

Lake Champlain Dragon Boat Festival

Dragon Boat Paddling Tips

Dragon boating is a full-body workout. By no means are you just sitting up straight and paddling with your arms. There are six key parts to the dragon boat stroke. When done properly, the boat flies. When executed improperly, the boat feels sluggish and heavy. The six components are called: rotation, extension, catch, pull, exit, and recovery.

ROTATION OR TWIST: Plant your feet against the strut in the boat so that you can engage your legs. Engage your core muscles as you twist to turn your chest toward your partner. As you rotate, your outside hip moves forward and your back turns toward the shore. This twist allows for maximum reach.

EXTENSION OR REACH: This position in the stroke is crucial to maximize the length of the stroke. The position of the outside paddling arm is equivalent to pulling a bow and arrow. The outside shoulder should be dropped slightly while extending forward. Your torso bends forward for additional extension. The upper arm should rise up to about your ear. The lower arm is fully extended and is almost locked at the elbow. The paddle should be a few inches above the water before driving it into the water.

CATCH: The catch phase is the most critical to the speed of the boat. The catch is the moment the paddle blade first hits the water. The top hand is held over the water. It then presses down on the paddle while the outside arm is relaxed and fully extended.

PULL: But not with your arms! Once the paddle is fully submerged or "buried," the next part of the stroke is the pull phase. The paddles should come back directly parallel with the boat. The top hand stabilizes and pushes on the paddle as the body untwists and back muscles pull you up. To use the back muscles effectively, the paddler sits up while continuing to drive the paddle downward with the top hand. Maximum power and endurance will come from using the larger muscles of the back, shoulder, and trunk rather than relying on your arm muscles.

EXIT: At the end of the stroke, the paddle should exit the water no further back than your hip. If you allow the stroke to go past the hip, the paddling blade will be at an angle that would slow down the boat. The outside arm bends slightly to allow the paddler to clear the water and then it is pushed or snapped forward for the next stroke.

RECOVERY: This part of the stroke is the rest phase when the muscles are not working as hard. During recovery, the torso starts rotating and leaning forward to setup for another cycle of the stroke.

For some videos, go to YouTube and search for dragon boat paddling tips.

Dragon Boating Terminology and Commands

(Courtesy of The University of Toronto Victoria College Dragon Boat Team)

EQUIPMENT AND PEOPLE	
PADDLE	The dragon boat equipment paddlers use to move the boat in the water
BLADE	The flat part of the paddle that is placed in the water
DRUMMER	The person beating the drum in sync with the strokes. The drummer helps the paddlers unify their stroke and is considered the heartbeat of the boat
STEERPERSON	The person standing in back of boat directing the boat with a long steering oar (yes, this is an oar, not a paddle). The steersperson serves as the rudder of the boat
STROKES	The strokes are the all-important lead paddlers sitting in row 1. Their essential job is to set the pace for the rest of the boat to follow. They are usually the steadiest, most rhythmic paddlers who tend not to rush
PACERS a.k.a. The Show	These are the front paddlers sitting in rows 1, 2, and 3. The paddlers in rows 2 and 3 must be strong paddlers in order to help the strokes maintain the pace. Pacers tend to have a longer stroke because they sit higher up in the boat. Their stroke is also a bit slower because the water is not moving as fast at the front of the boat. In general, the pacers are also the smallest and lightest paddlers
ENGINE ROOM a.k.a The POWER	These are the middle paddlers seated in rows 4, 5, 6, and 7. They are the stronger, heavier paddlers. Because the engine room is in the middle of the boat, these paddlers are closer to the water and can dig deeper into the water. This allows them to take advantage of their power and size to really propel the boat forward
TERMINATORS a.k.a. The Rockets or The Dough	These are the back paddlers seated in rows 8, 9, and 10. Having a strong back of the boat can be an advantage especially at the end of a race. They can pull the boat out of the water and give the boat that extra needed boost. Terminators tend to have a shorter stroke and a quick recovery because the water is moving extremely fast by the time it reaches the back of the boat.

GUNWALE (or GUNNEL)	The outside edge or the side of the boat that touches the water. In dragon boating, you actually hang out over the gunwale while you are paddling
RIGHT SIDE of the BOAT	sometimes called starboard
LEFT SIDE of the BOAT	sometimes called port
FRONT of the BOAT	where the drummer and dragon head are located; sometimes called the bow
BACK of the BOAT	where the steersperson stands and the dragon tail is located; sometimes called the stern
COMMANDS	
Inside the boat, paddlers should be quiet and listen to their steersperson and/or drummer. Pay attention to each command and do it!! It's all about safety—for you, your team, and the boats around you.	
SIT UP!	Sit up straight and get ready for the next command. Be attentive! Be alert!
PADDLES UP!	Be prepared to start paddling. Get your paddle out over the water with your inside arm up above your head and your outside arm preparing to reach out
SIT READY!	This is normally used at the start of a race. When you hear this command, have your paddles out over the water or buried in the water. Your steersperson will let you know which starting position to use. Keep your eyes in the boat and wait for the starting horn!
SIT PRETTY!	A preferred readiness command used by Dragonheart Vermont in place of "Sit Ready." Coach John Dyer absentmindedly coined this term and it stuck.
TAKE IT AWAY!	Start paddling. Be sure to watch the strokes and stay in sync. Keep on paddling—thou shall not stop until told to do so!
HOLD THE BOAT! or CHECK THE BOAT!	This is the equivalent of slamming on the brakes! Immediately take your paddle and stick it vertically into the water so that the blade is completely buried in the water. Keep holding it there until the boat comes to a complete halt. Do not take your paddle out of the water until your steersperson says so!
DRAW!, PUSH!, CRANK!, PULL!, PRY! (...and the list goes on)	When your steersperson is trying to steer and maneuver (i.e., repositioning at the start line), he/she may call upon the rest of the boat for help. For example, "Right side, draw, left side push!" That means everyone on the right side paddles by drawing/pulling the water toward the boat. The left side does just the opposite action

	of cranking/pushing/prying the water away from the boat.
BACK IT UP!	Put the boat in reverse by paddling backward. The folks in the back of the boat are now your strokes, so turn around and follow their lead. It is still important to stay in sync
BRACE THE BOAT! or FEATHER THE BOAT!	Hold the paddle blade parallel to the water surface and spread the water like icing on a cake. This stabilizes the boat if the waves are choppy. You use this command when the Lake Champlain Ferry is going by or if people need to reposition themselves inside the boat.
UP!	Increase your stroke rate. Make sure you watch your strokes so you don't get out of sync!
LENGTHEN!	When making the transition from the start to the race pace, you will lower your stroke rate and lengthen your stroke. However, if your steersperson is yelling this at you in the middle of the race, it (usually) means reach a little further and dig a little deeper while keeping the same pace.
LET IT RUN! or LET IT RIDE!	Three of nicest words you'll ever hear during practice or at the end of a race. It means to stop paddling and relax.