

huck it & tuck it

Images by Simon Westgarth

THE BLACK ART OF RUNNING BIG DROPS

Running waterfalls has been apart of whitewater kayaking for many years; endless kayaking movies have shown us death defying paddlers flying through the air as they descend bigger and bigger waterfalls. In reality running big drops is a dangerous and complex game. Level 5 Coach and serious creek boater Simon Westgarth explains what's really involved in chasing waterfalls...

>>> The whole idea of just hucking a big fall and seeing what happens brings a testosterone fuelled picture of whitewater warrior men folk beating their chests and paddling hard, big drops with adrenaline charging their egos on the edge of the lip. "Yeah man, yeeha, I'll give it a go, see you at the bottom, it's a no brainer!" If you really think that's what running difficult whitewater, and more specifically big drops, is all about, then stick to watching extreme kayaking videos and read on no further.

To run big drops with precision and limited risk requires skills developed through considerable experience, natural athletic attributes and an absolute understanding that whitewater kayaking is a gravity sport. Indeed, you could paddle a few straightforward low risk waterfalls without developed skills with marginal success, but your luck would soon run out and even natural talent can only go so far without the experience to back it up at the sharp end of running big falls. To begin with we will take look at the raw ingredients that combine to make running a waterfall successful. The paddler, the mental requirements, or as I like to describe it 'the operating software' that is needed to drive the big drop programme and then the actual mechanics of running big falls, with consideration of the moves and transitions needed for successful outcomes.

FEEL THE PULL

Whitewater kayaking is a gravity sport; this means that the motion experienced by the whitewater paddler has more in common with, say, alpine skiing or snowboarding than other water sports like sailing, open canoeing or sea kayaking. The term gravity sport encapsulates the idea of a sport where the participant is pulled down a gradient by the force of ever-present gravity. And then utilises and harnesses that force for a successful descent, be it snow, dirt or in our case water. As a creek boater you will need to engage the fall line, or line of least resistance, in order to control and anticipate the decent down the waterfall. In the case of kayaking the fall line is indicated by the main flow of water falling over the drop. The kayaker needs to access this and use it to keep their momentum flowing through and over any obstruction at the base of the fall and on downstream. I'll also refer to 'the transition' and this relates to the water and movement between the lip of the fall and the landing zone.

THE WATERFALL PADDLER - WHAT ARE YOU MADE OF?

In order to engage the fall line, you'll need to have some core physical attributes, such as balance, co-ordination and dexterity. But, above all you'll need to anticipate your own momentum as you descend the drop, and an understanding of the skills to change, or in effect bend the path of, your own momentum and your kayaks angle of descent.

OPERATING SOFTWARE - THE MIND GAME

The over riding theme of a successful gravity sport participant is to be confident of the outcome. This is easy to say when discussing it in the bar, but far more challenging to actually do when presented with the reality of a large fall. Confidence is generally built through having controllable experiences that are in the most part successful. By building on success, confidence can run high and new challenges can be faced and conquered. Be careful though, it's all easy to say that success breeds success. But what really helps and distinguishes this development is to focus realistically on what you can do, and what is possible with your skills. Can you look into your minds eye and



Sequence: Dave Carroll becomes one with his own momentum



see yourself running the drop successfully?

When you arrive at a drop, the questions in your mind should be, 'where is MY line?' It should not be 'where is the line?' To help you see YOUR line down the fall it can really help to focus on what to do and where to do it. What is the water doing? How many strokes are you going to take on the approach? How fast are you going to go? Are there any obstructions on or near the lip of the fall? By inspecting the fall and by working through in your mind the actual run the correct line of descent should become apparent.

If not then I'd suggest that the best line is the portage line. There is no place for peer pressure or chest beating in the arena of big drops. By simply copying your friend's line as they make it look easy it will take you off down the ego paddling route, where blind luck and good fortune come in to play, and as we all know they can soon run out.

Firstly you should be looking at the way the water moves through the drop, is the lateral momentum of the current pushing from right to left? What are the hazards? Are they a problem? Where do you enter and exit the drop? And finally and most importantly, is it actually possible? Once this observation of the drop and a realistic risk assessment has been done; then it's then a question of whether you can see the moves required to hit your line and be confident that you

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have the skill level to achieve them.

By linking the moves to visual markers on the drop, such as a rock or a curling wave, you can build the path of approach in your mind and visualise the decent. As the strength of the visualisation gains clarity you can mentally rehearse running the drop.

At this point you should be focused totally on the task, if there is doubt in your mind, this focus will be broken and at this stage. If this is the case, re-evaluate your line and decide YES or NO, do not wait to watch your friends run the drop before deciding! If you can't 100% visualise a successful run and be sure of your ability to make the line then shoulder that boat, walk around and leave it for another day.

ALL ABOUT ANTICIPATION

Take a look at a recent kayaking action video, or better still a DVD, find a segment that features a big drop and try to see where the paddler running a drop on screen is looking. You should notice that the kayaker will be looking some five meters ahead of where they actually are, focusing on and anticipating on where they will be and making the micro adjustments to actually get there. If the paddler's attention is focused on the bow of their boat, any adjustments they make are simply reactions to what has already happened to their boat. This 'focus of

anticipation' is an advanced skill for creek boaters, and indeed all gravity sport athletes, who have an anticipation and understanding of their own momentum.

Try this simple exercise to get to grips with the idea. Get on your mountain bike, hit your nearest downhill and try to focus at different lengths ahead of yourself as you bomb down the track. It may sound a bit 'out there' but this task will help you gain an understanding of where to look, and to anticipate future moves as you make descents at speed.

FREE FALLIN'

The most straightforward way to look at running big drops is as follows; we need an achievable entry to the lip of the fall followed by a manageable transition for a safe exit.

ENTRY

Any approach to a drop should be clear and obvious. There should be sufficient enough scope for you to gain momentum into the drop and is a key factor. Is any lateral momentum is required? For example does your line start river right and finish river left? If you need lateral momentum it must be generated on the entry to the lip of drop, simply because once you're falling it's near impossible to move sideways as the power of gravity is in full effect. Often the approach to a drop should be through an arc as this gains lateral momentum and allows the paddler to focus on key markers to keep on line.

MOVES

The success of a transition is often determined on the lip of a drop. Perfect transitions require good entry speed, excellent body form and a well-placed power stroke. The move can be broken down into three parts: 'Path', 'Form' and 'Timing'.

Path

The path refers to the arched trajectory that your kayak will normally follow in most big drop scenarios. One exception to this rule of thumb is when running drops with dead straight lips. But whenever possible look to paddle through an arc and follow the flow of the water wherever you can.

Form

The pitch and shape of the body and boat are critical. As the boat rides over the drops terrain your body should absorb the impacts by being upright or pitched forward. If your body is leaning back there is little control you can effect over a falling boat and any energy from impacts will often deflect you away from your desired line. This kind of energy absorption is reactionary and in some cases can be very dangerous. As you start to fall just after leaving the lip, your body should begin to be pitched forward to dip the kayaks bow in order to enter the water at the base of the fall. Ideally you want to land just under vertical at about an angle of 15 degrees. Famed Norwegian paddler and veteran of some monster falls Fleming Schmitt states the following advice for big drop enthusiasts, "If in doubt, get forward". This maxim is nearly always true and the paddler should move their weight forward through the transition. Boofing, or landing flat, from a fall, even from a low height, can have serious consequences and could lead to serious injury, including paralysis!

Timing

The planning and timing of your strokes through the transition is critical. As we've already discussed these strokes require an anticipation of your own

Note the paddler's body position as he descends the transition

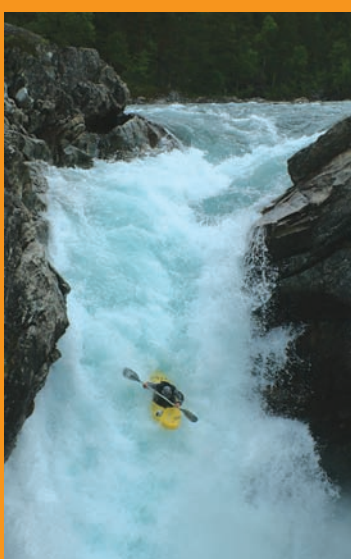


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momentum and precise timing. At the lip correctly anticipating a stroke sequence takes experience gained from practise, so start small and build from there. Some drops require stroke sequences with a late take-off from the lip, in addition to the patience and nerve to wait for the correct timing and stroke placement.

Exit

Be certain on landing that you can get away from the base of the drop and break through any awaiting stopper. If the landing zone is swallow and has exposed rocks, be certain that these have been considered in your line. It's as important to scout your landing as it is the lead in. And probably most importantly, if it all goes wrong, can your fellow paddlers get to you quickly and get you out of there? If this could be a problem then you need to seriously



Note the paddlers stroke sequence. He waits until he is actually falling before applying his final stroke.



ask yourself, should you run the drop?

Running big drops can be personally challenging and overcoming the mental and physical challenges involved can be fulfilling. But, the risk and inherent danger involved should never be underestimated or taken lightly.

The whole subject of running waterfalls is full of questions. And without the understanding and knowledge to reasonably answer those questions, combined with the core skill of anticipating your own momentum, my advice is to take your time. Build up experience on smaller features, use good judgement and leave any ego trips at home. Get some coaching by someone who knows their stuff, video yourself running smaller drops then evaluate your performance and plan a different outcome if it didn't go as you'd expected. What ever you do don't just Huck it and see!

Big drops and many more advanced whitewater river running techniques are featured in G17's latest DVD release Genes – Advanced Whitewater Technique.

To order a copy call 01242 539390 or visit www.gunnpublishing.co.uk/shop

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