

Paddle-ability: inclusive canoeing and kayaking

Ruth Holdway

Information for coaches, volunteers and clubs

With a bit of imagination and possibly a little adaptation, most disabled people can take to the water in a canoe or kayak. Paddleability is not about expensive hoists and pieces of specialised kit – its about making canoeing as inclusive as possible. Its about making canoeing accessible to a whole range of people who may not be able to access and enjoy other outdoor activities.

There is not a one-fits-all solution to getting people on the water – it all depends on their disability. Having a positive and open-minded approach as a coach or fellow paddler opens up as many opportunities as does specialist equipment. Participants don't even have to be able to swim - so long as they are confident in and around water – after all everyone floats the same in a buoyancy aid or lifejacket.

Don't just think of wheelchairs when it comes to disability canoeing. It could mean taking a blind person in a K2, open canoe or crew boat with a sighted paddler or helm, or it could be taking a group of deaf people and miming the actions. For paddlers with learning difficulties it might be a case of taking out smaller groups and breaking strokes down to the basics – Paddlepower awards might be an ideal structure to work through.

It might be just a case of helping someone get in and out of their boat, or carrying their boat to the water if they had a lower limb disability. Or it might be more suitable to take a group with learning difficulties in a stable crew boat such as a bellboat, outrigger canoe or even two open canoes rafted together, where teachers, parents or helpers can get in the boat with them. It's even possible to strap wheelchairs into rafted open canoes.

There are specialist seats for canoes and kayaks designed for people who are paralysed from the waist down who may not have the ability to hold themselves upright. Its even possible to learn to roll a kayak with one. However a high-tech solution is not always the best and it may be that a rolled up camping matt and foam paddling is more suitable. It is also possible to modify paddles for people with one arm or who are unable to grip a standard paddle.

It might be appropriate for some people to wear a lifejacket or a buoyancy with extra straps or a collar depending on their body size/shape and their ability to keep their head out of the water. With an outrigger canoe or bellboat the chance of capsizing is practically nil so this might open up opportunities for those not confident in water.

For paddlers interested in competition there are Paddle-ability races alongside the National Sprint regattas, which are open to anyone with a physical or learning disability. This could lead to the Para Olympics or Special Olympics.

It is now law (Disability Discrimination Act – DDA for short) that clubhouse facilities are accessible to disabled people and if you're in the process of applying for government grants for new buildings it has to be designed to be fully DDA compliant. Even if you do not have any disabled members in your club yet, do not see this as an inconvenient expense – it will open up opportunities for your club to approach disabled groups and could bring new faces to your club. You might be able to access grants to help you develop links with disability groups. However, don't just wait for disabled groups to come to you – be pro-active, they might not know what opportunities are available.

For more information read:

Chapter 10: Inclusive Canoeing and Kayaking by Suresh Paul in the new *BCU Handbook and Canoeing for Disabled People*: Geoff Smedley. Both available from the BCU.

Contact your BCU regional disability representative – details found in the BCU Directory or from the BCU. Or contact the BCU Paddle-ability officer, Viv Kendrick, 8 Yew Grove, Huddersfield, HD4 5XG 01484 460154 (Home) viv.kendrick@wynrush.co.uk

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Information for people with disabilities or learning difficulties and their carers

Paddlesports are so diverse that there will be some form of the sport that practically everyone can do, whatever their age or ability. Canoeing and kayaking can be a great way of accessing the outdoors, getting exercise and independence.

If you leave the mind-set of kayaking being a dangerous sport with tight-fitting boats, rough water and a high chance of capsizing, you'll soon discover that there are lots of branches of the sport that are suitable for everyone – although if whitewater kayaking floats your boat, then go for it!

There are hundreds of mainstream boats that can be accessed by a whole range of people – disabled or not. Here are a few ideas.....

- Fear of getting trapped in a boat or unable to access a tight cockpit? – try a Sit-on-tops, open canoe, modern recreational boats with large cockpits or a stable racing boat.
- Want to take a group out who have learning difficulties, are blind or deaf? – bellboats, outrigger canoes and rafted open canoes are ideal as they are incredibly stable and teachers, parents, siblings and carers can all come out too.
- Why not pair up with an experienced paddler in a double kayak or canoe, whether it is a racing K2, sea kayak or touring boat?
- If you'd struggle with steering – try a straight running touring boat, racing kayak or one fitted with a rudder or skeg.
- Balance an issue? – most modern recreational kayaks are now fairly stable or you could try adding an outrigger.
- In a wheelchair? – some centres will take paddlers out in their wheelchairs strapped into rafted-up open canoes. Alternatively there are usually lots of willing volunteers that would help you get in your boat, or hold it steady whilst you transferred yourself across. The wheelchair could even come too if you were on a river trip in an open canoe.
- Got that competitive streak? All competitive disciplines are open to everyone. Alternatively paddle-ability sprint races take place at the national Sprint regattas – you could always aim for the Para Olympics or Special Olympics.

It may be that a few adaptations may be needed to your chosen type of craft or to the way you get into your boat. These do not need to be expensive or specialist, although there are a few specifically designed devices that may be of use. It may be that all that is needed is some additional foam and some gaffer tape. You might want to use gel-pads if you have a problem with friction sores. There are specially designed seats that will support paddlers paralysed below the waist as well as buoyancy aids that will fit unique body forms or will support the head if in the water. There are loads of ideas in Geoff Smedley's book *Canoeing for Disabled People*.

Don't be afraid of asking your local club or centre if they can help you to start paddling. Remember you're the expert in your disability so help them to help you, especially if you can come up with a few ideas on what type of canoeing you'd like to do and any modifications that might be needed.

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