

Kayaks and Canoes for Freshwater Fishing Part IV

A long time ago I learned to think of water as a solid when paddling. You put your paddle into the solid then pull your boat to it. This enhances your paddle placement and helps position your body properly for the paddle stroke.

We discussed paddles in the last article so let's start the section on paddle strokes with a couple of steps in properly holding a paddle.

1. The right side up.

Kayak: Most modern kayak paddle blades are asymmetrical meaning that the top of the blade is different than the bottom of the blade. The longer or more horizontal side of the paddle is the top and will be up while you're paddling and the more curved and often wider bottom side is down. You also have the face of the blade and the back of the blade. In most paddles the face of the blade will have writing on it and is curved slightly inwards, (concave). The back of the blade is usually curved slightly outward. It's normally pretty easy to tell the face from the back.

Canoe: Canoe paddle blades are normally symmetrical in shape. A wider squared off blade will give you more power but for fishing there's nothing wrong with a traditional rounded blade.

2. Hand placement.

Kayak: Most kayak paddles are two piece and we established in the last article that for most anglers it's better to keep the blades in a straight line which means that, (if there is a choice), you should use the center hole where the two parts join. Put the center of that joint on top of your head and grab the paddle shaft with your arms 90 degrees to the shaft. The large knuckles of your hands should be in line with the paddle blades. You will have a "control hand" and an "off hand". If you are right handed the control hand will normally be your right and vice versa. The control hand is holding the paddle shaft firmly, but not white knuckled, during the paddle strokes. The shaft is allowed to rotate in the off hand. The control-off hand is always the same no matter which side of the kayak you are paddling on and puts less strain on your wrists.

Canoe: Your top hand, (grip hand), is your control hand on a canoe paddle and will determine the angle of the blade in the water. Your bottom hand, (shaft hand), is your off hand and the shaft should be able to rotate slightly. As in a kayak paddle, when holding the paddle over your head, your arms should be at right angles. The shaft hand should be near or up the shaft from where the blade and shaft meet. I see a lot of youngsters and new canoe paddlers holding the shaft and not the grip with their top hand. Break this habit! You can't develop any power this way and it's hard on your wrists.

Paddle Strokes

Mastering the 5 basic strokes is virtually all you'll need for 99 percent of your fishing trips. All other strokes are really only variations on these. After some practice you'll find yourself doing your own variations. The five are: The Forward Stroke and Reverse stroke; The Forward Sweep and Reverse Sweep (turns the boat) and the Draw Stroke (moves the boat sideways). Each stroke also has three parts: The catch, (when the paddle goes in the water), the power (moving the boat through the water), and the recovery, (removing the paddle from the water).

There is not much difference between kayaks and canoe in the mechanics of the basic paddle strokes. We'll talk about each of the basic strokes in kayaks then how it is different in a canoe. I'll refer a lot to the upper and lower hands. That's pretty self explanatory. The lower hand is the same side you're taking the paddle stroke on.

The Forward Stroke: You're sitting up straight in your kayak with your feet on the foot supports and knees slightly bent. Having good leg support gives you more leverage. In all paddle strokes we're going to let the large muscles of our torso do the majority of the work. **The Catch:** Rotate at the waist and reach forward with your paddle, towards your feet, as far as you can without bending forward. Put the paddle blade fully in the water. Your upper hand will be about chin high at this point. **The Power:** Unwind your torso while you bring the paddle blade through the water. Keep the blade in the water through the stroke. **The Recovery:** When the paddle blade is at your hip, drop your upper hand bringing the blade out of the water. If you draw your blade any further back it has a tendency to bury the front of the boat, slowing you down.

You also don't want to bounce during the stroke; this will also slow you down. Aim for a smooth stroke on both sides. Don't try to overpower your boat. A forward stroke on one side will turn the kayak towards the opposite side. How much it turns is dependent upon how well your boat tracks. Balance your strokes so that the kayak travels as straight as possible. If your boat is equipped with a rudder you should keep your strokes even and apply as little rudder correction as needed. In a tandem kayak the stern, (back), paddler should try to match their strokes to the bow paddler so that they're both paddling on the same side at the same time. Because they can see the entire boat, the stern paddler is in a better position to make course corrections.

The **forward stroke in a canoe** is not much different. The paddle should be closer to the side of the canoe during the stroke and straighter up and down. The paddler in the stern may also need to add some correction to their stroke to keep the canoe going straight. To do this turn your blade at the end of the stroke so that it's straight up and down and push outward slightly with your lower hand. This is called a "J" stroke because, if done correctly, your paddle blade will form the letter J in the water. Don't use any more correction than is needed to keep the canoe straight. This is an effective stroke for solo canoe paddling as well. In a canoe the paddlers do not paddle on the same side at the same time as this can unbalance the canoe. If you switch sides the stern paddler should tell, (maybe ask if it's your spouse), the bow paddler to also switch. If the bow paddler switches the stern should also switch sides.

The Reverse Stroke: Obviously the opposite of the forward stroke, this stroke is also your boat's brake. For this stroke you are using the back side of the blade and do not rotate the paddle. The control hand should stay in the same place for all strokes! **The Catch:** Your upper hand is at about chin height. Rotate your torso and put the paddle blade in the water just back of your hips. **The Power:** While unwinding your torso, draw the blade towards your feet. **The Recovery:** Just as the blade reaches your feet, slice it out of the water. The **reverse stroke in a canoe** starts with the paddle just back of your hip and is pushed forward in front of you. At the end of the stroke the stern or solo paddler may need to push the paddle blade outward slightly to keep the canoe backing straight.

The Sweep Stroke: This is your turning stroke. A sweep stroke on the right side will turn the kayak to the left and vice versa. If your kayak tracks well it will probably be harder to turn and may take two or more sweep strokes on the same side to turn the desired distance. Sweep strokes work either standing

still or while moving. **The Catch:** Twist at your waste and reach forward with the paddle blade, towards your feet and fully immerse the blade. **The Power:** “Sweep” outward like you’re using a broom to get that far bit of mess under your fish cleaning station. Your low hand, or hand closest to the paddle blade, will reach out over the water during the stroke while your top hand will be low about level with your stomach. While you’re learning, keeping your eyes on your paddle blade in the water will help your torso unwind for maximum strength in the stroke. You can also get additional leverage in your stroke by pushing with your leg on the same side. There is a tendency to lean outward during the sweep stroke. That’s not a good idea and will unbalance you. Remember what we said in Part III, “Keep Your Head in the Boat”! Do not lean your head out over the water. **The Recovery:** As you unwind your body, bring the paddle blade to almost the side of your kayak, or wherever is comfortable, and slice the blade out of the water. Be careful not to hit the side of your kayak as the paddle may want to slide underneath and unbalance you. In a tandem kayak the forward sweep is performed by the bow paddler while the stern paddler does a regular forward stroke on the same side. The bow paddler however will end the stroke opposite their hip making the sweep 90 degrees. The **forward sweep stroke in a canoe** is very similar for a solo canoeist in that the paddle travels in the same 180 degree sweep as in a kayak. However in a tandem canoe the bow paddler’s stroke starts at the bow of the boat and ends opposite the paddlers hips, or 90 degrees, like in a tandem kayak. The stern paddlers sweep begins opposite their hips and sweeps 90 degrees towards the stern of the boat. Since tandem canoeists paddle on opposite sides from each other, the stern paddler should not paddle when the bow paddler executes a sweep stroke. The stern paddler will use a forward sweep more as a correction stroke than for turning. It’s often best for the paddlers to switch side if an opposite side turn is called for. There are other tandem canoe strokes that solve this problem but are beyond the scope of this article. The mechanics of the stroke are very similar to how it’s done in a kayak except that since the grip hand is your control hand, your hand on the shaft can choke up a little for a bit more reach. Don’t move it up too much however or you’ll lose leverage in your stroke. The grip hand will be low, around stomach level.

The Reverse Sweep: The mechanics of the stroke are essentially just a reverse of the forward sweep whether in a kayak or canoe. **The Catch:** The paddle goes in the water at the same point where you took the paddle out on the forward sweep. **The Power:** Your hands remain low and unwind your torso. Keep the blade submerged. **The Recovery:** Remove the blade at the entry point for the forward sweep. In either a tandem canoe or kayak, the boat can be spun quickly, when stationary, by either the bow or stern paddler doing a forward sweep at the same time the other paddler does a reverse sweep on the opposite side.

The Draw Stroke: This is a stroke to move the boat sideways and is done the same with a canoe or kayak. It’s done from a stationary position. A very useful stroke to bring your boat up parallel to a dock, the shore or another boat. **The Catch:** Reach out beside your hip with your low hand but be sure to “keep your head in the boat” and don’t lean out too far. As you reach out, twist your torso so that you’re facing your paddle blade. Your upper hand will be near or just below face level. Your paddle should be as vertical as possible. **The Power:** Remember that, as in all of your strokes, think of the water as a solid and bring your kayak to your paddle. With your blade submerged, draw the boat to it by pulling with your lower hand. Your top hand doesn’t move much but acts as the pivot point for the draw. **The Recovery:** Before your paddle blade hits the side of your boat, slice it out of the water. This

is important as your blade will want to slide under the boat if pulled too far and will unbalance you. Tandem canoe or kayak paddlers can spin a stationary boat very quickly with draw strokes on separate sides.

A variation of the draw stroke is called sculling and one of my favorite strokes to move laterally. The stroke has the same catch but the paddle is moved back and forth repeatedly only about a foot or two and stays a couple of feet away from your kayak. Flex your wrist as you move the paddle blade back and forth, similar to the motion you would use stirring a large kettle of apple butter. When you become more proficient at this stroke, lean on it! And be sure to keep that torso rotating. Done correctly it will support quite a bit of weight and can be used to help stabilize your boat. Practice this in warm, shallow water however until it becomes part of your paddle repertoire. Leaning out on your paddle in this manner is called a “high brace”. There is also a “Low brace” when you slap the top of the water with your flat paddle blade putting downward pressure on the blade. This is also a stabilizing move. When practicing the low brace, be careful not to let your blade sink. Applying the braces properly acts to widen your boat like an outrigger does. This can help keep you upright in larger waves. Practice these strokes until they become second nature, like practicing casting. They are not hard to learn or execute and will help move you through the water, (in the direction you want to go), efficiently. There are great videos online that illustrate these strokes as well as other online resources and excellent books available. If you can take a class with a qualified teacher, so much the better.

The braces are defensive moves but if you have room to maneuver and find yourself in wave conditions that are uncomfortable, probably over a foot or two, the best technique is to paddle into the waves at a slight angle. This will allow the best control and help minimize the water you will take in the boat. Try to avoid paddling “in the trough” where the waves are coming on your side. You will take on more water and run the risk of having a wave capsize you. If you use a brace to help stabilize you when taking a wave do it on the opposite side of where the waves are coming from. If you have to change direction try making your turn between the waves. Running downwind with the waves behind you can also be dangerous. Try to paddle straight downwind so that the waves don’t turn your boat sideways. When a wave picks up the back of your boat, paddle forward or at least keep your paddle in the water. You are more stable when your paddle is in the water. These wave strategies also pertain to power boat wake which can often be more challenging because the waves can come from different angles simultaneously.

Accessories for Fishing

Besides the safety gear we talked about in part three there are other accessories you can use to make your fishing more productive and fun. You can accessorize a kayak or canoe with almost any accessory you can use on bigger boats and most of those, now days, are designed especially for kayaks. Your local canoe and kayak dealer should have a good selection and there are numerous sources online as well. As all of us who fish from boats know, boat control is critical to our fishing success. We’ve talked about paddle strokes and you will find yourself using small variations of the strokes to position your boat but the other important control is to have an effective **anchoring system**. Small, collapsible anchors in either 1.5 lb or 3 lb weights are designed for canoes and kayaks and are well worth their modest cost. These anchors are often used with an anchor trolley system. An anchor trolley allows you to anchor off of your bow, stern, or even the side in low wind and waves. This gives you maximum flexibility when positioning your boat. The trolley system can be as simple as a continuous line running from bow to

stern with a ring tied in, to a more elaborate one that is permanently attached to your kayak. The anchor line goes through the ring and then you move the continuous line to place the anchoring point where needed. Be cautious when anchoring for underwater obstructions that can foul your anchor and also keep spare anchor line out of the way so that it doesn't entangle you in the event of a capsize. Be careful too of anchoring in rivers where there is noticeable current. When anchoring I usually give myself four to five times the depth of the water out in anchor line and even more on windy days. This is called your anchor "rode". Another good use for a trolley system is to position a stake-out pole. Stake-out poles are used extensively in saltwater flats fishing where the water is shallow but can be used just as effectively for shallow freshwater fishing. The pole is positioned through the ring in your trolley system. A third device that can be effective in our freshwater fishing is a "brush gripper" that can be clamped on to trees or other brush and with a line tied to your boat, is effective in holding your boat in place. Be cautious however in using these when there is a lot of wind or current. Because your hands are often busy in a kayak or canoe, at least one good **rod holder** is almost an essential piece of equipment. Scotty and Ram are the two biggest names in kayak and canoe rod holders and make excellent products but there are also manufacturers such as "Yak Attack" that have designed ingenious ways to attach rod holders and a whole array of other accessories from camera to cup holders. Rod holders are either the adjustable type that can be positioned at any angle or the fixed type that are stationary. Many times you'll see stationary holders built into kayaks. These are usually just behind the seat and angled slightly back. They work well but be careful with rods in those holders or the straight up and down holders that are often attached to the popular milk crates that anglers use in their kayaks and canoes. Many of the areas we fish have low trees and your rod tips can become tangled or break. I learned that lesson the hard way, in the early days, when I got blown under some trees and snapped the tip off of a \$200 rod! For the two holders directly behind my kayak seat I prefer to use the same fully adjustable Scotty holders that I use on the tracks in front of me. This allows me to have the spare rods in a lower position to avoid those trees and also to be able to use one or both, positioned to the side, for trolling. Trolling in a kayak can be very effective. When I'm casting a spot I'll sometimes run a drop shot rig from one of the aft rods and it is often productive as well. A good rod holder is also a secure parking place for your valuable tackle.

They make **rod leashes** that attach to your rod and your boat but I'm not a huge fan. Most rods sink so rod leashes can save you big \$\$\$ but they are also one more thing to get in the way in tight quarters. I recently found some rod floats that are made by the Blakemore Lure Company and look like they might be a good solution. Unlike rod leashes I will sometime use a **paddle leash** on a windy day but there again, I'm not a big fan for the same reason. I have installed a **paddle holder** on my kayak and when not across my lap the paddle is firmly secured in its holder. In my canoes I usually have a single and double blade paddle with me so I have a spare if needed.

Tackle organization: Just about any tackle organization system will work in your kayak or canoe but remember that you're in a small boat so the simpler and less cluttered, the better. I usually use a small tackle bag next to me and additional gear in a milk crate behind me. The proverbial milk crate is a handy way to organize not only your tackle but other gear as well. Besides extra lure boxes, I keep my emergency box in the milk crate. Attached to the crate are two tube type rod holders. I use bungee cords over the top of the crate so that the gear is accessible but will stay in place in case of an upset. Since I fish out of several different boats, I can easily move the crate from boat to boat. Whatever systems you use, be sure that they can be secured in your kayak or canoe.

If you are so inclined, most **fish finders** can be adapted for use in a kayak or canoe and there are accessories made by the major manufactures and kayak accessory companies to help you in that regard. Once again, because I fish out of several boats, I've opted for a portable Hummingbird system.

A few thoughts on **some differences in fishing from a canoe or kayak**: Most any rod/reel combination will work and there is no reason to go out and buy new gear but if you find some specific needs it's great to be able to order what you want. My pal, Paul Center at Angling Adventures and Custom Rods , can build anything you want and uses outstanding St. Croix blanks. He's made several for me and a couple specific to this type of fishing. I usually like rods of at least 6.6-7ft that I can reach around the end of my canoe or kayak. I don't want to go into a lot of technique specific information but I use both spinning and casting gear for the same purposes that I do in my big boat. If you're able to safely stand in your canoe or kayak, all techniques are open to you. If sitting, you will find that perfecting that side arm cast is helpful. Because your kayak or canoe allows you to go where the fish are, short, precision casts are more the rule than long casts. Be careful with your back cast however, if you have gear, trees or,(if tandem), have another person behind you. Even a fish of a couple pounds or less can move your small boat so be aware of that and if they dive under the boat it is usually better to swing your rod tip around the front of the boat and pick them up on that side. Landing a fish in a kayak or canoe can sometimes be awkward. Leave a rods length of line as you reel in and raising your rod to vertical. This will help swing the fish towards you. Because the fish is probably still in the water and very close to you, be careful of hooks, especially treble ones! Most fish are still pretty active at this point so when I'm fishing crankbaits or any exposed hook I use my "Fish Grips". "Fish Grips" are plastic, floating, grips that are great for landing toothy critters as well as those active fish with a mouth full of hooks. They are available in a number of stores or online. If you like to use a net, Frabill makes a folding net that is designed for kayaks and canoes and works very well.

There are many aspects of "**paddle craft**" fishing that we haven't explored but the information is readily available. If you're reading this, you already use the internet. Putting "kayak fishing" in your search engine will bring up thousands of links, videos and discussion groups. One of the most popular sites for freshwater kayak fishing is *Kayakbassfishing.com*. Chad Hoover is the guru of kayak bass fishing and heads up the site as well as hosting the *Kayak Bass Fishing* TV show on the World Fishing Network. The *KayakBassin TV* videos are also accessible from the site and a super source of excellent information. Chad is also the author of the book, *Kayak Bass Fishing*, published by the Heliconia Press. There are also other great resources and publications available out there, so check them out.

As we mentioned in Part I, **kayak fishing is the fastest growing segment of the angling sports**.

Experienced anglers and newbie's alike are taking to kayaks and canoes for the simplicity, economy and the ability to get to the fish where others can't. I hope that this series has helped you in making good decisions on which boat to get, the equipment you'll need and how to be efficient and safe on the water.

Are you ready? Load up that kayak or canoe, get your tackle and gear together and we'll see you on the water!

Drop me a line at the email below if you have any thoughts or questions about the articles.

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