



Mississippi River Challenge

5 & 6 August 2006

Skills for Tandem Paddlers

We heard booming aluminum and chattering voices through the cottonwoods and knew a flotilla of canoeists from the local livery would soon invade the quiet waters surrounding our riverside lunch stop. The first few canoes appeared around a lazy river bend bouncing from bank to bank, paddlers frantically switching from side to side in a desperate attempt to straighten their course. A young couple paddling on the same side of the canoe grazed the shore and bobbed off downstream to take a broadside hit from another craft. The bow heavy attacking craft carried a mother and child, the occupants taking to heart the myth that females must occupy the bow seat when accompanied by a male.

A lone tandem canoe skirted the mayhem and disappeared downstream. The paddlers stroked on opposite sides. Paddles flashed in unison. A chocolate Lab sat attentively just in front of the woman paddling stern. Everyone on the river that afternoon could have appeared as proficient by following three golden principals of tandem canoeing:

Paddle on Opposite Sides - Canoes track straighter and travel faster when tandem partners paddle on opposite sides. The bow partner calls the shots, taking a dozen or more strokes on one side before even thinking about switching. Stern paddlers, follow the bow's lead and switch sides when the bow does.

Paddle in Unison - Stern paddlers, watch your bow partner and match their cadence stroke for stroke. The bow partner sets a stroke rate and regular rhythm; keep it slow enough to allow the stern partner time for a rudder, J-stroke or other correction. Talk to each other and agree on a cadence. Paddling in unison reduces side-to-side boat bobble and increases your speed.

Trim Slightly Stern-Heavy - A bow-heavy canoe is a nightmare to steer. The heavier paddler should always take the stern [back seat], or re-arrange pooh, packs and people to achieve a even to slightly stern-heavy trim. Thanks to uncle Newton, canoes steer much easier with the lighter end of the craft aimed in the direction of travel. The exception to this rule is when paddling into a headwind. A canoe behaves like a weathervane, point the heavier end into the wind.

Work on these three principals the next time you go tandem paddling. You and your partner will enjoy your newfound level of canoeing proficiency, because you'll be paddling the boat that cuts through the chaos and slips downstream.

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