

Escort Boat Safety!

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More and more often I hear how it is becoming harder to get escort boats to support races. For most recreational skippers, supporting 9-man Kanu races is the most hazardous and stressful activity they will ever participate in with their boats. Particularly so in the early part of the race when there are so many boats, kanu's, and people in the water in such close proximity. This is aggravated when clubs are forced to ask otherwise unknown skippers to help, often with minimal knowledge of the skippers knowledge, character, or skill.

As good seaman and skippers, our most important job is to ensure your safety at all times. Helping the teams win is our SECOND most important job. Your job as a paddler/coach (as it relates to the escort), is to do everything you can to reduce the skippers stress level and workload. This can most easily be accomplished by following a few common sense safety rules, keeping a high level of situational awareness as a backup for the skipper, and exercising some basic consideration.

To most skippers, paddling is just that - paddling - you stick the paddle in the water in front of you, pull it back, pull it out, and repeat. Most do not fully appreciate the subtle nuances of technique and strategy that paddlers must totally focus on to be competitive. In like fashion, paddlers do not always appreciate the massive amounts of information that the skipper is processing: Trim, wind, swell, current, Kanu traffic, boat traffic, people in the water, ad nauseam. The skippers' brains have to work like radar, tracking 50+ targets at all times. He has to navigate safely around all the other boats, Kanu's, and people in the water, keeping track of what is going on in his own boat, and supporting your team while not interfering with others. Every moment they are making decisions that directly affect everyone's safety and the outcome of the race. This can make for a very stressful situation for your skipper.

So how do you attract and keep good skippers? Make it more fun for them than it is work! The following are a few suggestions and general safety rules that you should be aware of while being escorted. The more you follow these rules, the less the skipper has to worry about you, freeing his brain to focus on the other aspects of his job, making it easier for him to have fun while doing it.

First and Foremost - Your Safety!

1. When boarding the boat, try to position yourselves so that the boat is kept level from side to side. When too much weight is on one side of the boat, it can be very difficult to handle, increasing the skippers workload tremendously. This becomes increasingly important when operating at high speed or close to a kanu or other boats. Excess weight on one side of the boat cause it to heel, and can also affect handling rather dramatically. This makes it difficult for the skipper to run in close to the kanu as desired.
2. Avoid moving around the boat unnecessarily. This is again related to weight distribution, but is also for your own safety. Stray swells combined with boat maneuvers can cause sudden jolts that may throw you off balance, potentially injuring yourself or others.
3. Do NOT trust the non-skid for secure footing. The only reason it is called 'non-skid' is that 'slicker than whale crap on a Teflon doorknob' takes too long to say.
4. Do not jump off the boat while it is still moving. Wait until the skipper has given the okay before jumping in the water. While not apparent to you, he may be making minor position adjustments to place you more in the kanu's line.

5. Do not approach the boat while the engine is running during a change. No shark has less mercy than a spinning propeller, and again, the skipper may be making small adjustments to the boats' position.

Approach the swim step/boarding ladder from the side farthest away from the propeller. Even when not moving, propellers can be quite sharp and cause a severe wound.

6. When docking, do not step off the boat until given the okay by the skipper. As during changes, he may be making minor adjustments to the boats' position at the last second. Getting caught between a 3,000+ pound boat and the dock IS hazardous to your health.

7. Do not use the Bimini poles for support when standing or when getting on or off the boat. These are not designed to carry the weight of a person who has lost their balance, may break, causing you to fall and the skipper to get upset about the damage to the boat.

8. Do not sit on the bow of cuddy cabin boats when underway. If you slip off the fore deck, you can easily be run over. The only time you should sit in/on the bow of a runabout is when it has been designed for you to do so (i.e. there are actual seats up there) or when the boat is at rest.

USCG Accident Statistics - Year 2000

Cause	Accidents	Fatalities	% Fatality
Improper Loading	98	51	52%
Standing, sitting on gunwale, transom, bow, or seatback	33	14	42%
Alcohol Use	346	100	29%
Passenger Behavior	306	29	10%
Rules of the Road	48	4	8.3%
Infraction			
Operator Inexperience	905	60	7%
Excessive Speed	630	33	5%
Restricted Vision	116	6	5%
Operator Inattention	959	49	5%
Careless/Reckless Operation	907	34	4%

Of all reportable accidents 45% involved open motorboats such as those that are used as escort boats. Lacerations were the most reported type of injury for open motorboats. Notice that while most accidents are the Skippers fault, the top four 'most likely to result in fatality' accident causes are all within YOUR control!

Basic Consideration - Make the Skippers Life Easy

1. Keep the items that you bring aboard with you down to those that you will need during the race. These boats have little room for extra gear, and it is invariably under foot.

2. Be mindful of where you step on the boat, particularly when getting on or off. I have seen several skippers get very upset when people scuff or dirty the upholstery by walking on it. Docks are usually quite dirty, and that dirt is inevitably tracked wherever you step. If possible (and safe!), rinse your sandals/feet right before boarding.

3. Get organized before coming to the boat, and get to the boat on time! On time is when or before the kanu launches.

4. For longer events (such as the Catalina Classic), keep coolers down to a minimum. For many boats, it may be better to bring two or three small coolers rather than one big one. Smaller coolers are easier to tuck away so they are not in the way yet still easily accessed.

5. Avoid using foul language - Many skippers won't care, but you never know who will and who won't. If you avoid it altogether, you're guaranteed to not offend anyone. I have heard of several skippers that have not returned for this reason alone.

6. Keep your gear together. Loose items drifting around on deck are a safety hazard and cause confusion when you have to go looking for them when needed.

7. Take your trash with you when you leave the boat, and offer to take any other trash that you see on the boat.

8. Steersman - If at all possible, get with your escort skipper before the race to discuss your strategy and preferences. This may include signals for when paddlers should drop into the water, where you want the escort positioned while racing (port, starboard, distance from kanu, etc.).

9. Coaches - Give the skipper clear instructions, but do not press him to push the limits of the rules or his equipment.

10. On the Catalina Classic - Bring as little gear as possible. Pack your 'during race' gear separately from your 'overnight' gear. This will allow the skipper to position the gear that you need during the race so that it is handy, while putting the overnight gear 'deeper in the pile' so that everybody can get to their 'during race' gear.

If you have friends/relatives/other teammates riding the shuttle over, have them take as much of your overnight gear with them as possible. Having the gear taken over via the shuttle will also reduce the weight of the escort boat, improving its' performance and making it easier to handle.

If the skipper does not have a crew with him, offer to leave a paddler aboard to help him moor the boat. The paddler will need Shore Boat fare (currently \$4.50), and somebody to take care of his gear on shore.

Also, invite your skipper along with your team to dinner and whatever other activities you have planned. The more they feel a part of the team, the more likely they will return next year (this assumes of course that you DO want them back next year).

If your skipper is alone and on a small boat with minimal or no overnighting capability, offer to share your quarters. The money they receive from KOA is not enough to cover expenses and lodging.

11. Recognize your escort skipper as an essential element to your participation and victory. A good escort skipper can make all the difference in the world, especially when the racing is close. A little recognition and appreciation goes a very long way!

To keep them coming back, use the following principles to guide you.

1. Go out of your way to make them feel like a part of the team. because they are! Without them there is no race, and they can directly affect your results.

One skipper I know was given the extra plaque that was originally intended for a paddler who did not make the race. A wonderful and much appreciated gesture (he positively raved about it to me). I have no doubt that it is a significant part of why he is willing to come back and help again this year.

2. Do everything within your power to reduce the impact of your activity on their equipment.

3. Do everything within your power to reduce the skippers stress level during the race. This is most easily accomplished by following the safety rules previously laid out. Finally, but most importantly, make sure you let your club staff and the KOA officials know about any skipper that disregards your safety or the safety of others! You DO NOT want these people back. No race in the world is worth anybody's life or limb.