



## Dragon Boat Practice Rules and Guidelines

This guide was developed by Tim MacFarlane to provide paddlers with useful information for their practices (especially for new paddlers). While much of the information is general for any site or team, the site specific details are for the Balmy Beach Canoe Club (in Lion's Club building) at Coxwell Avenue and Lakeshore Blvd East. All information will be reviewed with paddlers in person by their coach and/or team captain. If applicable, see your team website for a map and directions to the site.

See the Contact section at the end of this Guide if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions for it. This guide is free to share and distribute to anyone. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact Tim. This is a great sport that anyone can participate in. This is why it is the fastest growing water sport in the world.



*Above: The Harbord Village team after finishing a race at the DDRA Canada Day regatta at Centre Island (part of one of the oldest mixed regattas in the world – includes canoe, kayak, rowing).*

**Arrival Time:**

The posted practice time for each team is actual time on the water. That means all paddlers need to arrive 15-25 minutes before the posted start time in order that they have time to take care of the Pre-Practice Checklist items below. Please try to arrive early so you are relaxed and ready for the practice! Practice time is valuable and paddlers need to help make it an effective use of time by being ready. The quicker a boat is loaded, the longer the practice time.

**Late Arrival:**

If you are going to be late (traffic, work, etc), don't give up! We need you, and even 40 minutes or 20 minutes of practice is a big step forward in our preparations. Coaches will generally be bringing their boat back near the docks at approximately the :20 and :40 minute marks within each practice to look for and pick-up late-comers. Please e-mail, text, or call the coach on the day of a practice if you can (even last minute) if you are going to be late or will miss a practice. That way the coach can watch for you or adjust seat positions in the boat if needed. Every practice is important for both you and the team.

**Parking:**

There is strictly no parking at the boat house property as it is reserved for Lions Club members who own the building. Paddlers who drive must park to the south in the marked lot at the south end of Ashbridges Bay Park Road. This lot is a pay-and-display lot where you buy a ticket from a machine and display it on your dashboard. Note that early in the season (usually until June) there are no parking ticket machines, which means that parking is free. Please take care not to park outside of marked spots, or near the water where the long narrow spots are for vehicles with trailers only. You will get ticketed if you don't have a ticket or are parked illegally. Note that during the nearby beach volleyball season on Ashbridges Bay Beach that parking can be at a premium. Arrive early, or plan to park elsewhere. Another lot is located to the north up Coxwell and just east on Eastern Avenue. It is also a Pay and Display lot.

**Facilities:**

There is a single washroom in the boat house with a toilet and sink, but no showers. There is a basic change room for both men and women, but there are no lockers. Valuables should be left at home or stored in vehicles out of sight. One suggestion is for someone with a car to store team member valuables in their trunk during the practice. There is limited room on the boat (and it might get wet).



**Public Transit (TTC):**

The site is accessible two ways via TTC. The closest is via the #92 bus southbound from Woodbine subway station down to the end of the line at the Ashbridges Bay turn-around loop. This is just east of the practice site (450m) and a 5 minute walk through the park. The other route is via the #501 Queen streetcar, east bound from downtown. Exit at Coxwell Ave and walk south along Coxwell, across Lake Shore Blvd where it turns into Ashbridges Bay Park Road (900m or 10-minute walk).



**Weather:**

No practices are cancelled in advance due to the weather! Rain at 5:30pm does not mean it will be raining at 6:00pm or 7:00pm by the lake. We do this because every practice is important and we can't take a chance on missing a practice opportunity. I would cancel or delay a practice AT THE DOCKS about 5-15 minutes before the practice starts IF we see lightning or hear thunder, or there are high wind/waves. This is very rare! In the rare case of severe long-duration weather there would be an exception to the rule and the practice may be cancelled in advance. The coach will e-mail or call the crew. Call the coach if you have any doubts, but again assume the practice is always a GO. This has happened only once or twice in years.



### **What to Wear:**

If there is a chance of light rain, wear something loose and waterproof. Better to wear loose thin layers if it is cooler as you can remove layers as you warm up or sun comes out. This is a water sport so you may get a little splashed, but nothing too much. You could wear old running shoes on your feet, or water shoes (or flip flops, but your feet do need some leverage on the boat). Use a baseball cap for hot sun or light rain if you like. Don't worry too much as you will get a feel for it after the first practice. You may also want to bring a flat cushion like a garden kneeling pad to sit on (what we affectionately call a butt pad). A water bottle is also highly recommended so you can drink during breaks on the water. In late April and May it can be cool, some paddlers wear (MEC) paddle gloves for grip / warmth.

### **FIRST Practice Checklist:**

For the first practice, there will normally be some extra one-time preparations to perform...

- ◆ Completion of our Rusty Dragons waiver (standard waiver that all clubs use).
- ◆ Completion of the Balmy Beach Waiver and insurance form (we are using their site).
- ◆ Orientation of the site (building, parking, paddles, life jackets, docks, waters).
- ◆ Review of safety rules (see Safety Rules section).

### **Regular Pre-Practice Checklist:**

Prior to getting on the water for a practice, the following actions are normally required by all paddlers arriving at the practice site...

- ◆ Check in with the coach/captain (attendance) so the coach can prepare a seating plan.
- ◆ Get a life jacket from the boathouse. They must be worn, of proper fit, and done up.
- ◆ Get a paddle from the boathouse (lengths 43-51"). Coach will help you pick a size.
- ◆ Listen to the practice plan summary and objectives from the coach.
- ◆ Do a light warm-up and stretch. This can be done individually or in groups.
- ◆ Get your seat assignment for the practice from the coach.

### **Regattas:**

Racing is a lot of fun and a huge adrenaline rush - this is why we practice! Regattas are usually a day in length (often 25-80 teams), although larger ones with 80-150 teams can be two days in length. Teams usually have 2-3 races per day, and they are typically 500m in length. Top teams can complete this distance in under 2 minutes, and the average recreational team may take 2.5 to 3.0 minutes.

Other standard race distances, especially for national and world championships, may include 200m (sprints) as well as the exciting 2000m races (with staggered starts, no lanes, and looping 4 times around a 500m course with 3 turns).

**Paddles:**

Dragon boat paddles are different than canoe and kayak paddles. Their designs must conform to International Dragon Boat Federation (IDBF) standards. They are supplied free for use at all practices and at the regattas. They have a T-shaped top, and the blade is thin and flat with a square bottom. They are normally made of either wood (oak) or much lighter carbon fibre. Either type is great for paddling. You do NOT have to buy your own paddle.



If you choose to buy your own paddle (usually in second year or later, if at all), you should consult with your coach first. They are sold at MEC and also at most dragon boat festivals. Their costs vary from \$45 for a Grey Owl oak paddle, to \$210 for a carbon fibre high-end paddle. You can also buy paddle bags to keep them from getting scratched, as well as easier carrying. Remember that you now have to carry it to and from practice. There is a benefit however as you get more serious racing, as you will be using a consistent paddle, and also not have to use the generic (often shorter paddles of fixed size) that are available at regattas.

**Life Jackets / Personal Flotation Devices (PFDs):**

PFDs must be worn and fastened properly by paddlers and coaches at all times while in the boat. This rule applies no matter how well you can swim. PFDs are available for free use during all practices and at all regattas. Again, you never have to buy your own life jacket. But you may also choose to purchase and use your own PFD for comfort and fit. A good paddling PFD allows for mobility of the arms and body. A common life jacket used by paddlers is the Stohlquist Wedge-E (available at Mountain Equipment Co-Operative and other suppliers).





### Safety Rules:

The coach will review the safety rules at the first practice, and reminders as needed afterwards. Most are common-sense. Remember that safety is the responsibility of everyone on the boat.

- ◆ Load the boat carefully, usually in pairs and a few at a time for balance.
- ◆ Listen to the coach at all times, and be ready to stop paddling or stop the boat if needed.
- ◆ Stay seated in the boat at all times unless directed to move by the coach. Do not stand or make any sudden moves in the boat. Shifts in balance could capsize the boat if more than one person moved.
- ◆ Moving seats while on the water is rare, but may be required to better balance the boat.
- ◆ We will leave the water immediately if we see lightning or hear thunder.
- ◆ We will not leave the inner bay if the water is not calm in outer bay, or the water is colder.
- ◆ We do not venture far from shore, especially in the spring when the water is cooler.
- ◆ We use the buddy system should paddlers end up in the water for any reason. Locate your seat mate if this should happen, and STAY with the boat (it will not sink). Wait for directions from the coach and/or the safety boat.
- ◆ It is the responsibility of the paddler to ensure that the coach and team captain are aware of any special medical considerations you may have, including allergies, asthma, or other conditions that could put you at risk. This will remain confidential where needed.
- ◆ The coach will have a cell phone on the boat in case of an emergency.
- ◆ Anyone on the boat with valid CPR certificates will be identified. The coach normally has this.
- ◆ While the practice is in progress (other than rest components), there should normally be no talking on the boat. There are numerous reasons for this; 1) it promotes safety as you will be able to hear the coach if a sudden hold-the-boat command is issued, 2) it respects the other paddlers as they need to hear the coach providing directions or feedback to the team, and 3) last but not least – you are probably not concentrating on the paddling technique and proper breathing if you are talking.
- ◆ When in wavy conditions, the stability of the boat (balance) is much weaker. This can be compensated for by having paddlers spread the weight out to make the boat wider (in effect). Paddlers must resist the temptation to move closer to the centre of the boat and instead lean out over the water, and take strokes a few more inches away from the side of the boat. And most importantly listen to the coach. Do NOT stop paddling at any time unless the coach says so, even if a wave splashes the side of the boat. Imagine a wave hitting one side of the boat and everyone on that side pulls their body into the boat to save getting splashed. The centre of gravity in the boat suddenly shifts, and that plus the waves could roll the boat and swamp it (fill with water).
- ◆ If you see something unsafe, or feel unsafe or uncomfortable on the water, please do not hesitate to let the coach or team captain know (confidentially after practice if needed).



### Position on the Boat:

There are 10 bench seats on the boat. A pair of paddlers will sit on each seat; one paddling on their left side and one on their right. There is no formula to predict which side of the boat you will most likely paddle on (the hand you write with doesn't really matter). The coach will guide you to pick sides and try both if needed. Many paddlers do both sides equally well. There are different sections of the boat (identified by seat #1 at front through to seat #10 at back):

- ◆ **Seat #1: Stokers** – They set the pace for all paddlers behind them. As they have no one to follow they are usually experienced and consistent paddlers with a good feel for the boat.
- ◆ **Seats #2-3: Front** – The benches are narrower at the front of the boat. Paddlers here may not be largest paddlers, and they must carefully stay in synch with the stokers as all paddlers in remaining seats behind them are generally following this group of six by sight.
- ◆ **Seats #4-7: Engine Room** – This section of the boat is wider and a little lower to the water, so it is a great place for the bigger and stronger paddlers on the team. This is where the name Engine Room comes from (the main strength of the boat).
- ◆ **Seats #8-10: Back or Rockets** – This section of the boat is slightly narrower like the front for smaller sized paddlers. As these paddlers have many paddlers in front of them paddling, the water is already fast by the time it gets to these paddlers. As a result, these paddlers must paddle a little faster through the water than those at the front with still water. This is where the name Rockets comes from.

Before getting into the boat for a practice, the coach will tell you your seat number and side. Examples are "3 Left", "8 Right", etc. Early in the season it will not matter at all where you sit in the boat, and you may sit in different seats each practice. As the training progresses the coach will start to move you to a more permanent "area" of the boat. No one owns any particular seat. Please note that where you sit is not an indicator of your paddling ability (good or bad)! This is a team sport and every position contributes to powering the boat in differing ways.

### The Dragon Boat Stroke Phases:

There are three major phases/parts to the dragon boat stroke (and many components to each once you get more experienced). Your coach will explain these in detail and use drills to help you learn how to move your paddle, arms, and body through each.

**#1 Catch Phase** – This is the front of the stroke where the paddle is up front and ready to hit the water and take a stroke (a slight pause). Everyone needs to be in synch at the catch no matter where they sit. Your water side arm (lower arm on paddle) will be stretched forward.

**#2 Pull Phase** – The paddle hits the water and is pushed down and pulled through the water to accelerate the boat forward. Your body sits up and de-rotates as you exhale.

**#3 Recovery Phase** – Paddle is taken out of the water (Exit) without losing power at the back of the stroke and is returned to the Catch position. Relax and inhale to recover.

**Basic Commands on the Water:**

These will be reviewed by the coach at the site before going on the water or where needed while on water. They will become second nature after a few practices.

**Sit-Up:** When the coach is ready for the next training piece, this command alerts the crew to prepare and listen for the next commands. Sit up with paddle in hand and paddle across lap.

**Paddles Up!** Paddlers rotate outside hands forward and get into the Catch position.

**Take It Away!** Paddlers start paddling, following the stroke.

**Let it Ride:** Stop paddling and take paddles out of water (left boat glide on its own).

**Attention Please!** In a race, paddlers will likely be told to Sit Up at the start line and prepare for start when guns go off. The Attention Please command means the gun will go off and the race will start within 5 seconds. Everyone is focussed and ready to paddle.

**Head's Up!** A reminder when paddlers are fatiguing to keep the head up. This ensures good sight to the front to keep in sync, and ensures body is not hunched with reduced lung capacity.

**Hold the Boat!** A command to quickly slow or stop the boat by sinking paddles straight down into the water and holding them there until told to Let It Ride. This is an important command as it could be safety related to prevent a collision with another boat or the dock.

**Feather your Paddles!** A command for you to put your paddle flat on the water (away from the boat) in order to steady the boat and maximize safety. This will be demonstrated on the water. This may be needed in rough water or when someone is moving seats. The paddle is "feathered" on the water to maintain pressure and in effect it stabilizes the boat by widening

**Back It Down:** A command to move the boat backwards slowly. This is done by sitting up, putting paddle in water at your side, and pushing paddle forward (opposite a normal stroke). Always keep in stroke by still watching the stroke and resisting urge to look at the paddle that starts a little behind you. Trust me, the paddle is in your hands and you don't need to look!

**Draw and Pry:** These are commands to move the boat side-ways, or more normally the front or back of the boat sideways. The "Draw" command means to sink your paddle in the water to the side a few feet from the boat and pull (draw) the water towards you. The "Pry" command is the opposite; put the paddle in the water right beside the boat, then push the water directly away from you. This command is commonly used when pulling into a dock, or at the start line in a race to line up the boat with the race course (as the wind and/or waves can make the boat drift as we wait for the race to start).

**Contact:**

If you have any questions about or suggestions for this guide, please do not hesitate to contact the author Tim MacFarlane. This guide may be copied in whole or in part by anyone.

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