

Leaning Canoes On Corners

By Marc Gillespie, March 2008, <http://nymcra.org>

Lean up your turns-but under control! In any canoe race there are key opportunities to break away from the pack or conversely—to get dropped and one of them involves corners, whether naturally occurring or man-made (buoy turns). The ability to turn your boat while maintaining speed is the key to staying in the race or breaking away.



When most racers begin paddling, they are hesitant to lean for fear of capsizing and many never overcome that fear. On the other end of the spectrum are those individuals who recklessly drop their hips every chance they get so they can show off their superior balance and, in the process, make their partners feel very unstable and unable to paddle effectively. Somewhere in between is the ideal.

The key principle to understand in leaning a boat, whether it is C-1 or C-2 is that you are presenting a more curved surface to the water while lifting the ends slightly to allow them to slide around versus going straight ahead. The curved surface allows the boat to carve a turn just like a downhill ski does. In fact, a good exercise to get comfortable with how this works is to get the boat up to speed and then lean it while holding your paddle out of the water, but ready to catch you if you go too far. The dished sides of the Pro boats provide a perfect edge to rest on as you lean into a turn which is why they handle much better than the amateur boats with the straight sides did.

In most cases, there is no need to lean a boat so far that the cover is under water, especially if one of the partners is uncomfortable with that degree of hip flexion.



A slight lean is often all that's needed.

Along those same lines, both partners can use their hips to gradually and simultaneously initiate the lean, hold it there and gradually drop it back. Smooth, professional boat handling is not enhanced by jerky, momentum shifting movements by either paddler. Once you get the boat leaned up and it starts to carve, you must keep it there throughout the entire turn without letting it continually drop back to level with each jerky stroke. This requires confidence on the part of both paddlers that each one has support of his or her end of the boat.

This is where a proper paddle stroke comes in.

As I have mentioned many times, the canoe stroke is the same whether you are paddling straight ahead or drawing—only the angle of the stroke relative to the boat changes. On a forward stroke, the pressure on the blade is down which anchors the blade and pulls the boat up to the blade. Once the blade is vertical, there is no more support, and the stroke is over. Same with a stern or bow draw, or a “sides” sweep in the bow. The blade of the paddle has to be oriented so that it provides the same anchoring support as in a forward stroke and then pressure is applied to either pull the boat sideways to the blade (draw stroke) or push the boat away (sweep stroke).

By the way, in the bow you can draw or sweep to turn, but in the stern, you should primarily be drawing to turn. I see too many people in the stern sitting straight up or even leaning slightly back and sweeping the stern rather than drawing it over. No wonder they can't turn—they're pushing the boat the wrong way! What they need to do is lean forward and put pressure on the blade in a drawing motion, so the stern of the boat moves to the paddle, not away from it.

To summarize, a good, steady, controlled, supported lean is a paddler's best friend for making fast turns. It's OK to practice seeing how far you can lean the boat, but practically speaking, more time should be spent with both partners working on the coordinated motions that allow them both to feel comfortable the degree of lean, the speed of getting there and back and holding the lean while paddling effectively.