

# A skills update

By Peter Townend

## I had the good fortune to attend a recent Sea Kayaking Level 2 Instructors assessment run by NZOIA.

Three days at Great Barrier Island, what a great experience. There is a huge amount of knowledge and skills that are available to the kayaking sector these days. We stayed at the OPC base and the team there are the people to talk to about paddling on the island. They have the infrastructure and team to help set up your Great Barrier Island experience.

This is only my second time on the island and I am going back. "Old NZ" says it all for me. Friendly people, stunning scenery, great camping and accommodation and wilderness and yet more wilderness to explore.

Here are a couple of the new ideas I picked up from the three days.

The first of these is a change in how we do the sweep stroke. The sweep stroke is used to turn the kayak and if used well needs minimal effort. The change recommended is to keep the top hand at shoulder level rather than dropping it down to the side of the kayak. This has the effect of allowing more power through body rotation getting to the paddle blade. Testing this however made little difference to how effectively we could turn the kayak, but made for a stronger body position and protected the muscles and joints more. It also has the added advantage of linking quickly to the stern/ rudder draw which is superior in controlling the kayak on a wave over the old stern rudder.

The following are some coaching points for these two strokes.

### Sweep strokes - for turning the kayak

1. Box position: this refers to the hand position when holding the paddle and that if you rest the paddle shaft on your head, your arms should be in a rectangular box shape.

2. Paddle blade enters by your toes.



Gavin Palmer shows us the Sweep stroke.

3. Sweep the paddle blade in a half circle away from the kayak's bow around towards the stern.

4. Trunk rotation: this is where all the power comes from, the body not the arms.

5. Blade totally immersed, just below the water surface

6. Head facing forward.

7. Rail kayak to assist turning when the kayak is moving. (See note)

8. Top hand keeps at shoulder height. Both hands end on the same side of boat

9. Bottom arm keeps bent holding the box shape.

Note. A kayak has three turning surfaces that can help you turn. These are the rocker which is the amount of banana along the keel of the kayak. The others are the two sides, known as the rails.

Sit your kayak on a flat surface, the rocker will show as gaps between the ground and kayak at either end. It allows the kayak to seesaw with the bow and stern rocking up and down as you push them. Now put your kayak on its side and you will see that the kayak will have a far greater curve with a much more pronounced banana shape to the sides/rails.

So, when you are moving in your kayak and you wish to turn, you can use the shape of the kayak to help your sweep stroke. This is achieved through applying a sweep stroke to start turning you in the direction you wish to travel and at the same time leaning/railing your kayak. The shape of your kayak helps the turn.

You are probably thinking well that's great, but which way do I lean/rail?

The slightly mystifying answer is it will work either way. If you want to turn fast then lean on the sweep stroke and this will put the side/rail which has the most pronounced banana shape into the water. This will turn the kayak aggressively; stability is sacrificed so a high level of kayak control and skill is required. Leaning/railing the other way uses the rocker as the turning surface, which is softer and more stable but turns you a lot slower.

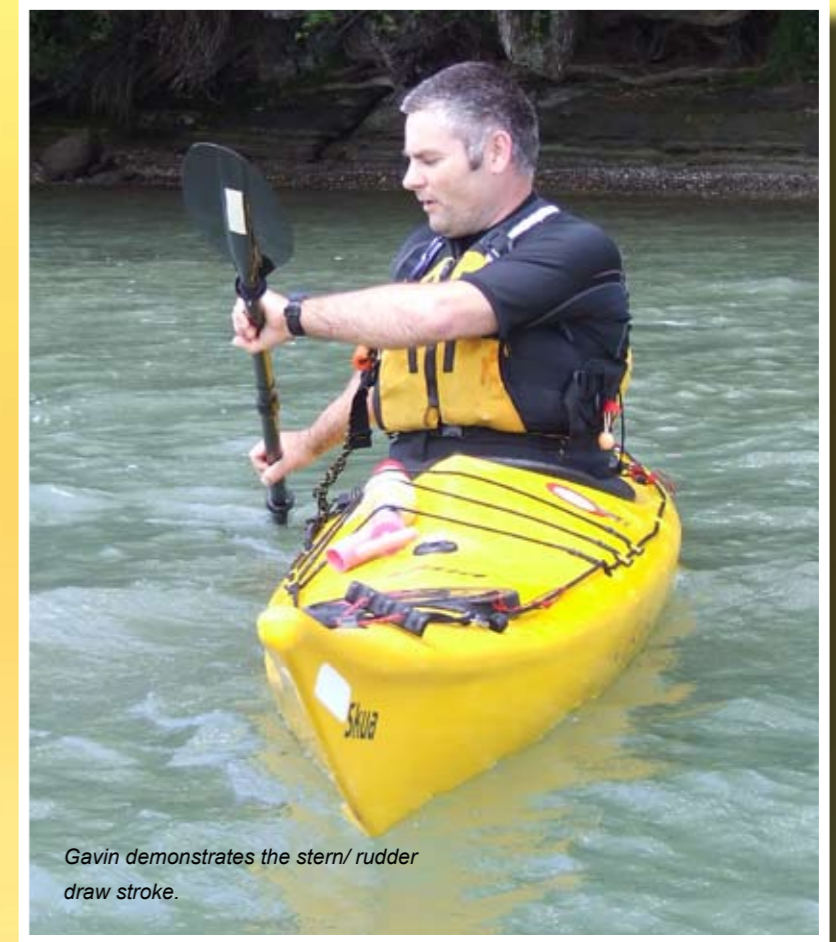
This technique is known by many different names including, carving or hip steering. It is sometimes referred to as railing or leaning. However those terms are used when crossing eddy lines on moving water and refers to lifting one side of the kayak to allow water in an eddy to flow under the hull. They are also used in surfing when your kayak broaches on a wave and you need to rail or lean your kayak so you slide down the wave towards the beach allowing the water to pass under your kayak. So leaning or railing is the skill of tilting your kayak on its side and carving and hip steering uses railing and sweep strokes combined to turn a kayak.

Lastly, it is important to forget mum and dad's stern warnings about tilting and balancing chairs on two side legs, as this is the absolute correct body position you require when railing your kayak. Your head has to be always on top to balance the rail.

### Stern/ rudder draw stroke - for controlling the kayak on a wave

1. Box position holding the paddle. (as before).
2. Blade placed behind the hip parallel to the kayak, vertical and totally immersed.
3. Forearm forward and across in front of shoulders. Top hand at shoulder height, lower hand controls the blade.
4. Pull blade towards kayak (draw), push away from kayak to steer.
5. Rotate body to supply the power and reduce stress on shoulder joint and muscles.
6. Blade is never dry.
7. Both hands across centre line of boat.
8. Bottom arm keeps bent holding the box shape.
9. To slow the kayak down, twist the paddle in the water. This will increase drag and slow you down.

It is fun to develop these skills and it makes the kayaker increasingly more skillful and confident in turning the kayak. In rough conditions and surf the paddler becomes much more in tune with their kayak.



Gavin demonstrates the stern/ rudder draw stroke.




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