

STEERING A DRAGON BOAT

The following is an overview of the techniques involved in steering a dragon boat. The techniques are basic but should allow the new steersperson to get a start at the helm. There are many factors involved in this skill. Major influences are the quality of the water, the number of pleasure crafts on the river, and the skill level of your crew. As a new steersperson, there should always be an experienced person in the boat until you have gained confidence and experience.

Safety:

The steersperson is responsible for safety in the boat.

- Note conditions for restrictions. This information is easily found on the Paddlefish website: http://pittsburghpaddlefish.org/?page_id=233. You should be familiar with the safety matrix for paddling.
- Become familiar with buoys and bridge safety by watching this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0eNklweT4o&feature=youtu.be#t=37.380354>

TIP: Starboard is right and Port is left (port and left both have 4 letters)

- Watch the TRRA safely video on our website:
http://pittsburghpaddlefish.org/?page_id=233
- Carry a cell phone in a waterproof pouch
- Count your crew. Have your crew make note of those around him/her
- Proper use of PFDs depending on water/weather
- Do you need running lights?
- Balance the boat. You can make up for a slight imbalance by changing your weight distribution on the steering platform. TIP: a balanced boat is key to a smooth, safe run.
- Issue commands properly: clear and concise. For instance: “DRAW left DRAW”

- Your crew is your engine. Practice boat commands: Paddles up; Go or take it away; Let it run; Hold the boat; Hold hard; Paddles on the water or Brace the boat; Back paddle.

Basic Principles of Steering:

1. Stance: Usually one foot is placed ahead of the other with feet shoulder width apart to give stability both fore and aft and side to side. Knees should be slightly bent and flexible, back straight, shoulders square. Place your feet in a comfortable standing position that will allow you to have good balance. The left hand should be positioned on the shaft of the oar, in line with your left leg. The right hand should be placed on the handle of the oar.
2. Footwear – Non-slip shoes. Flip flops are not recommended. There are pros & cons about bare feet.
3. Oar Position: The blade of the oar is perpendicular to the water. If the oar handle is straight up and down, the blade will be in the correct position to steer in a straight line. The oar blade should be about 1/2-3/4 in the water. TIP: Do not submerge the oar blade deep in the water when traveling. There will be significant pressure on the oar.
4. Turning the Boat: The boat responds to small changes in the oar position so be mindful not to overcorrect. Practice small corrections.

There are two methods of steering the boat.

- The push-pull method: The oar is moved right or left to turn the boat. Moving the handle toward the boat will turn the boat left, and moving it away from the boat moves the boat right.
- Turning the oar method: The handle is moved right or left thereby turning the blade and moving the boat. Turning the handle to 9:00 turns the boat left. Turning the handle to 3:00 turns the boat right. TIP: the boat turns to the direction your thumb (the hand on the handle) is pointing.

The person at the helm looks forward past the front of the boat in the direction of travel. However, you must be aware of boat traffic from all sections of the river. When in doubt about the travel commitment of another vessel, hold the boat and wait.

TIP: When the paddlers start to paddle at full force, the transition can create a sudden jolt. This is especially an issue with a strong, full boat. Be prepared for this by bracing yourself and leaning slightly forward.

Turning the boat:

The Steersperson can turn the boat right or left using the oar to sweep the water. This will be a tight turn and should be practiced.

- Sweeping the oar handle toward you turns the boat left. Lift the oar blade out of the water when the handle comes into your body and move it back out and into the water to repeat.
- Sweeping the oar handle away from you turns the boat right. Lift the oar blade out of the water when the blade is away from you and move it into the water as you move the handle into your body.

Turning the boat using your crew:

- To turn right: Front paddlers draw to the right. Additionally the right back paddler can post with his paddle
- To turn left: Front paddlers draw to the left. Additionally the back left paddle can post with his paddle
- A tight turn can be made by have one side paddle forward and opposite paddle back (left forward turns right; right forward turns left. This can be tricky if timing is an issue, an inexperienced crew will cause significant rocking of the boat.

TIP: It is more comfortable to turn the boat to the left. Moving the oar into your body is safer than reaching out and moving the oar away to turn right which puts the steerer at risk for losing balance.

Backing up the boat

Practice reversing a dragon boat. Point the back of the dragon boat towards the direction you intend to go before reversing by sweeping the oar. Never have the oar in the water when reversing. This is a sure way of losing control and falling off the back of the dragon boat. Only dip the oar in the water as and when required.

There are three things to remember when reversing a dragon boat:

- Always look behind to ensure there are no crafts (especially another dragon boat) behind; and
- Reverse slowly as this is one of the more difficult aspects of steering.
- Keep the steering oar out of the water except for light “flicks” to keep direction.

Traveling through wake:

The Allegheny River has many recreational boats. Most of them create some wake and a few create fairly large wakes.

It is best to point your boat to run across the wake rather than letting the boat roll as the wake comes toward the gunwale. A small wake can be weathered this way and if you are not moving, call a paddles on the water command. A larger wake will cause extreme boat rolling and put the dragon boat in jeopardy of capsizing, taking on water, or losing the helm.

- Stay alert to boat traffic ahead and behind.
- Cross over wakes with a moving boat.
- Steady yourself.

TIP: The boat will be more stable if the crew paddles through larger wakes.

At the Dock:

Loading and Take off:

Generally loading the boat is done front to back. Loading should be done efficiently even if the dock is unoccupied. This is excellent practice for times when the dock is busy. Place the steering oar in the oarlock (thread it through the oarlock handle first). Have the left side hold the dock while you board.

Before leaving the dock, look down the channel to ascertain a clear take off. Have the front two benches draw to get the front out and your oar in the water. Then have the boats paddles up and take off easy.

The narrow channel at the exit is shallow on both sides. Stay in the middle. It is helpful to view the channel from up on shore. The shallow portion is very visible.

TIP: Boats coming into the dock have priority.

Returning to the Dock:

Depending on the current, “let it run” while there is sufficient forward momentum to get into the dock. The left side will pull their paddles in and prepare to hold the dock. The right side should be alerted to prepare to drag their paddles or hold the boat.

The crew will then walk the boat forward to the unloading area. Unload in the same orderly fashion as loading...front to back. Remove the oar from the oarlock and place it in the boat.

Loading the Boat onto the Dolly:

The dragon boat will need to be turned to pull it from the stern onto the dolly. The steersperson or designee will call for the front end to be pushed out into the channel while he/she walks the stern forward, holding the pull line, allowing the current to catch the bow and turn the boat. The team should be divided into sides to lift the boat by the benches onto the dolly when the boat is perpendicular to the dock. The fourth bench should be over the front section of the dolly for balance. It is then lifted front and then back to move the dolly wheels over the gaps in the dock and up the hill to the boathouse.

The crew is responsible to cleaning the boat prior to storage.

TIP: The speed of the turn will depend on the current. Be prepared for a quick turn with high flows.

The new steersperson will be able to demonstrate:

1. Ensure the dragon boat is balanced and perform a head count
2. Pull away from the dock
3. Use the standard set of calls
4. Reverse a dragon boat safely
5. Steer a straight line for a reasonable distance
6. Steer through wake
7. Stop a dragon boat quickly
8. Complete a turn with and without assist from the crew
9. Dock the boat

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