

“FIRST DESCENT”
ADVANCED WHITEWATER KAYAK CLINIC
MAY 29, 30/ 2009
(Expanded Outline)

HELPING PARTICIPANTS GAIN CONFIDENCE IN 'READING THE RIVER' FROM A 'FIRST-BOAT' PERSPECTIVE

- How to boat-scout**
- Things to keep in mind while scouting from your boat**
- When to get out and shore-scout**
- Emphasis on control, safety and fun**

How to Boat-Scout (from out front)

It's a chess game: you plan 3-4 moves ahead, the river counters your moves, you adapt as you go!

3 Keys to Success

- Set an Appropriate Pace
- Determine Appropriate Lines
- Communicate with the Group

*** Set an Appropriate Pace**

Your previous experience will determine if you're able to make good decisions on the fly while boat-scouting: is there a ledge hole just beyond that horizon line? Is it a keeper? If you've seen and run enough ledges, the decision to run or not to run will be easier; if not, you may want to get out of your boat and take a look.

An appropriate pace helps to 'smooth out' the run:

- too fast and the group fragments, rhythm and communication are broken and mistakes are made by others trying to keep up
- too slow and concentration breaks down, eddy-crowding occurs and flow is nonexistent

*** Determine Appropriate Lines**

Read-And-Run: deal with each water feature with precise, well-timed strokes. As you approach a rapid, quickly break it up into pieces: look for likely stopping or pausing places you can use to ensure that you see what you need to see: pools, eddies, waves and small holes are all useful tools for boat-scouting: take advantage of them!

In particular, initially get a real good look as far downstream as you can to help visualize the moves you will need to make and the lines you will need to take.

***Group Dynamics and Communication**

Remember: the boat(s) behind you are probing on YOU! Make timely, efficient decisions, check upstream often (to be sure that your pace is appropriate and that you're not hanging anyone up midstream or about to get run over by a kayak, raft, telephone pole, cow, house...), keep everyone 'in the game' by maintaining a high level of 'situational awareness'.

NOTES:

Things to Keep in Mind while Scouting from your Boat

Boat scouting, whether you are out front or further back in the line-up, involves a certain mind-set: the decisions are yours to make and others may be depending on your skills.

3 Keys to Success

- OK to go there?
- What if I miss a move?
- Be prepared to adapt

* OK to go there?

Is the place I'm thinking of going to safe (no strainers or other hazards visible)?

- **can I see another safe move beyond it?**
- **can I get to shore from there?**
- **can I get back HERE if I need to** (assuming you are starting from a safe place to begin with)?

If 'yes' to any of the above, it is probably safe to go there: if 'no' to all three, pick another place to go or get out and shore-scout.

* What if I Miss a Move?

This is where the 'big picture' comes in. A good 'big picture' mind set helps whether you are boat 1, boat 2, or anywhere else in the pack. Have a plan B, C, D, E...Z in mind just in case you blow the move into your planned pausing place.. The only way you can do that is by **planning and looking as far ahead as possible BEFORE entering the rapid**, while still remaining focused on the moves you need to be making at the moment (remember: this applies to every boater on the run, not just the front-runner)..

* Be Prepared to Adapt

Plan your moves, but always keep the 'big picture' in mind to increase the odds of a successful run of any particular stretch of river. If you are thrown offline and miss an eddy, go to your Plan 'B' eddy. If you flip and roll, remember to keep executing the plan (if you 'zone out', you'll just end up flipping again!). Be imaginative, conservative, flamboyant: whatever your temperament allows, but remember to adjust your approach as the situation demands.

NOTES:

When to get out and scout

Not everything is boat-scoutable: if you can't see ahead far enough to determine a safe place to continue working your way downstream, shore-scouting is needed.

3 Keys to Success

- Have you exhausted all boat-scouting possibilities?
- Trust your instincts
- Ask someone else

* Have you exhausted all boat-scouting possibilities?

Look closely: there is probably an eddy or small wave you can safely paddle across or down to to get a little closer look at that 'blind' drop. Apply the rules in the previous section and don't be afraid to be creative!

* Trust your instincts

If your guts are telling you "don't do it", listen to them. If you are too scared, or too sure that you shouldn't go there, DON'T!! Get out and scout! Err on the side of caution and stay safe.

* Ask someone else

This technique is risky: the idea is to ask if someone else in the group knows where or how to run a particular rapid.

The risk is, you may find that, by asking, you might give up the lead-boat spot, and that would be too bad: running out front on an exploratory is just too much fun!

NOTES:

Emphasis on control, safety and fun

It's a thing of beauty when it all comes together: an elegant dance with a smooth rhythm, and graceful, efficient movements, as fun to watch as it is to perform!

3 Keys to Success

- Control
- Safety
- Fun

*** Control**

We could just bomb down the river, straight ahead, no stopping, playing, looking, showing off, breathing, etc., essentially at the mercy of the current. But, there's a much better way: use all of your skills to eddy-hop, surf-on-the-fly, and scout as you go. Need to buy some time to get a good look ahead or to give the boat ahead enough time and space? Sweep into that wave and surf for the 2 seconds it'll take to glance over your shoulder to spot your next move; or catch that micro-eddy, pausing just long enough to be sure of the line to take.

Out of control is scary, inefficient and dangerous; under control is elegant, satisfying and FUN!

*** Safety**

Control leads to safety. We make better decisions, can stop when we need to and won't stumble blindly into the next rapid (or the boater(s) in front of us) if we run under control. You don't have to be running out front to think like the front runner: just pay close attention to the environment around you.

*** Fun**

When we run under control and make appropriate decisions, the safety of the trip is maximized.

Safe is fun: reckless is not...

NOTES:

**HELPING PARTICIPANTS GAIN INSIGHT INTO GROUP DYNAMICS ON CLASS 3/4
WHITEWATER**

Team Dynamics (or how to be a ‘responsible individual’)

How to use all available information to evaluate a given situation

Tips on how to make the run ‘flow’ with a minimum of eddy- or shore-sitting down time

Emphasis on safety and fun

Team Dynamics (or how to be a ‘responsible individual’)

When it works, everyone ‘knows the drill’: the first boat has a role to fill, but so does everyone else on the trip. We need to gather the information necessary to safely navigate the river as if we were the only one there, while remaining an integral part of the group.

Front Boat

- Sets the appropriate pace
- Reads and goes; shore-scouts when necessary; communicates lines, etc. to the group
- Maintains contact with the group
- Always thinks safety

2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc.

- **Actively** evaluates the lines and decisions (and results of those decisions) of those ahead, adapts and changes as needed (or desired)
- Maintains good spacing with the boat ahead; always scans for a stopping / pausing place in case the boat ahead unexpectedly has to stop; doesn’t pass or overrun or crowd out the boat(s) ahead; maintains control at all times
- Ensures continuity of communication and flow
- Remains alert for the potential for things to go wrong: offers input and remains ready to participate in rescues as needed.
- Thinks like an active river runner and not content to just be a passive follower

River-running at advanced levels is a ‘shared adventure’: we are all equally responsible for the trip’s outcome. We have all had mentors who took us under their wing, helped us out, showed us where and even how to go. But, if you have honestly evaluated your experience and ability and temperament, you are here because you want to take a step up, expand your horizons, push the envelope a bit. You have the physical skills: the rest is how you think about what you are doing.

Unless you choose to boat alone (and I certainly do not recommend it: your life expectancy would rival that of the average Alaskan bush pilot, and I don’t think there are too many ‘average’ bush pilots flying around up there anyway!), on any given trip you are, by definition, part of a group. Keep this in mind when making your decisions on the river.

NOTES:

How to use all available information to evaluate a given situation

Simply put, use your eyes and ears (and brain!!) to help you to evaluate the chances that the challenge before you can be successfully conquered.

- * Listen to your environment. A lot of valuable information can be gathered just by listening: an increase in the river's roar, urgent voices behind or up ahead of you, boulders clunking and grinding away, actually moving down stream along with you: these all tell us something and we should pay attention to them.
- * Look all around you. If the boater ahead drops over the ledge and disappears, and you don't catch sight of him / her again after a reasonable amount of time, you may want to choose an alternate line (what may have happened to him?). There are almost always alternatives to the lines you see other boaters take; evaluate your alternatives and decide on an appropriate course of action, keeping in mind safety, fun and the impact that your decision might have on the group.
- * Think about what's going on and try to anticipate what's *going to be* going on. In the example given above, the lead boat drops over a ledge and disappears. He / she is either swimming (in which case you may be in the best position to effect a boat-based rescue), or surfing a hole or re-circulating in the hole or pinned or...you get it. Or, he / she might just be 'throwing loops' in some awesome playspot and neglected to indicate to you, or anyone else, that the drop was clean and OK to run. Either way, you should think about what's going on and make the appropriate decision: **actively participate** in the run and don't be content just to remain a passive follower.
- * Safety First! Even if you are not running out front, your decisions may have an effect on group safety. A confident river runner may take the 'hero' line through a particularly difficult rapid, mindless of the fact that the 'virgin' running right behind him / her will try to take the same line and make the same moves, with differing degrees of success. Always use your head and remember that you are part of a group and act accordingly. Safe boating is fun boating!

NOTES:

Tips on how to make the run 'flow' with a minimum of eddy- or shore-sitting down time

Ever watch an NBA basketball game, or NHL hockey game? Players warm up for a good while before the start of the game. Then, at half-time, they cool down again back in the locker room (while the coach yells at them!). They take the floor for the second half and...guess what? They spend another ten minutes or so warming up again before the second half begins.

The warm-up serves two main purposes:

- it gets the muscles warm and ready to be used, and
- it helps to refocus attention and concentration on the job at hand

We can maximize safety and fun by:

- 1). **Warming up adequately** (which also minimizes the potential for injury), and
- 2). **Minimizing situations on the river which lead to cool-downs and loss of focus** (like extended lunch breaks, drawn-out 'nature' breaks, extended eddy-sitting, 3-hour shore-scouts, a couple of cold ones just before you put on, etc...).

Tips to remember:

- Organize yourself and your gear (both on and off the river) so you have quick access to the things you use most often (food, water, throw rope) during breaks or rescue situations. Leave the laptop, cell phone, and portable generator back under the float bags!
- Slow pace, medium pace, fast pace: it's up to the group but, ultimately, **moving is better than sitting!**
- As front boat or trip coordinator, give others the info they need as briefly and concisely as possible. Try to remember that we're talking about Class 3/4 boaters here with corresponding skills, so 2-hour descriptions of how to run a particular rapid or stretch of river are probably not necessary, even for first-timers.
- Information gatherer or probe? Actually, even the probes may find that they need or want more information before running a particular rapid. The point here is to remember to be efficient and consider the group as you go about deciding if and when to run or walk.

NOTES:

Emphasis on safety and fun

Since it is a 'shared adventure', we are all equally responsible for a river run's safe, fun outcome.

Remember:

- * Be mindful of how the group seems to be functioning, paying heed to both individual performances and the performance of the group as a whole. Are you or someone else having an off-day, flipping on Class 2 riffles between major rapids and missing easy moves? If you spot this happening, sometimes just a personal re-group or a word of advice or encouragement to someone else will do the trick. If not, consider changing the running order so that you or that person is in a better position for information gathering and/or rescue potential. Be creative (and gentle) in dealing with these types of situations.
- * A 'fun' line for a Class IV veteran is probably not appropriate for a boater with less experience on his / her first major step up into Class IV whitewater. The front boat needs to continually assess the mood of the group and offer doable choices for even the least skilled in the group (which includes offering the choice of portaging a particular rapid).
- * You'll know if you or someone else has bitten off more than you can chew and are in over your head. While the decision to portage (or to take off the river entirely) can easily be made for yourself, all you can do is suggest to someone else that they (and the rest of the group) might be better off if they took off the river. This is a tough situation and calls for diplomacy and tact.
- * Be flexible, alert, creative, positive...and, above all, remember: if it ain't fun, don't do it!

NOTES:

WAYS TO EVALUATE A GIVEN CHALLENGE, KEEPING SAFETY IN MIND

Choosing your adventure wisely (including gear and 'what-if' considerations)

Can a rapid be boat-scouted safely or is shore-scouting called for?

Boat-based and/or shore-based rescue points - things to consider

How to help in a rescue situation and not become another victim

Choosing your adventure wisely (including gear and ‘what-if’ considerations)

Remember, it is a ‘shared adventure’ with every individual also sharing group responsibility. You can help make it a fun, safe adventure by:

*** A little independent research**

Even if you are not the ‘trip coordinator’, arm yourself with at least a gut feeling about such parameters as river level (optimum? low? high? flood?), length of chosen run, weather and weather trends, terrain and river gradient, access points and likely evacuation routes. Use published guidebooks, topo maps, ‘the weather channel’, local knowledge, etc. to help you to make intelligent, well-informed decisions regarding which river to run and who to run with. Always play the ‘what-if’ game:

What if...there’s too much water in the river when we get to the put-in? (Don’t succumb to ‘gotta-run-cause-we’re-here’ syndrome; weigh your choices carefully)

What if...the river flashes on us and we’re only at the halfway point? (Hope you had access points and evacuation routes in mind...)

What if...the weather turns suddenly turns frigid? (You’d have an extra layer in your dry bag if you had monitored weather trends and would be prepared even for this eventuality)

What if...a rescue situation arises? (Plan to carry appropriate safety gear and make sure it gets placed in your or someone else’s boat at the put in)

You see where we’re going with this. The more situations you foresee in advance, the more you will be able to deal with if necessary.

*** New rivers can be fun and flooded rivers can be fun: but new, flooded rivers are usually too scary and dangerous to be fun!!**

Evaluate your ability, mental and physical state *and* group make-up and dynamics honestly. Does the trip have a high likelihood of being safe and fun? Or do your instincts tell you that the local helicopter rescue team will probably get a good workout before the day is over? This process starts even before you get to the put-in. Remember that you will need to act as a team on the river; some thought should be given to the make-up of that team and your place in it.

*** Constantly be on the lookout for ways to upgrade your skills**

- Take advanced instruction
- Learn by observing others and from the experience of others
- Perform frequent (and honest) self-evaluations, including ‘attitude checks’: fix what’s not working
- Consider doing the work necessary to become a certified instructor yourself! You’ll be helping others (and yourself in the process!)

Can a rapid be boat-scouted safely or is shore-scouting called for?

Answer 3 basic questions when deciding on a river move:

- Can I get to shore from there?
- Can I get back to here (assuming a safe starting point) from there?
- Can I see another safe move leading from where I'm thinking of going?

If 'yes' to any or all of these questions, it should be ok to go there.

If 'no' to all of these questions, **DON'T GO THERE!!**

Your choices then come down to:

- Find another vantage point from where you can get a better look downstream
- Try an eddy on the opposite side of the river (after asking the 3 questions above!)
- Inch up on the drop by slowly approaching the top of the rapid from the pool above (make sure you can paddle back to a safe point above the drop before choosing this option)
- Don't commit to any move if you don't have a reasonably safe exit / escape from that move
- When all of the above options are ruled out and you still can't see a reasonable move, **GET OUT AND SHORE-SCOUT** and communicate, communicate, communicate...

NOTES:

Boat-based and/or shore-based rescue points - things to consider

The choice of rescue placement depends on the river features appearing before you. As front runner, you will be relied upon to communicate what you see from your boat, but if shore scouting is necessary, your job now involves evaluating the entire rapid to try to identify potential problem spots and devising a workable rescue strategy. While exact placement of rescue points depends on the situation, consider the following:

- Is it a single drop / ledge / hole / waterfall with nothing but a 1/4 mile-long pool below it? If so, a single rescue point may be appropriate (you standby with the throw rope you brought with you as you got out to scout, positioning yourself at or just downstream of the drop)
- Is it a long, intricate rapid, demanding multiple difficult maneuvers, with a stretch of continuous Class 3/4 water immediately downstream? Try to identify trouble spots and likely rescue placement areas, considering group size, equipment and skill and ability levels. Use all resources available to you.
- To maximize 'flow', try to make efficient, accurate observations, communicate those observations, and execute the plan.
- Always ask 'What if...?' Have alternate plans of action in mind

NOTES:

How to help in a rescue situation and not become another victim

Evaluate the situation: Take the appropriate action!

Things to consider:

- Can you safely get to the victim from your boat without getting bit by whatever bit your victim? This could be a hole, strainer, pinning spot, etc. and you need to evaluate the situation first before charging into the same trouble spot.
- Will you get in the way of a rescue already under way? Sometimes the best course of action is simply to stay out of the way, remaining available if needed.
- Should you go for a boat-based rescue? Or would a shore-based rescue be more appropriate?
- Do you have the equipment, temperament, knowledge, and skills necessary to effectively set or participate in a rescue in Class IV whitewater?

A little education goes a long way: take a swiftwater rescue course, learn about rescue gear and how to use it, and carefully evaluate the potential for a successful outcome, considering group makeup, river difficulty, skill sets available in the group and how best to deploy your resources.

Above all, use your head, stay cool, stay safe!

NOTES: