

MENTAL GAME

THE MENTAL SIDE OF WHITEWATER

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Overcoming Fears

WHEN I STARTED boating, my hero said that 90% of the sport is mental, that once a paddler gets a certain degree of skill, how far she goes depends on what's going on in her head. After years of whitewater experience, I've found that statement to be fairly accurate. To understand why, let's look at (a simplification of) how the brain works.

When taking on a new challenge, some amount of energy is spent in overcoming barriers. Mental distractions such as fear are by far the biggest. If distractions are present, there is less room for processing, or even remembering things you already know. Information theorists say that the mind has a certain channel capacity—the maximum amount of information is called the signal. Everything that gets in the way of the signal is noise, like static on the radio. Fear is the loudest kind of mental static and it decreases ones capacity to take in information.

How can you quiet the noise of fear? The first step is to listen to the static: actually pay attention to what the fear itself is saying. Is the fear of an actual danger, or of a perceived one? Once you separate the two, the fear becomes more manageable. Let's listen in on the mental channel of a paddler experiencing fear:

"There's the eddy—rocks! I don't want to flip! Get my angle—a hole! I don't want to drown!!!"

The actual danger is so minute, but these fears are very real, flooding the body with adrenalin and blocking the mind's channel capacity.

The experienced kayaker knows that he or she is more likely to dislocate a shoulder



On the river do the same things repeatedly in order to turn the scary into the routine. When a rapid or maneuver becomes boring, you will no longer fear it.

than to be trapped in a boat. Fear gets us thinking the opposite. You will not drown while boating if you use good sense and follow basic safety procedures. The real dangers—shoulder dislocations, cold water, a long day, getting in over your head—aren't the kinds of dangers that grip your gut and jam all your channels. Most things you are likely to be afraid of are not really dangerous. It's more likely that you have overestimated the risk and underestimated your skills. To help develop a realistic evaluation of your skills and the risks, get input from the more experienced paddlers in your group. And, if you feel fear arising, ask yourself what is the cause. Is it real or is it perceived?

Adopt this mindset to change the belief systems in your head. These will help desensitize you to your fears and overcome them (for an example of desensitizing yourself to fear, see the "Bombproofing Your Roll" section below)!

One of the most effective approaches to loosing fear is through gradual exposure. Can you ever remember being bored and scared at the same time? If you find yourself

fearful, practice until you're bored before pushing to the next level.

Experience fears so that you have proof that the fearful outcome your in your mind isn't reality. Part of that is swimming. Leave your boat on shore and swim in eddys, in safe rapids and swim in small holes that flush. Take rescue classes. This will give you a sense of control.

When learning, mistakes are a good thing! If you watch children starting to walk, they often laugh with glee when they fall down. When learning to kayak, you are not only the mad scientist but also the laboratory mouse. Approach learning with curiosity, humor, and openness! Smiling changes the chemistry in the brain and opens the channel capacity to learning—even if you aren't really feeling smiley!

Pre-trip head centering sets the tone for the day. Don't let your fear take you downstream during the shuttle. When you're miles above THE RAPID in playful Class II, keep your mind focused. Remind yourself where you are and that you will

only boat what's right in front of you. Always give yourself the portage option.

Silly as it might sound, singing works to decrease fear. So does visualizing yourself as though you are your kayaking role model.

At the end of the day, notice how you describe your runs to others. Keep it positive! Even if you had a "bad" run, DON'T describe it! Instead, say how you would make changes to have a successful run next time.

Creating Confidence

Many paddlers have been told that they have the skill to run more challenging rapids, but they hold back. What drives us? What limits us? To find out, we need to learn a bit about how the brain works.

People like to perform their best and so purposefully, although often unconsciously, seek out conditions that produce a state of optimal arousal in the brain. A paddler cannot perform at her peak when her brain is either overwhelmed or bored. Each of us has our own measure of just what optimal is. People participate in kayaking because of the intrinsic feelings of enjoyment, well-being, and personal achievement it causes.

This state of being, which lies outside the parameters of worry and boredom, is called "being in the zone" or having a "flow" experience.

Here are some conditions that are necessary for a paddler to be in the zone. The activity is completely voluntary, the motivation is intrinsic, the outcome is uncertain. There is just the right amount of challenge. Flow can only be experienced when the ability to influence the outcome by applying personal competence is matched to the situation's risk.

What makes being in the zone worth repeating the activity? The goal is clear and the feedback is immediate. Action and awareness merge into pure, uninterrupted concentration. The field of stimulus becomes centered and limited. There is an experience of "self forgetfulness." There is a feeling of control over one's actions in the environment. The experience is so enjoyable and meaningful that the individual hopes to reproduce this state by repeating the activity!

Knowing this about our minds, we can cultivate a type "C" personality, one that objectively evaluates our commitment,

control, and confidence over a challenge. Commonly, there is the rapid or river that represents your personal *step up*. Your mentor has assured you that your skills are up to the challenge, yet you've held yourself back. The first question you must ask yourself is, "Do I want to do this?" Remember, your motivation must be intrinsic and the decision voluntary.

If you decide "yes" then guide yourself through this process. It will help you step out of the emotional side and into the physical side, and help you create an attitude of control and confidence.

- First measure the difficulty of the parts. Break the rapid down move by move. Have you ever done similar moves on any other river? Have you done similar moves upstream?
- Rate the difficulty on your own scale. Can you make that ferry? Can you catch that eddy?
- Rate your ability. How successful were you with similar moves? How is your energy?
- Imagine the worst outcome. How likely is that to occur? What are more realistic consequences? Are you willing to suffer the most likely consequence?
- Evaluate your group and location. Do you have confidence in the support your group can provide? Does the environment provide the necessary margin of error to let you take on this challenge today?



Next create a "can do" attitude by visualizing your run. See yourself successfully dealing with the crux move. Which paddle blade goes into the curler? What posture and boat edge is needed? Continue to see your line all the way through to the final

The field of stimulus becomes centered and limited when you are in the zone.

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To help get a realistic evaluation of your skills, get input from more experienced paddlers.

up to perfect your technique. Video is an invaluable tool to see what you're doing.

So now you've got a great roll in the pool. It's effortless. Although you've practiced many drills to simulate combat, in moving current it just isn't there. Instead you have a sloppy, difficult roll that often requires more than one try, when it works at all.

What can you do to keep the smooth roll with you when you hit whitewater? Finish the movement. That sounds too simple, but it's true. The first 80% of the movement is not enough. *You have to finish it.*

What tends to happen on whitewater? Most often, your roll doesn't fail; rather you fail to do your roll! During an unexpected flip, the mind can fill with fear or over-analysis: "This roll doesn't feel right," or "I'm not safe," or "I don't have enough air." This negative commentary short-circuits the

eddy. If progress stops at a certain feature, you'll need to work through it until you see yourself successful. Use only positive and realistic self-talk. Quiz the better paddlers in the group. Watch their runs to reinforce your plan. Remember that a great percentage of the work is done above the move. From each staging eddy, where did the successful boaters line up? What landmarks can you use to lead you to the positive line?

On the other hand, if you are happier seeing the take-out than the put-in, perhaps your motivation is not intrinsic. How many of us have run a rapid because "so-and-so ran it and I'm better than he is," or because the group we paddled with created an atmosphere of judgment? You'll never boat in the zone at peak performance if something other than joy is driving you.

What drives us changes day-to-day, even moment-to-moment. Let yourself focus on the water in front of you and realistically evaluate your skill and the difficulty. Know that YOU want to take on this challenge, or not. Only you can control the conditions that allow you to have a flow experience.

For paddlers who are in the zone, action and awareness merge into uninterrupted concentration.

Some days it may be by nailing every move in a familiar rapid. Another day it could be while running a rapid for the first time.

Bombproofing Your Roll

So, what is a roll anyway? It's a movement. It's a complicated movement that relies on synchronization, but it isn't hard. If your pool roll isn't effortless, get a tune-



roll movement and results in instinct taking over. The result? The head pulls up and the blade dives down.

If you want a reliable combat roll then you have to do the roll movement 100%, start to finish.

So, how do you stay focused? Fill your mind with a mantra and the intention to finish every roll. Having a mantra that takes you to your finish position is invaluable. "Back hand to ear" is a common one to keep the back hand from punching. "Watch the blade" keeps the head from jerking up. Attention to the positive also helps keep your mind from being overwhelmed by fear.

Here are some exercises to clear your mind. This is a process called desensitization, intended to reprogram fear into comfort.

First off, being underwater is part of our sport. Can you accept that? Mentally,



Use a mantra to keep you at ease. "I'm OK," "Back hand to ear," and "Watch the blade," are mantras that will help you finish your roll, instead of pulling down and lifting your head.

roll movement, from start to finish.

Choose different places to practice being up-side-down and rolling up. Your goal is to get comfortable everywhere. You want to get so familiar being under

water that you almost don't even notice when you flip! Hang around on mild eddy lines and at play spots. Spend time in deep, tail waves at the bottom of rapids. Gradually move to safe spots within rapids. You are training your mind to stay calm and clear, and focusing on finishing your roll, no matter what. This desensitization process loosens your mind's hold over you, replacing the chatter and filling your mind with intention.

embrace that in the kayaking world of mere mortals like us, being up-side-down is to be expected. Moreover, it is OK to be underwater. If you expect to be underwater and you are comfortable there, you will roll—even in the rapids.

Find some mellow place where you know you'll roll up. Have a friend there with the insurance of a bow rescue present. You want to feel 100% confident that you are OK. Decide on a mantra that puts you at ease, like, "I have lots of air," or "I'm OK." Then, with lots of air, your nose plugs, a mask, whatever helps you feel comfortable, tuck, flip and stay under for a while.

Open your eyes. Look around. Be curious! What does the water feel like? What's the temperature? Move out of and back to your set up. Is the water pushing you? Is it putting pressure on one of your blades? How is your body responding to the current? Then, once you've hung out for awhile, take a bow rescue. Describe your exploration. Use only adjectives from the physical realm: cold, bubbly, green. Don't let your mind say it was scary or dangerous.

Using your mantra that keeps you at ease, flip again and purposely do the whole

Use your roll often. Some paddlers get so balanced they rarely flip. But when they do they may find their roll isn't working so well anymore. Once one side is reliable, learn your other side. You won't lose your on-side roll; you'll come away with two rolls instead! Use them equally. Rolling consistently in whitewater requires you to place mind over matter, so be sure your mind is trained to finish every roll you start!

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Having confidence in the support of your group is key to pushing your limits.