

Article and photos: SIMON WESTGARTH



# Looking

## FOR SUPPORT

### THE ART OF SURFING STOPPERS

**O**ver the past winter, all across the UK, countless canoe clubs will have been conducting swimming pool sessions, with the aspiring members tackling the kayak roll and sharpening up BCU 3 star skills, such as bracing and sculling. But, there's an endemic problem in the paddling population. In a belief that it builds confidence, it has often been believed and taught that the paddler needs to commit their weight to the paddle. In practise, this means that near shoulder wrenching high-brace supports off the back deck of the kayak, and the kind of sculling for support

that will turn the hapless boater into stopper meat, are learnt! "What's wrong with that?" I hear you ask. What's wrong is the paddler's body position. This can be solved through a simple look at balance and an improved understanding of what actually works in a real on-river scenario. It's not, however, all bad news out there, as numerous kayak teachers and coaches have long since identified this problem and refined their teaching practices. And yet, go on any popular class III or IV run, and you'll still find paddlers committed to the paddle in bracing and supporting situations!



## ► BALANCE



**“If you keep your head within the boat line, you’ll stay balanced and, more importantly, upright! This is the source of staying in balance, no matter how dynamic the situation becomes. It is, however, easier said than done, especially in a large hole, or when paddling across powerful eddy lines.”**

One of the first functions our body learns when trying to move is balance. The body balances over its centre of gravity (COG). This is a theoretical point that moves according to the body’s position. When sitting on a chair, your centre of gravity is where the centre of mass is located, approximately in the middle of your pelvis. If you slightly rock your body to the right, you’ll feel a small increase in pressure on the right side of your bottom. Your COG has moved to the right, but is still located in the pelvis area. Now lean over to the right so that your hand touches the floor, and your body is in a horizontal position. Your COG has now moved to the top of the torso on the right side. If you removed the hand that’s supporting you, gravity will pull you, with a bump, to the floor.

Whatever the body position, there is a COG for

it. If you look at any kayaking image, it should be a fairly straightforward exercise to identify the COG of the paddler in the image.

Take a look at the above flat-water image, where the paddler is face on to the position of the camera. The paddler is edging the boat by lifting a knee and holding that position. Note here that the paddler’s head is in line with their COG. If the paddler moved their head outside of the boat line, their COG would also move and they would no longer be in balance, and thus would probably fall over into the drink! We could therefore say, if you keep your head within the boat line, you’ll stay balanced and, more importantly, upright!

This is the source of staying in balance, no matter how dynamic the situation is. It is, however, easier said than done, especially in a large hole, or when paddling across powerful eddy lines.



## ► 1-2-3



## ► STOPPER OUT

*Good edging and balance frees your paddle up for the important business of getting out of the hole*

Go jump in your boat, or as you're reading this article, sit up and square on your chair. This is a neutral position that we can call '0'. If you roll some weight to your right side, just to feel a small amount of additional pressure, and then try to stay upright, this is like edging the boat very slightly. We can call this position '1'. Again apply a little more right edge, and try to keep the head centred over your body, to position '2'. You should feel your torso begin to stretch on one side and compress on the other, your spine if viewed from behind should start to look like an upside down question mark.

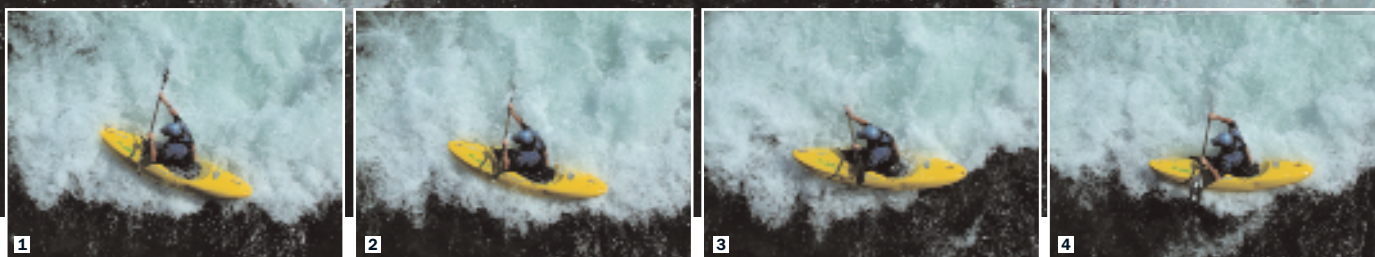
Now increase the edging, to position '3'. This would probably be sufficient to surf most stoppers. With this much edging, the torso stretch, after a while, should start to feel a little uncomfortable. This is in part because it's an unfamiliar body position to hold. However, for a whitewater paddler, and especially a playboater, the ability to edge the boat and to hold that edge is a fundamental skill that needs to be trained for.

Next time you try this exercise, sit on the floor with your legs in front of you, in a not too dissimilar position to sitting in a kayak. Focus on holding your feet together and, as you edge into positions 1-2 and 3, pull your upper body over your legs, compressing your chest in towards your knees. After watching countless freestyle competitions I noticed that the C1 paddlers use this compact forward lean position, to retain balance. If they were braced over the back of the boat, they would simply flip, as their COG is higher than a kayaker's is.





## ► IN THE PIT



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With a compact edging position we are ready for a spot of side surfing in stoppers. When you begin to play in stoppers, it's important to understand that the flat hull of most modern boats should, with a slight edge, sit on the ramp of downstream flowing water. This allows the water to flow under the hull in an efficient way. If the boat is over-edged downstream, the hard chine on the boat's hull grips into the downstream green water and starts the boat bouncing. When this occurs, the unnerved boater will often increase their edge further. All this does is to increase the problem and make the bounces near uncontrollable. So sit up, look at the ramp of water, and edge just enough not to

flip upstream. With practice you'll learn to feel the right amount of edge and keep those 'rodeo' bounces to a minimum.

In the past, while sculling for support during stopper surfing, it was believed that the paddle was needed continuously to support the boat and paddler. However, if you're balanced over the downstream edge of your boat, leaning slightly forward, there shouldn't be too much requirement for the paddle to support the paddler. The paddler should now be free to paddle forwards or backwards, depending on where the stopper exit is. If required, the paddle can still support, but it's primary use should be to move the boat around.

**"If you're balanced over the downstream edge of your boat, leaning slightly forward, there shouldn't be too much requirement for the paddle to support the paddler. The paddler should now be free to paddle forwards or backwards."**



## ▶ SEEING IS BELIEVING



*Once you've got your balance and edging sorted out, remember to look around and work out exactly where you are in the hole.*

As the paddle becomes free, the opportunity for looking around for an exit and manoeuvring towards it, waving to a friend with a camera, or, indeed, receiving a throw-line, should be possible. This freedom to take in more of your environment and situation, rather than having your head buried in the pile in a permanent high-brace, allows you to choose what to do. Sounds great and of course it's easy to put here in print. But what normally happens is that the learning kayaker is transfixed with a mythical point some 15cm above the bow of their boat. Now trying to look around, in fact anywhere else, is quite a challenge. So stick some tape to the bow end grab, to remind yourself not to stare! **CKUK**

## ▶ COMPACT

The best position for any stopper surfing or supporting is to get in to a compact form. Edging, with your head balanced in line with your boat's edge and leaning forward is a great start. Yet it's just as important to be supple in your body, as the turbulence of a whitewater situation can certainly throw you around in your little kayak. So we need a compromise between a compact and supple support unit. Being able to keep in balance and absorb the hits or bounces from the hole is the best position to be in.

**The techniques in this article and many others are presented in the new DVD 'Genetic Progressive Whitewater' from Westgarth TV. To mail order your copy call 01242 539390. For information on coaching courses and paddling destinations visit [www.gene17.com](http://www.gene17.com)**

*Master the art of self-supporting and even the beefiest of holes will become a breeze.*



# Looking

## FOR SUPPORT



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