

Back to the Future: The Tampa T Rescue

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Introduction

For the past eight weeks, the lead author of this paper, along with 4 co-authors (Jacqueline Whitaker, R.N, John Browning, EMT, Robin Pope, Ph.D./PA-C, and Tim Finkenbinder, J.D.) has spent many hundreds of hours working on how to deal with personal and group safety in paddlesports – specifically with respect to risks related to COVID-19. The culmination of this work is a manuscript entitled [**Paddlesports During the Age of COVID-19: Risk Assessment and Risk Management**](#). This manuscript contains an extensive analysis of the science behind COVID-19, risk assessment, risk management, and applications to paddlesports. In addition, the appendices in this document contain an extensive set of tools and recommendations organized into such key areas as event planning, running an event, and so forth. This document, including the appendices, serves as the basis for the American Canoe Association’s guidance on paddling in the age of COVID-19 (which was released on May 22, 2020).

While doing the research and analysis, one issue that came up repeatedly was concern about doing assisted rescues (since they typically involve very close physical proximity). This concern about the ability to safely do rescues is one of the major factors which event organizers are facing when they consider if, and how, to run paddlesports events. For further information on this topic, you may wish to consult [**Rescues**](#) (Appendix # 9).

After “finishing” work on the manuscript, the authors decided to embark on a series of tests regarding the practicality of our suggestions and whether there are different techniques that we might “invent” while on the water. The lead author of this paper ran the first session on May 17, 2020, and the five contributors listed on this article were all active participants on land and on the water. In addition,

Jacqueline Whitaker, R.N. (who is, by background, a nationally known infection prevention and control expert) served as both a “safety observer” and videographer.

One of the main things that we wanted to experiment with was rescue techniques. In particular, we wanted to see if it was possible to perform safe and effective rescues which do not break infection prevention and control principles for COVID-19. Our original guess was that it would not be possible, but we were thrilled to be able to “invent” several practical techniques. The results of this session are described in the remainder of this document, and we have also released an accompanying [video](#).

PLEASE NOTE: WHAT THIS VIDEO DOES NOT SHOW IS THE NEED FOR BOTH THE RESCUER AND THE SWIMMER TO PERFORM HAND HYGIENE (I.E., SANITIZE THEIR HANDS) ONCE THE RESCUE IS DONE. IN ADDITION TO MAINTENANCE OF SOCIAL DISTANCING (WHICH IS WHAT THIS VIDEO SHOWS), HAND HYGIENE IS ALSO A CRITICAL PART OF INFECTION PREVENTION/CONTROL. NOTE ALSO THAT THE PADDLERS IN THIS VIDEO ARE A COUPLE – NO NEED FOR FACE COVERINGS.

Additionally, please note that this video is not “perfect”- for example, the rescuer could have more fully committed herself (by edging) to stabilize the swimmer’s boat and, in addition, she probably should have waited a few more seconds before moving further towards the swimmer’s bow during the re-entry. That being said, however, the video is “good enough” to illustrate the key steps in the rescue.

Infection Prevention and Control Principles Related to COVID-19

This is an exceptionally large and complex subject (hence the reason for the manuscript that we wrote on the subject). However, a number of principles are directly relevant to paddlesports rescues:

- Try to maintain a minimum 6 feet (2 meters) distance between people, at all times.
- Sanitize hands frequently – especially before and after contacting someone else, or something that someone else has touched, or may touch.

The reason for the first principle is because COVID-19 is spread mainly by airborne droplets (e.g., if someone who is infected, coughs, sneezes, talks, or breathes near you). Clearly, the longer you are in close proximity, the greater the risk of transmission ... unfortunately transmission can take place with even a brief exposure time.

The reason for the second principle is because COVID-19 can also enter the body through your mouth, nose, and eyes. Thus, if you touch your hand on something which the virus is on, and then touch your face (which people tend to do frequently), then you may infect yourself.

Breaks in 6 Feet (2 Meters) Distancing During Rescues

Our group was composed of sea kayakers, accordingly we started by analyzing the way in which T rescues are generally taught for sea kayaks:

1. The swimmer holds on to their boat and paddle, and moves towards the bow of their boat, while the rescuer approaches in a “T” formation.

2. The rescuer grabs the bow of the boat being rescued and the swimmer then works their way along their declines, grabs the rescuers boat (generally in front of the rescuer, but sometimes behind them) and holds on.
3. The rescuer empties the swimmer's boat.
4. The rescuer lines the boats up side by side (generally bow to stern is recommended, but bow to bow will also work).
5. The swimmer positions themselves behind the cockpit of their boat and the rescuer stabilizes the swimmer's boat directly in front of the cockpit.
6. The swimmer then reenters using either a back deck or heel hook technique.
7. The swimmer puts their spray skirt on, while the rescuer continues to stabilize their boat.
8. The boats are then separated.

Highly skilled rescuers can accomplish the above in well under a minute (Scott and Jill, who are a couple and practice extensively, can do it in about 40 seconds) but, for the average recreational paddler, this process can take many minutes.

In order determine if/how the “6 feet (2 meters) rule” is violated during a T rescue, we pre-marked our boats with tape positioned to be 6 feet in front of the paddler's face and 6 feet behind the back of the paddler's head (this tape is clearly visible in the video that we released). We then closely observed a T rescue which was intentionally done at a “leisurely” pace. Based on this observation, we noted that the 6 feet (2 meters) rule was broken three times: steps 2, step 5/6, and step 7.

Fixing the First Problem (Step # 2)

Our first question was could we eliminate the break in social distancing when the swimmer grabs onto the rescuer's boat. The answer appeared to be no ... until the lead author of the paper realized that there was an alternative. In particular, the “Old Way” of teaching T rescues is to have the swimmer work their way to the stern of their boat and hold on while the rescuer empties it. The reason that this technique has largely fallen out of favor is because of the risk of the swimmer losing contact with their boat and then drifting away. However, use of this technique does completely remove the problem associated with step #2. The reason that we have titled this paper “Back to the Future” is because (in order to maintain 6 feet/2 meter social distancing) we are potentially reviving use of a technique which has fallen out of favor. As to “The Tampa T Rescue,” all the authors of this paper happen to reside in the Tampa Bay area.

Fixing the Second Problem (Step # 5/6)

Tom Joseph gets the credit on this idea: Once the swimmer's boat is emptied, maneuver the boats so that the rescuer's bow is pointed at the swimmer's stern. This gets the boats lined up but, at no time, is the 6 feet (2 meters) separation broken. Note that it is easier to bring the boats into this configuration by moving your boat, as opposed to moving the swimmer's boat (this can be best accomplished by tightening your core muscles and “moving your legs under you”). Rather than stabilizing the swimmer's boat by holding on at the front of the cockpit, stabilization is achieved at a point 6 feet in front of the swimmer's face (depending upon the length of the boats, this is generally in front of the forward hatch cover). Is this an optimal place to stabilize from? It certainly is not as secure as being closer to the cockpit. However, it does work and none of the paddlers in our group (granted we are all reasonably skilled) had any issues. In fact, Jacqueline, who weighs approximately 135 pounds, was easily able to rescue the lead author who, on a good day, weighs 225 pounds. One lesson learned while we practiced

this technique is that it is beneficial that the deck lines be tight (but not excessively so) to maintain positive control.

Fixing the Third Problem (Step #7)

When putting a spray skirt on, almost everyone tends to lean far forward, thus breaking the desired distancing. Jill Lingard gets the credit on this fix: once the swimmer is in their seat, they are generally much more stable, and the rescuer can get away with less support. Thus, as the swimmer begins to sit up, the rescuer can move even closer to the swimmer's bow (therefore maintaining separation).

Hand Sanitization

In textbook infection prevention and control practice, hands should be washed (with soap and water) for at least 20 seconds, or should be sanitized with an approved agent (such as > 60% alcohol) both before, and after, touching another person or someone else's boat or gear. Realistically, while underway in a kayak, it is more practical to sanitize the hands than to wash them (all participants in this group were required to carry sanitizer spray or wipes). In addition, using hand sanitizer may be more eco-friendly as well.

It may, or may not, be practical to sanitize hands prior to a rescue. In a "real rescue" the likely priority is to rescue the swimmer. In a "practice" rescue situation, it may be much more practical to do this.

After a rescue, both the criticality and feasibility of sanitization increases and hand hygiene should be performed if at all possible.

Additional Fine Tuning

As noted above, it is not as secure (although it is workable) to stabilize the swimmer's boat further away from the cockpit. Scott Jantz noticed (and we all felt, as well) that it did seem to help matters if the swimmer made an effort to use the rescuer's boat for some support during the re-entry process (obviously, this is more applicable to back deck entries than heel hooks).

One of the author's observations, in many of the classes that he teaches, is how often even highly skilled paddlers "futz" while putting on their spray skirts. This is obviously problematic in rough water, but becomes an issue, even in flat conditions, when we wish to minimize the chance of any close contact. The solution for this is straight forward – paddlers should be encouraged to practice getting their spray skirts on rapidly. This practice can even occur on dry land.

One of the general principles, for most rescues, is that faster is better, as long as good technique is maintained. This is especially true in the age of COVID-19 because if social distancing is inadvertently lost, then it is better that the close proximity be shorter in duration rather than longer. With proper training, swimmers can become active participants in their own rescues and, thus, speed things up. As one example, immediately upon wet exiting, the swimmer should flip their boat deck up, while holding onto the deck lines, and work their way towards the stern of their boat.

Additional Thoughts

The technique that we have described (and posted a video of) uses a configuration with the rescuer's bow pointing at the swimmer's stern. It is also possible to use a configuration with the rescuer's stern pointing at the swimmer's stern. There are advantages, and disadvantages, to both options. For example, stern pointing at stern avoids people looking at each other "face to face." On the other hand, bow pointing at stern allows you to better observe what is going on, thus likely being able to better secure the boats (and therefore decreasing the likelihood of a botched rescue).

There does not seem to be an easy answer, or any answer at all, regarding how to do either a scoop rescue, or a hand of God rescue, without violating social distancing. However, all is not necessarily lost. As explained in our reference paper and appendices, "administrative interventions" may be applicable; for example, pairing up paddlers who have already been in close proximity with each other (e.g., significant others) is unlikely to lead to an increased risk of disease transmission.

In addition, Tom Joseph and Dorsey Demaster were able to devise an assisted rescue technique using a sling. This technique, which we will release in a separate video, maintains social distancing and could be of value for an exhausted paddler (thus potentially decreasing the need to do scoop rescues on certain individuals).

A major question is, of course, how applicable is the "Tampa T Rescue" technique described above? In our opinion, it is a viable option if paddlers are concerned about breaking social distancing. As with all rescue techniques, there are no guarantees. Practicing it in advance of needing it will certainly help!

With respect to use in conditions, we devised and tested this technique in flat water, with light winds (< 5 kts), and an occasional 1-2 foot boat wake. We do intend to test it in rougher water. Our guess is that the second modification (i.e., stabilizing the boats, further away from the cockpit) will begin to lose effectiveness in seas above 2 feet.

With respect to boats, unfortunately, there is no getting around the fact that what we have devised will not solve the social distancing problems for shorter boats (e.g., whitewater boats and "rec" boats). This technique is much more likely to be of value for longer boats such as sea kayaks, surf skis and possibly canoes (we have not yet experimented with them). However, adaptations of our approach may still be possible to minimize the duration of close proximity. Specifically, with respect to recreational kayaks we have always recommended, and continue to recommend, that they be taken no further out than a distance at which the paddler can comfortably swim back to shore.

Summary

We were more than pleasantly surprised to learn that it *is* possible to maintain social distancing through some creativity and thought. Although the technique that we have described will likely not replace a standard T rescue (almost certainly not in rougher conditions), it is a viable option in gentler waters and may offer an option for some instructors and group leaders who want to be able to do safer (from an infection control perspective), and effective, rescues in mild to moderate conditions.

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