

STARS IN THEIR EYES PART TWO

Open Canoe BCU 2 Star Award

Article by James Weir, images by Micha Schomann

The governing body of canoe-sport in the UK, the British Canoe Union, has designed a set of awards intended to encourage participation and measure progress for open canoeists. Starting at the One Star Award; an entry level award designed to increase interest, knowledge and introduce basic strokes, and culminating with Five Star; an award that tests a wide range of open canoeing skills, from expedition paddling to whitewater. This is the second of a series of articles dedicated to helping you to 'reach for the stars' and will focus on the skills and knowledge needed to gain your BCU Two Star Canoe award.

The Open Canoe Two Star award is designed to reinforce the open canoeist's flat-water stroke work and encourage deliberate, controlled, canoe paddling, by understanding the way each paddle stroke effects the movement of the canoe. The award builds on the strokes learnt for the One Star Award and introduces new techniques and concepts in understanding the dynamics of open canoeing and open canoe paddle strokes.

During the Two Star assessment candidates have the option of paddling either tandem, (two people in the canoe), or solo, (one person alone in the canoe). In this article I will solely focus on the tandem variant of the award, solo open canoeing will be focused on next month during the Three Star Award.

Bend and Lift

The first challenge is of course lifting, carrying and launching the canoe onto the water. This technique is much the same as that used for the One Star award, remember to bend your knees and not your back, take regular breaks and do not over strain yourself.





All Forwards

Forwards paddling, although already learnt for the One Star Award, should be improved upon, with greater focus on achieving an efficient, dynamic forward paddle stroke. Good trunk rotation and use of the whole upper-body to pull the paddle through the water, keeping the blade submerged at all times and the paddle shaft as vertical as possible through out the length of the stroke. Recover the paddle out of the water when it is level with your body and keep the blade close to the water as it is returned to start the next stroke. Both paddlers should concentrate on synchronized paddling and balancing the power of each paddle stroke, so the canoe travels in a straight line in the desired direction without the need for excessive steering or corrective strokes.

The J-Stroke

One of the key strokes for the open canoe paddler to master is the J-stroke, this stroke combines both forwards paddling and steering in to one fluid stroke and is essential for solo canoe paddling. The easiest way to understand the J-stroke is to imagine you will draw a letter J in the water with the paddle, this is of course assuming you paddle on the left-hand side, if you make the stroke on the right it will look like a mirrored J. Start the stroke at the top of the J and perform a normal forwards paddle stroke, then, as the paddle reaches the body, turn the drive face of the paddle away from the canoe, so the paddle is now in a ruddering position and can be used to adjust the direction of travel. At first the J-stroke can feel very uncomfortable for your wrist on the T-grip hand, but this will soon pass as you become more familiar with the stroke. A common mistake is to turn the drive face of the paddle towards the canoe instead of away from it, although this stroke also works it is not a correct J-stroke and should be discouraged. In tandem paddling the J-stroke should only be used by the stern paddler, and the bow paddler should perform a normal forwards paddle stroke.

Although it should not be necessary for the stern paddler to use the J-stroke to adjust the direction of the canoe on every stroke, it is good practise to use the J-stroke for each stroke.

On The Turn

More advanced turning manoeuvres are required for the Two Star Award and the paddlers are expected to work more effectively as a team to move the canoe in a controlled, fluid and deliberate manner. The key skill to master for these turns is communication; good controlled turns cannot be achieved without first making a plan. These turns should be performed whilst the canoe is moving forwards; the front paddler performs a sweep stroke whilst the stern paddler performs an exaggerated J-stroke. To turn the canoe in the other direction the front paddler performs a draw stroke combined with the back paddler performing a sweep stroke. Leaning into the turn, similar to a skier or a motorcyclist, improves the efficiency of the movement.



J-Stroke



Side Slipping

During the One Star Award the draw stroke was learnt for moving the canoe sideways, there are several further variants of this stroke, which are explored in the Two Star Award. First and foremost, remember to turn your head and upper body in the direction of intended movement and lift the leading edge of the canoe, so the water flows under the canoe, dropping the leading edge will result in the edge digging into the water and resisting the movement. The feathered draw is so named because of the feathered recovery of the paddle blade. Place the paddle blade in the water and pull it towards the canoe, as per a normal draw stroke. When the paddle blade comes within 10cm of the canoe twist the paddle 90 degrees, so the drive-face of the paddle blade faces the stern of the canoe as per a normal forward paddle stroke. Slice the blade back out to the starting position of the draw stroke, concentrating on keeping the blade under the water during the feathered recovery, turn the paddle back 90 degrees and repeat.

The end effect is the same as that of a normal draw stroke, but because the blade is kept underwater for the complete stroke, the canoeist has a greater control over the canoe. The paddle can be used effectively only when it is underwater, and so by feathering the blade back to the start position the paddler is able to maintain maximum control over the canoe throughout the cycle of the stroke.

There are three other techniques to explore during the Two Star Award to move the canoe sideways, the sculling draw, the pry and the off side draw; you are not expected to have completely mastered these strokes, but a basic knowledge of how they are performed and a good attempt at each is expected. As with all draw or pry strokes remember to lift the leading edge of the canoe and turn your head and shoulders in the direction of travel, this is a key skill, which will increase your chances of successfully drawing the canoe in the desired direction with ease and grace.

The sculling draw is a continuous draw stroke that allows the canoeist to, not only, move the canoe sideways but also change its direction at the same time. The easiest way to explain the sculling draw is to imagine drawing

a figure of eight, on its side, in the water, with the paddle blade. If you start at the bottom left of the eight with the paddle blade and slice towards the top right point, whilst pulling on the blade you can create sideways motion and still maintain the distance between the paddle blade and the side of the canoe, now change the angle and slice back towards the top left point of the eight from the bottom left point. The idea is to maintain the distance between the paddle blade and the canoe and create an everlasting draw stroke; this is exactly the same stroke canoe paddlers use to paddle their canoes in a straight line, as it enables the paddle to have constant control over movement in every direction simultaneously!

The pry stroke is the exact opposite of the feathered draw, instead of pulling the canoe towards the paddle; the paddle is used to move the canoe away from the paddle, then feather back to the start position. The blade is placed under the water next to the side of the canoe with the shaft vertical and the bottom hand holding the paddle shaft against the gunwale. The blade is then pivoted about the gunwale so as the canoe is propelled away from the paddle, then twisted and feathered back to the start position and the stroke is repeated.





Further Reading:

Path of the Paddle – Bill Mason
Canadian Stroke Guide – Pollner
Canoe & kayak Handbook – BCU
Canoeing & Kayaking – Marcus Baillie
Canoe Poling – Harry Rock
Canoeing – Dave Harrison
Tandem Canoeing (Nuts 'n' Bolts) – Lou Glaros
Open Canoe Techniques – Nigel Foster

Web Sites:

www.songofthepaddle.co.uk
www.ukriversguidebook.co.uk
www.bcu.org.uk

Big up and thanks to Nookie and Robson for quality products, Bijan for canoeing, Micha for photographs, Hotel Schloss Fernsteensee for the use of their beautiful lake, and of course the Sun for shining.

The third and final sideways variant to investigate is the off-side draw stroke, essentially this stroke is identical to a normal One Star draw stroke, but is performed on the off, or non-paddling side of the boat. The paddler reaches across the canoe to the non-paddling side without changing the handgrip on the paddle and pulls the canoe towards the paddle, not forgetting to slice the blade out of the water when it comes within 15cm of the canoe. Forgetting this may result in the blade continuing under the canoe, and potentially causing a capsized! The off-side draw stroke can also be performed using the feathered draw recovery technique, but this is unnecessary for the Two Star and slightly more complicated.

Extra Support

As part of the One Star Award the low brace was learnt to prevent the canoe from capsizing and you were expected to show a reasonable knowledge of the basic technique, for the Two Star a stronger more effective and reliable low brace is required.

Both paddlers should move to middle of the canoe, with both paddling on the same side and kneel. Apply pressure with the knees to tip the canoe off balance, pivoting at the hips and trying to keep your spine vertical. When the canoe loses balance start the low brace. Remember to keep both your arms and weight over the paddle shaft and brace down and forwards with the paddle blade and your upper body, concentrating on keeping the blade near the surface of the water, your head in line with your spine and your eyes looking forward. Combining the brace stroke with pressure from the knees on the non-paddling side should bring the canoe back level and balanced. Each canoe has a different balance point and it is important for each crew to become familiar with how their canoe both maintains and loses balance.

All Aboard

Jumping out into deep water and climbing back into the canoe is a requirement for the Two Star Award, and this is often one of the areas of the award that presents the most problems. Climbing into an open boat from deep water is not easy, but

by applying a few good techniques it should be achievable for most paddlers. First start with the paddlers on opposite sides of the canoe, and in the middle, and take it in turns to climb in. The aim is to pull your self up the using the centre yoke, similar to climbing a rope. Before starting to climb in, place both hands on the gunwale and kick your legs out behind you and keep kicking as you pull yourself up the yoke, until you are safely into the canoe. Sometimes the buoyancy aid presents a problem, the front pocket or the top lip of the buoyancy catches on the gunwale of the boat and resists the climbing movement, there is no easy solution to this problem when it happens, but if you are aware of the problem in advance of your assessment it can prevent hours of frustration by simply swapping buoyancy aids, for a model that doesn't snag, before hand.

Without a Paddle...

As part of the Two Star Award a basic knowledge of non-paddle techniques, which are used to propel an open canoe, such as lining, poling and sailing is required.

Lining is a technique using ropes attached to the front and rear of the canoe to move the canoe up or down the river bank, this is a particularly useful skill when you encounter water that is too shallow to paddle, either because the canoe is grounding on the river bed or because there is not sufficient water depth to make paddle strokes. Poling is the use of a pole, approximately 3.5metres long, to propel the canoe along. Canoe poling is very similar to punting. Key points to remember include keeping your feet wide apart and bending your knees slightly. Sailing the canoe is a superb way to move the canoe when the elements are in your favour, from the simplest form of sailing by just holding your paddle blade in the air or holding your waterproof coat in the air with your paddle, to complex sailing rigs specially designed for open canoes. These non-paddle techniques have already been covered in depth in previous issues of this magazine and a short-explanation would not do any of these skills justice. Try and track down some back issues or check out the recommended reading section at the end for in-depth explanations.

Increase your Knowledge

A more advanced knowledge of canoeing is expected for the Two Star, and you will be tested by verbal questions during the assessment. Information on canoeing can be found from a huge variety of sources, try the BCU Handbook, the Internet or asking fellow canoeists. Do you recognise the differences between different types of canoe? For example can you tell a whitewater canoe from a racing canoe and explain how the differences affect the performance? Can you tell dangerous stretches of water from safe ones and are you aware of the safety precautions you should take before venturing out onto the water? A basic knowledge of the medical or environmental conditions that may affect canoeists is also required. Can you recognise the signs and symptoms of hypothermia or leptospirosis (Weils Disease)? Do you know how to find out if you are allowed to canoe on a section of river or canal and what preparations would you make for a days adventure? Do you know how far you can paddle comfortably in a day and what would bring with you in the canoe? Are you aware of the different competitive disciplines in canoeing and what the competitors are expected to do? What are the important rules to remember when out canoeing as a group and how can you help the group together and working together effectively?

There's a lot to learn and take in, but it can be informative, educational and, above all, really fun to find out.

These top tips are not intended to replace a formal course of instruction, but to provide another point of view and maybe different techniques for achieving the same goal, all of which will hopefully help to further your learning as an open canoeist. For those who do not hold a Two Star award consider taking a course to improve your open canoeing skills, for those of you who have already passed your Two Star do not forget the strokes and techniques you have learnt. Practice makes perfect. So, with autumn well and truly upon us why not contact your local canoeing centre and get out and get yourself a second badge to sew on to your buoyancy aid? **TC**