

Dragon Boat Steering Accreditation

Lethbridge Dragon Boat Festival

(reviewed March 2009)

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(Thank you to Alan Owen and Chris Hansen for creating this document)

Introduction

The Lethbridge Dragon Boat Festival has grown over the years, which means that the steerspeople have a greater responsibility to keep their team safe on the water. The Steering Accreditation Course was developed for this reason.

The Steering Accreditation Course will consist of 3 parts:

1. Boating Safety
2. A Practical course/test on the water
3. Steering at a Regatta and Festival

Every team must have their steersperson take this Clinic at Henderson Lake. It is recommended that each team have more than 1 person from their team take this course.

To gain full accreditation, a steersperson must:

1. Take this course
2. Pass the practical test where your basic steering skills are assessed
3. Steer in 2 practices successfully

Steersperson with experience at other Dragon Boat Festivals or local steerspersons taking the Steering Accreditation Course from the Lethbridge Rotary Dragon Boat Festival Coaches will be the only people that will be allowed to steer at Henderson Lake during the mandatory practices, the Festival Regatta and Lethbridge Dragon Boat Festival.

This steersperson instruction guide provided a 'how to guide' of essential information for anyone taking on the responsibility of steering a dragon boat in practice and in competition. This guide covers the following topics:

- A. Boating Safety & the Steersperson's Responsibilities
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A. Boating Safety & The Steersperson's Responsibilities

While on the water, the steersperson is responsible for the safe operation of the dragon boat and safety of the crew. This requires knowledge of boating safety and safe boating practices at all times.

The City of Lethbridge and the Lethbridge Festival (Practices and Races**) require the following equipment for a dragon boat:

1. A personal floatation device (PFD) or lifejacket of appropriate size for each member of the crew, the Festival requires that each crew member wear their PFD or lifejacket at all times while on the water & on the dock**
2. Two bailers**
3. Sound device (whistle)
4. Toss bag

The Lethbridge Festival supply each dragon boat with: a PFD for each crew member; two bailers; a sound device and a steering oar.

- It is your responsibility to ensure that each crew member on your dragon boat has a PFD and wears it.
- Be aware of any non-swimmers on your crew and assign a buddy to the non-swimmer in case of a capsized.

- Be notified of any crew member who has a medical condition that you should be aware of
- Have your team adopt good skills in getting in and out of the boat at the dock – **load and unload from the centre of the boat**. The drummer and steersperson getting in first and out last.
 - To make loading and unloading efficient and a team effort paddlers need to assist each other
 - Paddlers hold the boat next to the dock (**fingers and thumbs on the inside of the boat**)
 - Dockside paddlers hold on to the dock (watch your fingers!!!) to help stabilize the boat.
 - Waterside paddlers, ‘Brace the Boat’ with your paddles.
- Prior to leaving the dock check that the steering oar is securely tied into its bracket.
- Have your crew bail out any water prior to docking.
- Always communicate to your team in a loud clear voice. Because you have responsibility for the safe operation of the dragon boat on the water, your instructions take priority over the instructions of the drummer, coach, or captain.
- Your team should recognize the importance of following all instructions quickly. You are the eyes and ears of your crew while on the water: your instructions must be followed for their safety.
- It is essential that you maintain a quiet boat when you are giving instructions to navigate amongst other boats. Call to your crew to “Listen Up” for instructions – their safety on the water is in your hands – respect for your calls is mandatory.
- Always be aware of what is happening on the water in proximity to your boat. Be aware of boats approaching from behind and from either side as well as boats ahead of you.
- Always “brace the boat” or (paddle flat on the water feathering the top of the water) for crew seat changes. This stabilizes the boat and reduces the likelihood of someone losing their balance due to a rocking or unsteady boat while they change positions in the boat.

B. Rules of the Road

The steersperson must be aware of the “Rules of the Road” for safe navigation of the dragon boat. Safe boating regulations apply to all recreational vessels. These Rules of the Road apply to every vessel in all navigable waters – from canoe to supertanker. You as a steersperson must adhere to these rules – develop good boating practices from the start.

- You are required to maintain a proper lookout at all times. You are to determine if there is any risk of collision with another boat and **take all action necessary to avoid such a collision**.
- You should stay to the right hand side when moving into or out of a practice area such as a creek or cove or when moving up or down any channel. Adopt a counter clockwise route around your designated dragon boat practice area.
- When you are passing a boat coming towards you, stay to the right hand side. Inside your course early so the other boat knows your intention.
- When you are overtaking another boat stay well clear of the boat you are overtaking.
- Any boat approaching you from the right hand side has the right of way – stay clear and yield to the other boat.
- Give larger boats (just about everyone!) the right of way.
- Always check over your shoulder to see that your course is clear before you turn or change to a new course heading.

C. Safe Boating Practices

The following are additions safe boating practices particularly applicable to dragon boating:

- Establish a comfortable and steady steering position, well balanced with knees bent. You must remain standing while you are steering.

- Wear footwear with a good grip. A baseball cap is advisable if you expect sun in the late afternoon as you may need to see ahead into the sunset.
- On the way out to your practice or to a race, pay attention to wind and currents. The wind can be seen by observing flags on buildings, people's hair or clothing, etc.
- Be aware of changing weather patterns and avoid gusty conditions that could create swells. Plan ahead and head for shore and to the dock if gusty conditions arise.
- While you are practicing, learn instinctively how your boat turns – pull the steering oar right to turn left, and push the steering oar left to turn right.
- Learn that your boat reacts differently to the steering oar at different boat speeds – when you are stopped the oar has no steering impact, when you are at race pace the boat responds quickly (requiring a soft steering touch to guard against over steering a course change).
- The angle of the steering oar and depth of the oar also effect steering. Practice and get used to these differences.
- It is a good practice to hold your headings (course, direction) constant and make gradual course changes – don't weave back and forth down the practice area – be predictable in your course headings so other boats know your intentions.
- Practice back paddling the boat, know the turn circle and how to steer a straight course backwards. This will be valuable during race starts as you control the boat and ensure you are in good position for a 'clean start'.
 - When backing up – go slow to prevent the oar from locking in its bracket; if this happens "Hold the Boat" and correct the oar lock and then back the boat again.
- Develop a "local knowledge of your practice area – learn location of all buoys and shallow spots in the area you practice.
- Stay clear of anchored boats. They will have an anchor line stretching forward off their bow and may have a stern line to shore or to a second anchor. (If they have one anchor line rather than two and it is breezy, their bow will point into the wind.)
- Around dock areas watch for boats moving in and out and give them ample clearance. Look up to see if any of the masts of sailboats are moving down a dock lane – if so give them ample clearance as they have limited steering capability when moving out of their dock.
- If you are coming around the corner of a dock with limited visibility stay out from the corner. Have your drummer or one of the stroke paddlers keep a lookout for approaching traffic.
- Do not assume that larger boats see you. Stay well clear and respect their course line. Again, take a predictable course heading and maintain a course that keeps you well clear of a collision course with other boats. A collision course is one in which the angle between you and the other boat remains constant and the distance between you is decreasing.
- Do a periodic 360-degree scan of the water to check traffic in your practice area. This is important to ensure that you are staying clear of other boats in the area.
- Give rowing crews a wide berth and respect their course lines. These boats do not have the steering capabilities that you have in a dragon boat. They are also facing backwards in their shell and do not have the view of the water ahead that you have from your dragon boat. Steer clear of their coach boat as well – give it room to stay alongside the rowing shell.

D. Undocking and Docking a Dragon Boat

When you have checked the following:

- a. That everyone is wearing a PFD,
- b. There is a sounding device on board
- c. There is a toss bag on board
- d. That the steering oar is secure in its bracket,
- e. Bailed any water from the boat,

- f. Everyone is seated you are then ready to move away from the dock,
- g. The boat is balanced left-to-right and back-to-front, and
- h. You know how many are in the boat.

Undocking:

- Prepare to move away from the dock when your crew is ready. You must have their attention and check that the way is clear for you to move away from the dock.
- If there is a dock master, adhere to his/her instructions – both going out and coming in.
- Have your crew push the boat away from the dock (with their hands, not their paddles) so that the paddlers on both sides can put their paddles in the water.
- Call for quiet (“Listen Up”) then “Paddles Up”, then “Back Paddle” if you are backing out from the dock. Use “Take it Away” if you are proceeding forward off the dock.
- Take your time and be predictable to other boats. There is no need to rush away from the dock area.
- Give small boats the clearance they need. Let them know your intentions when undocking and pick a clear channel to guide your boat through other boat traffic.
- Once clear of the dock, have the crew pull in the bumpers (rubber fenders) that are used to protect the side of the dragon boat.
- Once away from the dock and underway out to your practice area you can turn control of the boat over to the coach or drummer. While in transit out to the practice area, take your time and become aware of the other boat traffic, the wind, water conditions, etc.

Docking:

- As you complete your practice and approach your dock, have the crew put the bumpers (rubber fenders) over the side to protect the dragon boat. They should have the dock lines ready to hand to a person at the dock.
- If there is a line of boats coming in then “Hold the Boat” and wait in line for a spot on the dock. If there is a dock master on duty, watch for hand signals as to which dock you should move towards.
- Take a good line into the dock, slowing the boat so the dock people know your intentions as to which side of the dock you are approaching.
- Check if the wind will be blowing you into or away from the dock. Let this govern how you approach the dock. If the wind is behind you then be prepared to hold the boat longer and have the paddles in the water to keep you from blowing in. The paddles will create a drag to slow the effects of the wind.
- Approach the dock slowly, fender and dock lines ready, then “Hold the Boat” say four or five boat lengths from the dock, then “Let it Ride” to keep some forward momentum to move to the dock without bumping against the dock.
- Call to the crew to keep their hands and paddles in the boat on the docking side of the boat – not between the boat and the dock where they could get injured.
- Glide in smoothly and slowly – take it easy. If you need a bit of boat speed after you have stopped the boat within a few boat lengths of the dock, then just use the back three benches of paddlers to take her in the last few boats lengths.
- Before you leave the boat, prop the steering oar out of the water and onto the seats in the boat. This will minimize its interference with boats docking alongside your boat.
- If you see another dragon boat coming alongside, check that its bumpers (rubber fenders) are in the water and give it a hand to secure it to your boat. Everyone appreciates a helping hand while docking.

E. Steering a Dragon Boat in Practice Sessions

Being a good steersperson takes practice in boat handling as well as being knowledgeable of the Rules of the Road and safe boating practices as covered above. Here are some tips and advice for your practice session:

- Check the boat balance again after you have run a few lengths of your practice area. Adjust the paddlers so that their weight is even right and left and that the boat tracks relatively straight without a lot of correction in steering.
- Steering slows the boat, make small course adjustment, don't zig zag down the course.
- Practice steering close to another dragon boat down the course. You want to get yourself and your crew familiar with another crew racing alongside your crew at close quarters. You should leave a minimum of 3 meters between boats.
- Focus all of your attention outside the boat, watch for other boat traffic and establish a target on shore as a target heading. Don't get distracted by the calls on other boats during a practice race. Your focus is on your boat's course.
- Adjust your boat's course or "Hold the Boat" as required to stay clear of other traffic.
- Become familiar with the race course: boat staging area, start line, finish line, dock etc.

Practice all Calls:

Lean Out: position within the boat at all times. Upper body leans so that 70% of the body weight is on the gunwale leg and 30% of the body weight is on the inside leg. Paddler should be able to see the outside of the boat. The shaft of the paddle is resting on the gunwale.

Take it away: begin paddling. The command to begin paddling; usually follows the command Paddles Up. Commonly used for starting the movement of the boat in a non-race situation.

Let it run (or ride): stop paddling and let the boat coast. The blades are out of the water with the shaft resting on the gunwale.

Brace the boat: to stabilize the boat. Paddle blades flat on the surface of the water; the blade feathers the top of the water by moving the blade back and forth. The shaft of the paddle pressed against the top of the gunwales.

Hold the boat: bring the boat to a full stop with the use of the paddles. Paddlers thrust blades vertically into the water to bring the boat to a halt.

Check for drift: to prevent the boat from drifting from side to side. Paddles are in the water with the blade running parallel to the boat and the shaft is held against the gunwale.

Back paddle... paddle backwards. The stroke used to bring the boat backward into or away from the dock or a race start.

START this one with "paddles up"...
then "paddles back"...
then "take it away"

Draw / Draw stroke: stroke used to line a boat up straight at the start of a race or to turn a boat around. The paddle is placed perpendicular to the side of the boat and 'drawn' towards the boat, usually by designated paddlers. You must call WHOM you wish to paddle, i.e. right side, back 3 right.

Pry / Pry stroke: stroke used to line a boat up straight at the start of a race or to turn a boat around. The paddle is placed perpendicular to the side of the boat and 'pryed' or pushed away from the boat, usually by designated paddlers. You must call WHOM you wish to paddle. i.e. right side, back 3 right.

Paddles in the boat: paddles completely in the boat, above the gunwale of the boat.

Time it up: to get the paddlers back into synchronization so the paddles enter the water at the same time.

Listen up: paddles in the relaxed position, parallel over the water. The crew should be ready to listen to the drummer or the coach.

Focus in the Boat: command to bring the focus back into the boat. Command can be used prior to a race start or during a practice to bring the paddler's focus back into the boat.

Stroke: refers to one cycle of the paddling motion.

F. Preparing for a Dragon Boat Festival

Your preparation for the festival should include the following:

- Read the rules and regulations for the festival (www.lethbridgedragonfest.ca). Know what your specific responsibilities are in steering your boat to the boat staging area, start line, at the start, during the race, at the finish, and on and off the dock.
- Walk to the shore area close to the start and the finish areas. Observe a start or two, listening to the starters instructions, observing the start area wind conditions.
- Know where the crew marshalling area is and ensure that your team is there in plenty of time.
- Know your boat number which will also be the lane you are racing in.
- When lining up to go down to your boat, be in front of the line so you can load first, along with your drummer.
- In the festival your dragon boat will likely have a dragonhead and tail at the front and back. Allow extra clearance for these when moving in and out of the dock and stay clear of other boats.

G. Festival Racing

Starts and Start Procedures

Now you are prepared, have moved away from the dock and are underway to the boat staging area. Key considerations are as follows:

- Stay close to shore and away from the race course.
- It is important that you move to the boat staging area without undue delay. You must listen to the direction of the Race Officials.
- Plan your approach to the boat staging area early which will be 50 to 75 meters back from the Start line. This will give you a sense of any sideways drift of your boat from any wind and enable you to get set up for a good start squarely in your lane.

Race Underway and Race Conduct

- This is why you have been practicing and preparing for this day. With the race underway you have one goal, stay in your lane and guide the boat straight to the finish. Here are some tips to do this well:
- Pick out your steering course to stay in your lane and check it often during the race. You may be steering towards a lane marker on a bridge ahead or for a mark part way between the two finish line buoys.
- While in the race your attention is outside the boat, pick the line to steer and hold it steady. Do not get involved in looking at your crew – this distracts you from your job of keeping the boat straight and true down the race course.
- There will be referee boats following the dragon boats down the course. Obey all instructions directed at your boat; they will call your boat by boat number. i.e. “Boat Two, Move Left” – If this is called to your boat, make a gradual course correction to your left and then straighten.
- Be sure to make any course corrections gradually – over steering can cause problems and collisions. This is why your full attention is required outside the boat and on the course you are steering – so minor changes can be made as you move down the course.

- When one boat is in a position to overtake another boat during a race, it is the duty of the boat overtaking to keep clear of the boat being overtaken at all times; similarly, the boat being overtaken must not alter course to make difficulties for the overtaking boat or boats.
- If there is a risk of collision because you or another boat is off course or for any other reason then call "Hold the Boat" (crews are responsible for taking all action necessary to avoid colliding and minimizing impact with other boats and crews). This is a fun sport, not a life and death duel – always keep the safety of your crew and that of other boats uppermost in your mind.
- If the referee boat calls you to "Hold the Boat" do so at once – do not delay to question why – they can see more of the race course than you can.
- Should a race be stopped in progress, the Referees will display a red flag along with REPEATED blasts from horns, whistles or other noisemakers and give verbal instructions through a loud hailer.
- On the course remember to stay cool if you're alongside another boat. Steer a steady course in your lane. It can seem crowded and noisy on the race course – don't let the noise and proximity of other boats distract you for a moment from your task to steer a straight and safe course.
- Know your race plan and plan with your drummer as to who will make calls during the race, e.g. near the finish from your vantage point you will know where you are on the racecourse and how close you are to the finish.

Proper Finish

Oh the glory of victory and the agony of defeat! You have arrived at the finish line by steering a good race. Here's what to do after you cross the finish line:

- The finish line marker buoys can drift; make sure your boat is well over the line prior to calling "Let it Ride". Continue to steer straight down your race lane.
- Once you are sure you are over the finish line and clear of other boats, call "Let it Ride" (then "Hold the Boat" and stay straight – do not turn until you're confident that your boat will not interfere with the course line of other boats.
- Congratulate the crew and then quickly put your attention back outside the boat to select your course to the loading and unloading dock.
- Check over your shoulder and know that your course is clear to have your crew "Take It Away" back to the dock.
- Proceed to the dock without delay. The race schedule relies on all boats moving back to the dock and unloading as soon as they can so that the races stay on schedule.
- When approaching the dock, stay in line and hold your boat until called in by the dock master. Remember to allow additional dock space for the dragonhead and tail on your boat. Take it easy and guide your boat in slowly, rubber fenders out and dock line ready to hand to the dock assistant.
- Make your way off the dock area quickly. Once you have dropped off your PFDs and paddles, clear the marshalling area immediately.

Coping with the Unexpected During a Race

When you encounter the unexpected be prepared. The following points should be kept in mind for the times when the unexpected occurs, either in practice or in a race:

- In the event of a crew being in distress, for example, a crew member lost overboard, a crew member seriously injured, the Steersperson or other crew members shall alert the Race Officials by signaling with their paddles held vertically, high in the air.
- Report any injuries to the Dock Master. The team manager must submit an injury report to the Race Registrar immediately following the injury.
- If a race is stopped in progress, follow the instructions of the referees. A re-race may be called. This will require you to paddle back to the boat staging area and wait in the boat staging area while the next race is run, and then your heat will be re-raced.

- If your steering oar or transom (steering brace) breaks, immediately call “Hold the Boat” and bring your boat to a stop. If you are in a race await assistance and direction from the referee's boat.
- If a crew member's paddle breaks, you must continue to race and be prepared to adjust course. You should have a spare paddle aboard and the crew should pass the paddle to the person who needs it. You should maintain your focus outside the boat – do not be distracted by what is happening in the boat in an instance such as this – your job is the straight course line.

Should the boat capsize:

- **The drummer and /or steersperson:**
Will blow their whistle and call for help to attract individuals on shore or in other vessels
Call for a Safety Count
- **The crew must:**
Stay with the boat
Do a Safety Count
Find your seat partner and stick together
Locate the person in the seat in front and behind
(the front seats, locate the drummer; the last seats, locate the steersperson)
Await rescue
Stay with the boat
Listen to the drummer and steersperson and work together as a group
Repeat Safety Count every 30 seconds until all are recovered and accounted for
Make sure PFD's are properly fastened
Do not attempt to swim to shore
Stay with the boat
Minimize heat loss by huddling close together
Reassure panicking crew members
Provide non-swimmers with additional buoyancy e.g. a handful of paddles
Stay with the boat
- **If someone is missing:**
Look around for the missing person – if you have already been counted in
Quickly resume safety count to be sure that they're not others missing
Each paddler will need to feel under the boat to help find the missing person
If necessary, one individual ONLY, should check under the boat
The Rescue Crew needs to be notified, as soon as they arrive, that a person is missing
When the person is found, commence First Aid and / or CPR, if required

Please note that if you end up under an over turned boat, there should be an air pocket available for you to catch your breath and get your bearings. Feel your way to the side of the boat and then surface on the outside.

Race Regulations – A Steersperson's Perspective

Pay particular attention to your steersperson responsibilities in the following sections of the Lethbridge Dragon Boat Festival Regulations:

- The various areas of the racecourse – learn these.
- You must follow the directions of the Race Officials at all times during the competition. Failure to do so may result in disciplinary action taken against the Crew.
- The authority of the Referees.
- The Boat Staging Area.
- Call forward into Racing Lanes
- Lining up for the start.
- Static Starts.
- Running Starts.
- The starting call sequence

- False Starts
- Penalty for false starts
- Equipment failure off the start and up to 50 meters.
- Racing Underway
- Proper Finish or Did Not Finish (DNF)
- Return to Base
- Refereeing and Disqualifications
- Penalties, Protests, and Appeals

Be sure you are familiar with all the rules and regulations so that you will be well prepared for the festival you are attending.

Have a safe and enjoyable time on the water. Steering is a great way to participate in dragon boating.