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Eskimo Rolling (Kayaks)

Introduction:

Welcome to our article on Eskimo rolling. Years ago eskimo rolling was considered to be an advanced skill only performed by experts. Today it is recognised as an essential skill for both intermediate and advanced paddlers and can be learnt from a very early stage of our canoeing development. Being able to eskimo roll successfully means we can enjoy our canoeing so much more no matter where we are paddling. So it is well worth investing the time and effort learning to roll as soon as you are ready.

This article will, we hope, help you to become a successful eskimo roller. The good news is that learning to eskimo roll is not difficult as long as we follow a logical coaching sequence and concentrate on getting the technique right from the start and not rely on just strength.

We have taught eskimo rolling for many years and have developed a teaching method based on this experience which we find works. Although different people learn to roll at different rates, if you follow the methods outlined below, you should quickly pick up eskimo rolling.

Setting up our boat.

To eskimo roll effectively it is essential that we fit out our boat correctly. In order to make sure that we fit the boat comfortably, we need to adjust the footrest correctly, make sure we can place our thighs and knees under the cockpit area and pad out the seat where necessary to stop ourselves slipping sideways on the seat. Most intermediate spec. boats are ideal for learning to roll in, because they usually have adjustable footrests, thigh braces and can be paddled out to fit well.

Warm up.

As with any form of physical exercise, it is very important to warm up properly to avoid straining muscles. With eskimo rolling it is particularly important that the warm up should include stretching and mobility exercises focusing on the back, hips and shoulders. There is not space here to go into the warm up routines, so if you are not sure how to warm up properly it is worthwhile buying a good exercise book and reading up on the subject.

This article has been written from a right handers perspective simply because most paddlers are right handed. If you are left handed, (as I am), you may prefer to learn to roll leading with your left hand.

Stage 1. - Hip flicks

Having warmed up thoroughly, we can move on to the first stage of learning to roll which is 'hip flicks'. In order to right a boat after a capsize, we need to be able flick the boat up with our hips so the deck of the boat is facing upwards rather than downwards. This is called the hip flick. The key to performing a good hip flick is to keep our head and trunk low whilst rotating the boat up with our hips. This should be practised initially by:

1. With the boat parallel to the side of the pool, put both hands on the side of the pool on your right hand side. Lean over until the water supports your body. Turn your head up towards the roof so you can still breathe.

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2. Keeping your right ear in the water, try to roll the boat upright as far as you can using hip movements. Start off gradually and build up your movement until you can comfortably flick the boat up as far as possible. Again the key to this is to try to eliminate your trunk and head movement. You will know if you have lifted your head, because if you

ear comes out of the water you will be able to hear properly again!



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Note from photos above:

- That the fingers are on the edge of the pool and the thumbs are over the edge of the pool helping to grip the side.
- That both elbows are kept pointing towards the bottom of the pool at all times. This helps protect the shoulder area from strain.

Do not make yourself tired, if you are getting tired, stop and rest. Rolling is all about good technique and good technique is a lot easier to achieve when you are not tired.

Once you are comfortable hip flicking off the side of the pool, move onto using floats to practise your hip flicks. We use plastic drums as floatation aids here but you can use other forms of floats as appropriate. Again emphasis must be placed on isolating the body movement from the hip flick and ensuring that the elbows are kept low.

Once you are comfortable hip flicking with large floats, move onto smaller ones. This is a steady progression and the smaller the float the more dependent you will be on good technique. If you start trying to raise your head out of the water (i.e. bad technique), move back to a bigger float and focus on getting the boat up first.



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- Make sure that you capsize towards the right hand side and practise your hip flicks on that side.

You should at this stage be able to capsize, (towards the RHS), let the floats you are holding rise to the surface of the water, and keeping your head and body low in the water hip flick the boat on balance. Each time you practise this, aim to keep your ear in the water for three hip flicks and on the forth, bring you body and head to the upright position immediately following the hip flick.

- The key thing to remember here is "boat up first, then body followed by head".

When we teach eskimo rolling in the swimming pool, we usually allow forty-five minutes to cover the introductions, warm ups and hip flicks. (5 minutes on introductions, 10 minutes on warm ups and 30 minutes on hip flicks.)

Stage 2 - Learning the paddle movement.

Having developed a sound hip flick and understood the need to isolate the hip flick movement from the upper body movement, we can now move on to what we need to do with the paddle. We have found from experience that the easiest way to teach this initially is by practising the paddle movements out of the kayak on the poolside.

Get out of the boat, and do a few simple-stretching exercises to "warm down."

We will break the paddle movement down into four stages.

- Set up. (Pool side).
- Movement 1 - Pushing the paddle onto the surface
- Movement 2 - Sweeping the paddle out to 90 degrees
- Movement 3 - Pulling down on the paddle and hip flicking

Set up (On the poolside).

Stand with your feet spaced well apart, with your toes just over the edge of the pool. Set the paddle up as shown below.

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The photo above shows the extended arm position needed to allow the paddle to clear the hull.

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Extend both arms and push the paddle away from you with both hands. Make sure that your left arm is in contact with your left thigh.

Movement 2 - Sweeping the paddle out to 90 degrees

Lean towards the paddle side. (Putting weight on your left foot may help here)

Maintain a "cocked" right wrist and sweep the paddle out to 90 degrees, twisting your body round at the same time.

- Keep the paddle shaft parallel with the ground
- When you have swept the paddle out 90 degrees, look at the paddle blade and make sure that the drive face of the paddle blade is facing the ceiling.

- Lean forward as far as you are comfortable
- Left hand is just touching the neck of the paddle blade.
- Right hand is just off the center of the paddle shaft.
- Right wrist is "cocked".
- Left hand is held against the hip.
- Both elbows are bent

Movement 1 - Pushing the paddle onto the surface

Moving the paddle from the position shown in Photo 6 to the position shown in photo 7. (This movement we are going to call movement 1)



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Movement 3 - Pull on the paddle

Pull the paddle blade over your head with your right arm



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- Keep your left hand low; do not raise it above your waist.

The beauty of this pool side drill is that we can practise these simple movements over and over again until we have developed the motor skills we need to put them into use when hanging upside-down in the boat. It is however, very important to pay great attention to the detail given above.

- If you are practising this drill with other people, make sure you are well spaced out along the edge of the pool so you don't hit each other with the paddles!

After practising this poolside drill, it is time to practise this on the water.

Set up in boat:

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Grip the paddle as shown in the photo

- Lean forward as far as you are comfortable
- Left hand is just touching the neck of the paddle blade

- Right hand is just off the center of the paddle shaft
- Right wrist is "cocked".
- Left hand is held against the side of the boat level with your hips.
- Both elbows are bent

We now need to combine the above paddle movements with the hip flicks we practised earlier. The key to learning this is to practise Movements 1 to 3 but this time whilst up side down in a boat with the help of an instructor.

Set up in the rolling position and capsize towards the instructor.

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Perform movement 1 with the help of the instructor, then allow the instructor to guide the paddle out to 90 degrees, performing Movement 2.

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Once the paddle is at 90 degrees to the boat, the paddler should then pull down on the paddle and hip flick at the same time. The above photo shows Movement 3.

The paddler must relax and let the instructor guide the paddle through movements 1 and 2. The idea is that when learning to roll this exercise can be repeated over and over again so we can develop a feel for what to do with the paddle.

- It is crucial at this stage to emphasize again that the order of events is "boat first, then body, then head".
- It is also crucial that the left forearm remains in contact with the side of the boat, since we are only using this arm as a pivot point.

Once the paddler is successfully rolling with the instructor guiding the paddle, and demonstrating good technique, they should be asked to perform movement 1 unaided.

The instructor then takes hold of the end of the paddle and guides it out to 90 degrees. The paddler then repeats the pull down and hip flick. The instructor should encourage the paddler to repeat this exercise but gradually have less and less input until the paddler is rolling successfully!

Photo 16

Further progressions:

Once you are comfortable performing the above roll using an extended hand position, switch to the normal paddle grip position on the paddle shaft and practise rolling again.

A further progression you should aim for is to eliminate the pull down phase of the roll and come up just on the sculling motion and hip flick. This requires a good awareness of the paddle position as it travels from the front of the boat out in an arc towards the rear of the boat.

If we sculled the paddle from the front of the boat right to the rear of the boat we would be covering a 180-degree arc. If we break this arc down into three equal sections of 60 degrees, we would get the most leverage off the paddle as it travels through the second 60-degree section.

Drawing 1. mid 60 deg. Position.

As we progress through our sweep stroke we load the paddle gently at first and apply more power as we pass into the second 60-degree phase.

The beauty of this method is that if we are rolling in really turbulent water, we can literally just continue sculling the boat up until we have fully recovered.

Finally I'd just like to cover the most common problems people have when learning to roll.

The first point is really psychological. Unless we do trampolining or aerobatics it is unlikely that we have ever been asked to learn a new skill whilst hanging upside-down! It can be very confusing trying to work out what is happening in this position, which is why we try to encourage paddlers to roll to learn by numbers (i.e. movements 1,2 and 3). Paddlers who try to "think under water" in the early stages of rolling usually get disorientated. We therefore strongly recommend developing rolling motor skills by feel. Don't worry though, once you are an accomplished roller you will develop an excellent sense of awareness whilst up side-down!

The second key thing to remember is that, as we said at the beginning of this article, good rolling needs good technique so it is really important to focus on getting the boat up first, followed by the body, followed by the head.

Another area where paddlers can struggle is maintaining the paddle blade angle whilst sweeping it away from the front of the boat. If you practise doing sculling supports with the boat just slightly off balance, you will notice the "cocked wrist" position you need to adopt. Since eskimo rolling is literally sculling the boat upright combined with a hip flick we need to adopt the same wrist position. When learning to roll many paddlers unintentionally relax this wrist position and end up trying to roll on the edge of the paddle rather than the drive face. Working on maintaining this wrist position is crucial to successful rolling.

We need to remember that our passive arm, which if we learning to roll as a right handed paddler, is our left arm, needs to remain in contact with the side of the boat at all times. Remember we are only using this arm as a pivot.

We recommend learning to roll on one side well first. When you can do this, start developing you roll on the opposite side. This article has been written from a right handers perspective simply because most paddlers are right handed. If you are left handed, (as I am), you may prefer to learn to roll leading with your left hand. Your instructor should be able to accommodate you.

The rolls we have described above give good protection to the body and face whilst paddling white water. Rolling can be adapted so we come up on the back deck not the front deck. Because most of us are more flexible leaning back in a kayak rather than forwards this has the advantage of lowering our center of gravity and making the roll a little easier. However, doing this makes us more exposed to hitting under water objects (rocks!), so we would advise only rolling from the back deck where you know the water or hole you are playing in is deep enough.

Many thanks to Nick Wodgate who has helped coach on our rolling courses over many years and Andrew Glock for his technical IT support.

Finally to protect our shoulders, we need to make sure that we always roll with a bent elbows and never let our upper arm and forearm extend behind our shoulder.

Good luck,

Grant Scamell. BCU Level 5 Coach