



# Cinderella

## Paddling is the forgotten sister of adventure racing

**PADDLING IS THE CINDERELLA discipline of adventure racing, one that is undeservedly neglected and forced into an obscure existence - until a big race looms - when it achieves sudden and urgent recognition.**

In the few weeks that precede the event, city dams are frequented by twitchy adventure racers. Paddling is usually, for most, a 'hope for the best' affair.

Teams may paddle on dams, lakes, rivers, seas and canals in or on craft of all shapes and sizes. Double racing kayaks, stable sea kayaks, surfskis, sit-on-top plastics, dug-out canoes, bamboo rafts, traditional boats and

inflatable rafts (two-man or bigger) have all featured in races. Indeed, events could include more than one type of paddling setup according to its location and the season.

### Home cooking vs take-away

Compared to running, which you can do from your doorstep, paddling is like making pasta from scratch. It is an inconvenient discipline until you're kitted with a PFD (personal flotation device), paddle and boat (or have a friend with a boat). Then there's the issue of living within a reasonable distance from a dam and being able to transport the boat to the dam or to store it there. These issues can be easily resolved by a visit to a kayak shop and phone calls to friends.

The author is currently preparing her third novice team for the annual Abu Dhabi Adventure Challenge in December, which has a 120km sea kayaking stage, split over one and a half days. This stage was undoubtedly the most difficult that I, and each of my previous six teammates in our 2008 and 2009 teams, had ever undertaken. Although no amount of paddling around Emmarentia Dam or Germiston Lake can prepare you for 10 hours non-stop in a 40kg sea kayak (excluding gear) on the sea, efficient technique – taught by a paddling coach - and months of regular training make the stage doable – with sections that are even enjoyable.

Locally, a 120km sea kayaking stage would be rare (and dangerous), but 30-60km on a river is very possible, especially in a race longer than 24 hours. Technical paddling down rivers with big rapids is usually excluded from local adventure races because so few participants are graded or have the experience. This limits organisers to safe sections with few exciting elements.

*"When it comes to river paddling nothing beats experience. Get out there and trip a river from A to B, or better, join one of the many races put on the canoeing calendar by Canoeing South Africa and its affiliates,"* says Swazi Xtreme organiser, Darron Raw, a very experienced river paddler.

## PUT IN THE TIME

Merrell Adventure Addicts' captain GRAHAM 'Tweet' BIRD comes from an elite river paddling background and has transferred this strength to his AR racing.

"Adventure racers tend to neglect this discipline because it is difficult to just get out and do it. People are also not proficient and are not prepared to put in the time to get proficient. The more you do it, the easier it will get. So if you dedicate two to three months to improve your paddling with three to five paddling sessions a week, your paddling would increase rapidly compared to if you did it once a week.

So put in the time for a few months and then when you have gained the proficiency, you can slip back to once a week and maintain the proficiency. Race organisers tend to look at us by making plastic boats the norm, which negates the advantage proficient paddlers have, as the plastic boats have one speed.

If organisers started allowing people to bring their own boats, there would be a huge time difference between those who can paddle proficiently and those that can't. Get outside and paddle."

Plastic two-man sit-on-tops, like those provided by Kinetic for their races – including the 500km Expedition Challenge scheduled for 7-15 May 2011, are suitable for first timers. But, to get and keep them moving at pace and pointing in the right direction takes a little experience.

Regular training, on flat water, will see you prepared and proficient to handle most paddling disciplines. As for the rest? Hope for the best.

### Get a coach

Paddling is a technical discipline, so learn a correct and efficient technique from the start. If you're self-taught and have been paddling for a while, get a coach to iron out your bad habits. This makes a big difference when you're paddling long distances.


Buy your own paddle and PFD. These are personal items, just like running shoes and a backpack. You can borrow from a friend, but ultimately you'll need to buy; just do it.

Borrow a single or hop in a double until you can get your own boat; it helps to paddle for a bit to know what to buy. And get roof racks so that transporting the boat is not a limitation.

Start with a slow and stable boat to focus on technique and building strength. Then progress to quicker (less stable) boats as you improve. A boat above your ability will cultivate poor technique and posture.

Designate one session a week to paddling and stick to it. Time trials are open to everyone and you don't have to complete it, you can paddle a couple of laps until you're up to the full distance. These sessions are social and well attended, especially in summer and before big river races like Dusi and Fish. Two sessions a week would be better... but one is better than none.

Training in a K2 when you will be in a raft in Brazil may seem irrelevant. Not so. The point of regular paddling is to develop technique (use your back, not your arms), upper body strength and water awareness.

Complete flat water and river proficiency tests through a local canoe club or your Provincial body (contact the safety officer). Aside from learning fundamental safety basics, you'll get confirmation of your proficiency. 

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