



Mississippi River Challenge

5 & 6 August 2006

Canoe Skills: The BONK

A few paddling seasons ago I was helping teach a tandem canoe class. On the final weekend of class my partner and I dropped into a familiar play hole for a side surfing demonstration.

Things were going well: the students were lined-up like ducklings in the eddy where they could all see the demo; my partner and I sideways in the meat of the hole, raging water beneath us, a couple of broncos riding that wild pony for all it was worth. We started to slip out the backside of the hole and I dug into the foam pile with my paddle to pull the bow home again. In for another ride, slipping again, then it happened... BONK!

My ears were ringing. But I was still breathing air and looking at trees not slime-covered rocks on the river bottom. Befuddled, I turned to see my stern partner throwing in hard back strokes to pull us out of the hole. It seems the BONK was a paddle-whack to the helmet to get my attention, or at least get me to stop paddling in the opposite direction.

The BONK while seldom used, remains the most extreme of communication techniques. Tandem canoeing requires teamwork and communication. Tandem whitewater emphasizes that need, but it is no less important on a quietwater afternoon float trip.

Good communication starts with partners agreeing to a division of labor between bow [front seat] and stern [back seat] paddlers. Both partners control direction: the stern paddler is responsible for keeping the canoe on its overall course; the bow paddler makes short-range corrections. Both partners have an equal stake in supplying power. And, both partners have a fifty-fifty stake in communication.

Communicate with your partner by speaking, pointing or leading with a stroke. Make sure your partner can hear you. On quietwater it's often helpful for the bow paddler to pause for a moment and face the stern, making eye contact. Make your verbal queues meaningful; shouting "ROCK!" in a mid-stream boulder garden provides your partner very little navigational assistance. "LEFT!" works much better. I find throwing in a quantifier like 10 o'clock, number of strokes or a distance often fine tunes the maneuver.

On a noisy whitewater river or wind-blown lake partners may have to rely on non-verbal queues. In this case remember to always point in the direction of travel or safe passage, not towards obstacles or obstructions. Pointing to an obstruction may ensure you a parking spot on it; as you partner will intuitively point the canoe where you point.

In bigger water where you can not afford to miss a stroke, watch your partner. The stern has an obvious advantage as they can easily see the bow paddler throw in a draw or other stroke to change direction. But with good stroke mechanics and torso rotation, bow paddlers catch a peripheral over the shoulder glimpse of the stern with each stroke. Learn to feel the boat respond to your partner's body movements and strokes.

A good drill for this is to take turns wearing a blindfold on a quiet lake or pond after the water warms to a comfortable swimming temperature. With practice you'll learn to feel the stern initiate a turn, feel the weight shift when the bow rotates into a cross-draw position. You'll be the tandem team with the graceful choreographed moves that every tandem canoeist envies, not the two hole riding broncs communicating by BONK!

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