

the Outrigger

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An Outrigger Guide to Steering Outrigger Canoes

By Marilyn Kali

If you've ever watched an outrigger canoe gliding gracefully through the water, you've probably marveled at the synchronization of the experienced crew, paddles dipping effortlessly into the water in unison.

On the other hand, if you've ever watched a canoe zigzag its way from point A to B, you've probably chuckled at the novice steersperson in the back of the boat.

The steersperson is the quarterback of every canoe, and as Outrigger begins competition this month in the Oahu Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association Regatta season, you'll have the opportunity to watch the Club's best, and its newest, and all types of steerspeople in between.

Board member Brant Ackerman, Coordinating Director for Athletics and Winged "0", has been steering Outrigger crews since he was 12-years old. He steered his first crew to a state title at the age of 13 and has won many state and Oahu championships since then. He is also a veteran of the Molokai-to-Oahu race, steering and paddling on 20 Molokai crews including the winning crews of 1975, 1977, 1983 and 1984 and more recently winning Masters crews.

"A good steersman can be the difference between winning and losing a race," Ackerman says. "The best

steersmen are the people who know how to read the wind and swell. Usually people who surf make good steersmen because they are tuned in to both the wind and swell.

"You can know all the technicalities of steering, but not be a good quarterback, so it's important to a crew to find a steersman who is both.

"An effective steersman knows what to say, how to say it, when to say it and how often," Ackerman says. "If you're a chatterbox, no one will listen.

"You have to know what your crew is capable of and then call your moves judiciously. You can't yell 'Power 10' after every change."

Being a good steersperson, Brant says, involves three things:

- **Technical Skills**—Understanding the wind and swell, getting a good start, and knowing how to maneuver upwind, downwind and crosswind.
- **Psychological Skills**—Knowing how to motivate and get the best out of your crew.
- **Analytical Skills**—Figuring out before the race even begins, how you're going to execute the start, the straightaway, the turn, and the finish.

"The steersperson has to know how to position the canoe to compensate for all conditions," he adds.

The steersperson actually combines three different functions:

- **Paddling or J Stroking**—The

Learning the Terms

Just like any other specialty, steering has its own terminology:

UNE

Steer or turn from front of the canoe. Example: Seat number 1 unes (puts paddle in the water) and steers the nose of the canoe around the turn.

BACKWATER

Paddle in reverse.

WINDOFF

Stop paddling.

POKE

Placing blade fully in water to make a full correction.

HALF POKE

Placing blade half way down in water to make a minor correction.

J STROKE

A cross between steering and paddling. Steersman paddles to side, pulling back of paddle toward boat. Changes direction of stern of canoe.

steersman should ideally paddle at least half of the time. Otherwise, he/she is dead weight in the boat.

- **Poking or Steering**—Keep corrections small and frequent. Bigger corrections slow the boat down.
- **Anticipating**—Pay attention to what's happening in the race and be prepared to act. As above, small corrections are better than big corrections.

The way the steersperson places the blade in the water is critical to how well the canoe can stay on course.

"The steersperson should always keep his/her forearm flat on the gunnel when they are poking. This will give them better control and will secure the blade to the side of the boat," Brant said.

"The front of the blade should be angled toward the hull when you put it into the water. As you pull through on

Proper Position for Paddle Entry



Right



Wrong

your stroke, the pressure of the water forces the blade toward the hull.

"The greater the angle, the greater the correction will be. The greater the depth, the greater the adjustment. When you make a small adjustment, you should go in shallow. A medium adjustment, put the blade in halfway, and a full adjustment, go in all the way and increase the angle," he adds.

"However, the best way to steer, is to make small, frequent corrections. To do this, you have to have good anticipation. Make the correction before you need to, rather than after. This takes experience but if you work at it, you'll learn.

"Most steerspersons feel the pressure from their crew to paddle, and they wind up paddling too much," Brant said. "When the steersperson paddles too much, the canoe stands to lose more than it gains."

Ackerman says that the steersperson shouldn't ever let the boat veer more than 10 degrees off course without a correction. Always have a reference point or landmark to aim for.

Brant has taught many steering clinics at the Club and taught many novices.

"The best way to teach a new steersperson is to mount a motor on the back of a canoe. With the motor, you can go faster and the steersperson can feel the sensation of the blade in the water.

"They get the feel of the paddle biting and know what to expect. It's a great way to teach turns, and you don't burn out a crew."

Making a Correction

The greater the angle of the blade, the greater the correction. However, the greater the angle, the more the boat will slow down. Keep corrections small and frequent. Make the correction half the distance you need to get back to center point. The boat will go the rest of the distance on momentum. As the boat hits the center point, stab on the opposite side to stop the momentum.



Getting the blade into correct position.



Initiating the correction.



Fortunately, kids learning to steer don't have to make turns on the race course until they reach the Boys 16 or Girls 18 races, and most have had time to learn by then. For those who are trying to learn to turn, Brant has these tips for turning.

"Use the front tip of the ama, the buoy and your own eyesight as key points. During a race, the three points form a natural curve. As you get closer to the buoy, the three points will line up. When they're all lined up, that's when to start the turn. If you start too soon, you'll be too low (close to the buoy), and if you start too late, you'll be too high (far away)," Brant explains.

"You'll also need to correct for the wind and ocean conditions, and the boat next to you."

On the following pages, Brant has tips for Outrigger steerspersons, but reminds all paddlers that the first three strokes of a race are the most important. "A race can be won or lost on the first

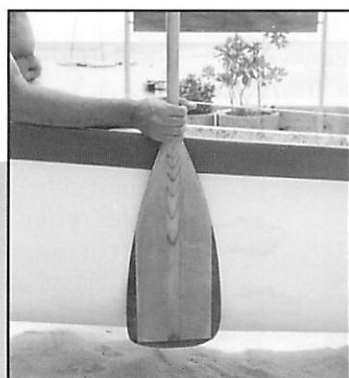
three strokes, and the steersperson should be paddling."

Outrigger opens the season with the Clem Paiana Regatta at Keahi Lagoon on Sunday, June 5. For steerspersons, the true test will be the Kamehameha Day Regatta at Kailua Beach Park the following week, June 12.

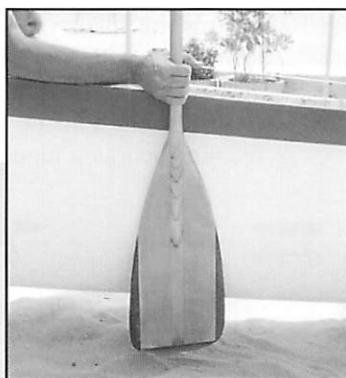
"Kailua is the most difficult race for even the most experienced steerspersons because of the wind and ocean conditions, especially the cross angles and cross swells. That's why it's so important for all steerspersons to listen to the head coach before the race so they'll know what to do."

If you don't know what to do with your Sundays, join the 200+ Outrigger paddlers at various beaches around the island during June. And don't forget to join us on the 4th of July at the traditional Walter J. Macfarlane Regatta at Waikiki Beach. See you there! 🍹

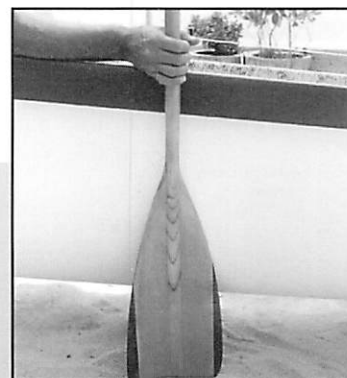
Proper Paddle Depth for Poking



Quarter Poke
Grasp shaft at neck of blade



Half Poke
Grasp shaft 2"-3" above neck of blade



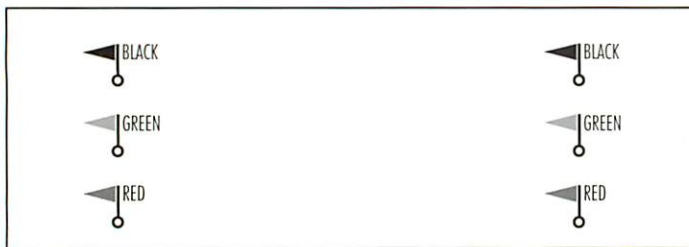
Full Poke
Grasp shaft 5"-6" above neck of blade

Canoe Racing Strategies for Steerspersons

By Brant Ackerman

Flags

Before your race, count the lanes at both ends of the course to make sure the same color flag is at both ends. Do this about one or two races before yours, as the flag positions may change just before your race or the colors may change at one or both ends.



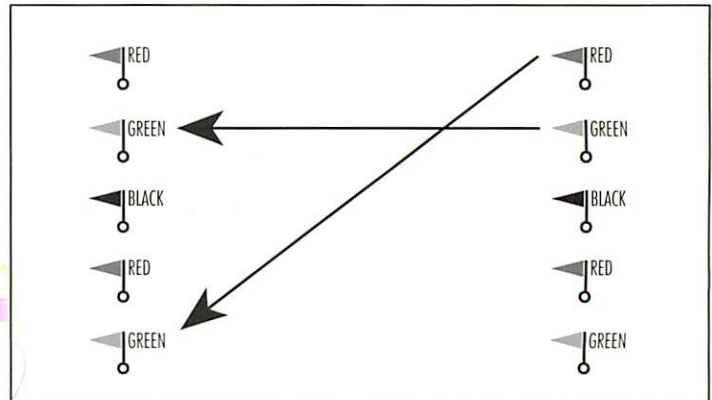
Not only should you know the color of your flag, but also the color of the flags on both sides of you. This is in case you should lose sight of your flag during the race or if your flag should break loose. This can and does happen. If it does, just go between the two flags.

Sometimes just the flag stem breaks and a small orange buoy is left. Other times the whole flag and buoy break lose. In either case, knowing the color of the flags on each side can keep you on course. If you have to make a turn, turn even with the other flags.

Adjacent Crews

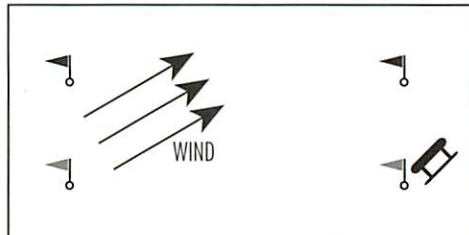
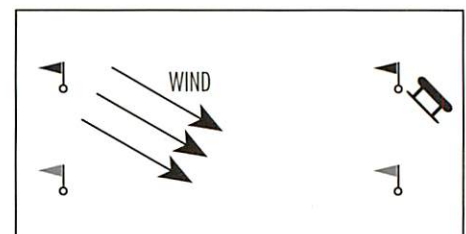
Find out what crews are next to you on each side and also the color of their boats. They can be of help if you lose sight of your flag by staying between them. However, do not depend solely on them, because they may not know where they are going.

Do not let them lead you off course either. This situation happens frequently when there are two lanes with the same color and the other canoe may be heading in the wrong direction.



Lining Up

When lining up for the start of the race, look at which way the wind is blowing. Face the bow of the canoe directly into the wind at the closest point to the flag. This will keep the canoe from drifting and will avoid having to turn the canoe around many times.



Use your stroke (Seat No. 1) as much as possible to keep the nose pointed into the wind. There is nothing worse than to be out of position at

the start. Inform your stroke before you paddle out what the job includes.

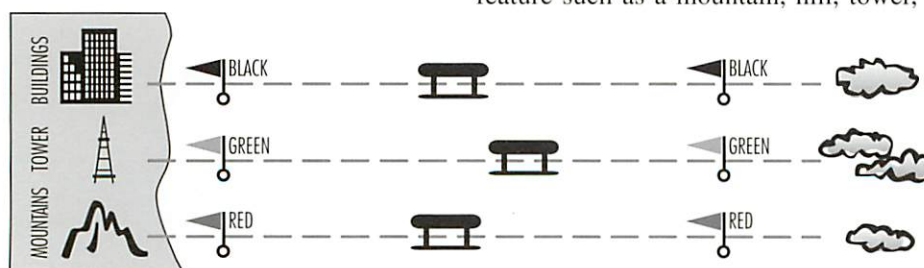
Landmarks

When you are paddling out to your lane, paddle down to the center of your course and look both forward and backward. Try to find a landmark which is in line with your

lane. If you lose sight of your flag during the race, you can locate your landmark which will keep you on course until you sight your flag again. A landmark can be any prominent feature such as a mountain, hill, tower,

building, or just about anything that you can easily see.

If there is no landmark, only open ocean, it is helpful to find a cloud formation just above your flag. Since cloud formations change constantly during the race, when you see your flag just look up occasionally and find the cloud formation above. This formation will generally stay the same for a couple of minutes which is time enough to get a bearing until you can pick up your flag again.





Crew Instructions

Just before the start of a race there is so much confusion and excitement that it is vital for the crew to listen to you. Make this perfectly clear before the race. They should know that whatever you say goes. If you say paddle ahead, backwater, or wind off, they should do it instantly at your command and not just sit there. A split second can make a big difference.

The steersman should be the only person talking and everyone else should be listening. During the race, the crew should keep their eyes straight forward. The steersman should not yell just to yell, but should do constructive yelling. Emphasize such things as breathing, reaching and timing, etc.

When yelling at the crew, it is best to yell encouragement instead of insults. A boat will move much faster when the crew is "stoked".

For best results yell at each individual separately, either by name or seat number. That way the individual will listen to you when you speak directly to him/her. The best time to yell is right after a change. That way you are not going to interfere with the person calling the changes.

When approaching the finish line, if you are neck and neck with another boat and about 50 yards from the finish line, inform No. 2 "do not change." This can gain a few extra feet which can and has won many a race, especially short races.

The Start

This is the most important part of the race. After the previous race has ended, the official boat will raise a green flag meaning the race had no violations. A red flag means a violation has occurred and there may be a delay. There is five minutes before the start of the next race at which time a yellow flag will be raised during the five minute period.

Twenty seconds prior to the start, the yellow flag will start waving. The race can start anytime within the 20 second period. The starter will raise the red flag. Within 1-3 seconds the starter will drop the red flag and raise the green flag signaling the start.

You may hit or run over your starting flag but not the finish flag. Watch the starter for a few races (the more the better). The starter's starting habits are usually consistent and predictable. You can anticipate the starting procedure and be positioned to get a jump at the start.

Your entire crew must each know what is expected from their seat. Number one and two will help to keep the front of the canoe near your starting flag. Three and four will help move forward or reverse. Five will assist six with the stern positioning.

The entire crew must all be anticipating the start—not just the steersperson. Inform the crew of the starter's habits prior to going out on the course. It is critical for all six paddlers to hit the first stroke precisely together. It is the key difference between a good start and a great start.

Overlapping

A dangerous situation arises when another canoe crosses over into your lane. If that canoe hits you, it may get disqualified and you may just lose the race. Avoid a collision at any cost.

If you think your crew can speed up, try to steer away slightly and pick it up. If you can't pull away, slow the crew down and let the other canoe pass in front. You may lose a boat length, but if they hit you, you could lose 8 or 10 boat lengths.

You should constantly watch the other boats and try to see this situation coming before it happens so you can avoid it. Sometimes you can yell to their steersman, but do not count on him/her listening to you.

Turning

Making a good turn can gain your canoe two or three boat lengths on the other canoes. Every steersman has his/her own method for turning. Some like a close approach and a wide exit. Others like a wide approach and close exit, or still others a fairly wide approach and fairly wide exit.

Whichever method used, the most important thing is for the boat to slow down as little as possible.

When you are about 75 yards from the turn, inform No. 2 that you are approaching the turn. No. 2 is responsible for making sure that he/she is on the left side and No. 1 is on the right side going into the turn. This saves time and speed and No. 1 is already on the side he/she is going to "une" on.

The crew should pick it up before the turn to build up momentum, slow it down around the turn, applying the power and picking it up again coming out of the turn. It is best not to make a real tight turn because the boat will slow down too much, and it will overwork the crew.

As far as the flag goes, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, so it is best to get as close to the flag as possible without hitting it. When turning around the flag, you must correct for the wind and current which can move you into or away from the flag, depending on which way you are heading.

You must make the necessary adjustments depending on how strong the wind and current are. If you are running with the current and wind, then a tight turn is possible, but if you are paddling against the wind, give extra room at the flag for the wind will blow you into your flag.

Overlapping on a Turn

For those of you who have to turn. If a canoe on your left is behind you, an overlap can occur at the turn. This can develop into a collision and possible disqualification, or a loss of boat lengths correcting to avoid them.

If a boat on your left is pretty far behind and if when you will be coming out of your turn they will be coming in, make your own turn a wide approach so as to come out close to your flag thus avoiding an overlap. ♣