

How to Create Your Own Freestyle Canoe Program



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A canoe can be many things, from an ecologically sensitive vehicle for exploring to an exciting recreational toy. It can also be a vehicle of self-exploration and communication. For more than a dozen years, groups of enthusiastic paddlers have practiced what is called Freestyle paddling, an art of single-bladed paddling that focuses on every nuance of boat handling, from kneeling position to balance and stroke form.

Freestyle paddlers paddle open boats on quietwater, solo or tandem--although some kayakers and whitewater enthusiasts are also discovering its joys. Although most Freestyle paddlers practice their art for fun on local ponds and lakes, a small but growing group use their skills to interpret pieces of music; that is, they paddle their canoes to music, interpreting both melodies and lyrics. They communicate through the motion of their boats and bodies. Ideally, these paddlers move their boats across the water in time to every subtle change in a song, much like figure skaters.

National competitions exist, but most followers demonstrate their art in exhibitions held in locations around the country. The American Canoe Association (ACA) recognizes Freestyle as a discipline and certifies Freestyle instructors, and instruction is available in the U.S., Canada, and Germany. Although most Freestyle paddlers never paddle a prepared program for an audience, an increasing number enjoy sharing their skill in an entertaining format. Following is a primer for those seeking to use their canoe in an organized exhibition or competition.

Music

Select music that is between two to five minutes long. Select music that is meaningful to you: music that evokes an emotional response. Also consider your audience's response to the music. Don't pick music that is too fast. Many interpretive paddlers start with a relatively slow song; after gaining more experience, they try faster rhythms. Working with faster music is tougher and requires more practice and precision. Working with an instrumental piece is easier than using a song with lyrics. An instrumental allows for a greater degree of adjustment (covering up mistakes) than does music with words--words usually require precision and timing that make it difficult to compensate for missed or poorly timed moves.

The Routine

The goal of an interpretive routine is to make the boat dance on the water--not to dance in the boat. To achieve this it is necessary to link specific maneuvers with particular points in the song. The blending of music, lyrics and boat movement yields interpretation--if blended appropriately. At its best, interpretation is communication between the paddler and the audience. A practical way of creating a program is to practice paddling to your selected music. Move the boat to the rhythm as you would move your body on the dance floor. Paddle to the music again and again. Soon you should start to detect variations in the music--either in tempo or in lyrics--that suggest a boat movement. At this point start to make notes. Write down moves that seem to go with the music. Note the point in the lyrics that a maneuver seems to fit. Also look for areas that might be just right for any special or mandatory moves you may wish to include in your routine. My technique is to determine a first and last move. In between I list special maneuvers that I want to include. From this point, I basically fill in the blanks to create a full routine.

Important considerations

When constructing a routine, consider the following:

1. Use the entire performance area. Avoid confining your program to a limited section of water.
2. Avoid acrobatics and paddle tricks that have little paddling application. They may look interesting, but they do not demonstrate paddling expertise.
3. Set up your turns so that the down rail faces the audience during the peak of the maneuver. Posts and cross posts can be executed with the high rail facing the viewers.

4. Demonstrate power as well as finesse. Show the audience that you are in control of your boat.
5. Utilize a variety of kneeling positions.
6. Include a variety of maneuvers. Work the boat from all four quadrants: forward, reverse, cross forward and cross reverse.
7. Posture is important. Your boat and your body combine to present a visual experience.
8. It's okay to smile--if it is appropriate to the music.
9. Remember: make the boat dance, don't just dance in the boat
10. Relax and have fun. Don't forget that you're paddling a canoe, not negotiating world peace.

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