. Other pre-paddle considerations are (depending on how diligent you are):

* Check that rudder cables are ok and the rudder is straight
* Adjust your paddle length and angle – in very general terms you should be able to comfortably wrap your fingers around the top of the blade when you are standing and holding the paddle upright. I set my angle to the common 60 degrees, but this is a preference, and some people are now even advocating zero degrees
* Make sure that the bung is in place
* Check that you have your desired safety equipment
* Have you told the Coastguard or someone else your plan?
* Have you checked the forecast (especially wind), as you don’t want to be out at the supply ships and a massive westerly comes through?
* Always scenario plan(what will I do if my rudder cable snaps, what will I do if hit some sharp debris and it holes my ski, what is my plan if I start having severe chest pains, what if I lose my paddle, what if the conditions change radically from the forecast when I’m out there, etc?)

**The Paddle Itself**

It’s good to have a plan, but sometimes you might see something and want to investigate, or you just want to deviate from your plan and have fun. That’s great, because conditions might change or be a bit different from what it looked like. You might want to paddle into a northeasterly so that you can get runs coming back south to the club, or you might spot a wave at Fittie and head down there, or a planned gentle paddle might turn into a beasting interval session. Either way, think about things. For example, if you beast yourself with intervals or ins and outs, be near enough to the club (or other exit point) at the end so that you are not too tired to make it at the end.

**Going out:** Getting onto the ski, generally in knee deep water, involves waiting for a calm section, then either entering side-saddle, butt first and then feet into straps, and starting to paddle immediately. In a double, let the front paddler mount first and then the rear, unless you are well-practiced and can do it at the same time. For the less practiced, you can straddle the boat and then slide your bum forward into the seat.

If the surf is flat, just go out. If not, there are several ways to approach things. First is to just go hell for leather. Unless it is really big, this can work but if it is sizeable, then you might have to sit at mid-break and again before backline until there is a lull. This isn’t as easy as you might think, as a stationary ski is an unstable one. You can either wait in relatively calm water, or paddle slightly forward or back. Pure white water is difficult to negotiate as it is turbulent. You need to be directly face-on into it, never at any angle but straight on. In my experience, with pure, broken white water you need some momentum into it, then lean back as you go in, and be prepared to either paddle or brace as soon as you are over the first bit. Strangely, too much speed can be destabilising in white water, but this is something you’ll just have to learn by experience. Bear in mind that the impact zones are relatively small in area, so if you get a break, go hell for leather. Just be careful though, there has been many a time when I’ve heaved a sigh of relief and relaxed, thinking I’m out, only to see a monster bearing down on me.

TOP TIP: in pretty much any water situation, keep a blade in the water, either to brace or to stroke. This includes waiting for a lull, cruising down a wave, landing after crashing over a wave, etc.

It is generally easier to negotiate an unbroken or broken wave. Paddle hard for the shoulder or clean water, but slow down just as you crest. If it is a steep wave, you need that slow down bit just at the crest to avoid too big a drop on the other side. When you drop, be prepared to brace your paddle on the side you are leaning over towards, and also be prepared to paddle quickly to get momentum for the next one.

If a large wave breaks just in front of you, you can opt to roll. This involves a quick dismount, hanging on to your paddle with one hand and keeping a tight grip of the footstrap, turning your ski upside down and letting the wave wash over both of you. In theory you act as a drag anchor and the smooth hull of the ski offers little resistance. Unless you really get this right, keeping the boat headed directly into the wave, you’re in for a beating. I’ve never tried this, preferring to either wait or punch through even in big surf, but if you’re going to try it, my suggestion is lots of practice.

**Coming in:** again, if the surf is flat, just cruise in.If there is swell, coming in is often more difficult than going out. Surfskis are long, unstable craft. This is makes it very difficult to change direction once it is tracking in a certain way. Your best strategy in any decent size of surf is to either sprint in behind a big wave (rather than catch it), or wait for the end of a set and sprint in. If you intend catching a smaller wave all the way in, get on it early, then get ahead and stay ahead, staying straight on. If a wave catches your tail, or your rudder doesn’t catch, you’ll be pushed sideways and unless you are very skilled, you will flip. If you feel you are going to flip, you can drop one or both legs over the side to stall a bit and aid balance. The best plan in surf of any size is to catch smaller waves between sets and stay ahead of them. If you end up going side-on on a wave, lean into it with the flat blade on top of the wave to push down if needed. If you fall off, and I know it seems obvious, try to fall ocean side and go deep to avoid a wave smacking the ski into your head. To beach the ski, get off in shallow water, ocean side, to avoid getting your rudder bent in the sand or getting smacked by the ski in the shorebreak.

**Falling Off And Remounting**

You will fall off. Don’t rely on your leashes. They need checking, and leash failures (both leg and paddle) are common. Even if you don’t have a paddle leash, keep hold of your paddle. If you lose your paddle and decide to swim for your boat, which can be blown away and well out of reach in an instant, you are unlikely to recover your paddle even if you get to your boat. On the other hand, you can throw and swim/recover your paddle if there is a lull to get to your ski.

PRACTISING YOUR REMOUNTS IS ESSENTIAL. In parts of South Africa, Australia and Hawaii this is simpler – you just pull your Speedo out of your butt crack and climb on. In our frigid waters it is more difficult and clumsier, because of the wetsuit, jacket, PFD etc. Nevertheless, in cold water the more you fall off the more tired and colder you get, and this makes repeated remounts disheartening and downright dangerous, hence the need for practice. Even three successive remounts can see you in the danger zone, especially if the sea is big, choppy, or both. If in doubt, call for help earlier rather than later.

Practice makes perfect. Practice your remounts in different conditions, ideally mounting from both sides of the ski (although most people have a side preference). Practice close to shore, particularly until you are confident. My own practice is to do ten remounts, and if I fail to land one, I start back at zero. Okay, I’ll confess – I’ve only done this a few times because it is boring and cold, but it is very important.

Remount on the upwind side. This may involve swimming under the boat, which can be tricky if leashes get tangled, but make sure you maintain contact, e.g. through your leash as you don’t want the boat to blow away – it is very difficult to outswim a wind-driven ski. Alternatively, you can, using the wind, swim/push the boat around so that you are upwind.

There are essentially two ways of remounting. Quite popular now is the side-saddle method. I find this a bit more technical and less stable than the straddle method I grew up with, but it is recommended by the long-distance pros and most surfski schools. If remounting from the port side of the ski, place the paddle lengthwise along the starboard side, holding it with your left hand, roughly at footstrap place along the starboard size. With three breastroke kicks, launch yourself upwards, twisting at the end so that your butt lands in the seat. Immediately place one paddle blade (probably the right hand as your legs are still in the water on the port side) in the water, and if you want to relax for a moment with your feet still in the sea, that’s fine. Then place your right foot in the straps, while taking small paddle strokes, followed by the left, and then commence paddling. If remounting from the starboard side, just do the reverse of above.

The alternative remount is to be just a little forward of or level with the seat, do the same kicks, push up and try to immediately straddle the boat, then slide forward into the seat. Again, keep a blade in the water immediately on getting onto the boat, then move one or both feet into the straps and head off. For this one I prefer to keep my paddle across the boat at first, but I may just be wrong about that. I find it interesting that despite the popularity of the side saddle method, Australian competitive professionals still seem to use the straddle method in surf conditions. If practiced, it can be done very quickly.

**Upwind And Downwind**

Paddling into the wind is generally a hard slog, and paddling with it can be an enormous amount of fund, even in wind chop. I tend to use a flatter stroke going upwind. Catching runs – downwind - (South Africa) or runners (Australia) takes practice and can to some extent be specific to your boat. In general, try to get into the rhythm of the swell pattern, getting into a run early, going with it, and when your speed slackens, look to link with another one. Look left and right and angle the rudder to where the next run will be. Paddling too late for a run is frustrating as you will be pulling ‘uphill’ and will invariably miss it. This results in frustration and you then repeat the pattern, getting more tired and frustrated. Relax, and try to read the flow of the ocean. Also, keep your destination in mind. For example, if paddling north from Aberdeen catching south-west generated runs, keep angled left unless you want to visit the windfarm, or worse, Norway!

**Surf Etiquette**

A ski is great for catching waves, including big ones if you have the guts and DIY repair skills! You can catch waves from far out, but pull out much earlier than you’d think, heading for the shoulder from the start, and then paddle hard for the shoulder of the next wave as you head back out. Getting caught inside on a ski is not much fun. Don’t get caught in the surf with either your paddle leash or leg leash secured to you. Finally, pick your days and avoid dumping, hollow surf.

Remember that on a ski you are much less manoeuvrable than other craft or swimmers, so if you are paddling out go very wide for the shoulder to avoid surfers. You will catch waves further out than others, and can catch more waves, so don’t get greedy, and only take your fair share.

**Post-Paddle**

Lift the ski up by the footstrap with one hand, and the other hand grabbing the rail at the seat then boost it on to your shoulder. Be careful of others, both on the beach and on the walk/cycle path, either look underneath it or drop it a bit and look over the top. Also do this when turning. When carrying a ski the wind can easily grab it and lead to you dropping it. In stronger winds carry it on the waist rather than your shoulder. Avoid dragging it along the beach.

Notify the Coastguard or whomever you told that you were setting off.

TIP: don’t leave paddles standing up leaning against something, as they invariably catch some breeze and fall over.

Always wash the ski with fresh water, particularly the rudder cables and any metal bits, including lifting the T bar cover at the stern to wash out the rudder mechanism. Remove the bung after washing and store the ski.

If you think that the ski has water ingress, drain it properly by tilting water out of the bung hole. Report the ingress to the Equipment Officer for repair.

Wash the paddle off, including inside the shafts, and particularly the sizing and angle mechanism. This jams quickly and becomes unusable (and expensive!) unless you wash them regularly and properly.

Wash your kit as your preference might be, particularly your VHF and PLB.

Go home and enjoy a well-earned beer!