



Photo: Rachel Dance



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# Safety First

**(Safe. Tea first)** **LOOKING AT SOME BROAD CONCEPTS FOR WHITE WATER RESCUE...**

As a Level 5 BCU Coach I spend a lot of time helping people develop their approach to rescues. It’s understandable really. A rescue tends to be a high- pressure situation where mistakes can be costly. No wonder people stress about them. Which is precisely why, in this article, I’m not going to look at specifically how to rescue someone. There are about 1001 ways to do this, ultimately all variations of a few simple tools that aren’t rocket science to use. Instead, I’m going to look at some broad, underpinning concepts to a rescue to help you ensure that the wheels stay on and everyone gets to go to the pub rather than A+E at the end of the paddling trip... ▶

Article by Tom Parker



Photo: Rachel Dance

### 1 – KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

Successful rescues are based on sound judgement calls. It's going to be far easier to assess the situation and make a sound judgement call if your upper lip is stiff. Panic is contagious and leads to things becoming even more skew-whiff very quickly indeed. Assess the situation, come up with a plan and get on with it.

### 2 – STAY ADAPTABLE

Napoleon once said; 'No plan ever survived contact with the enemy'. Actually, he didn't say that, but he said something similar in French and the overall point still stands. The environment we work in is dynamic, ever changing. When dealing with a rescue, we have to constantly be watching the situation and the environment, assessing how our plan is working the whole time. If the environment or situation changes, we need to be ready to change our plan accordingly.

This is critical. The environment is vastly more powerful than we are. Any approach we adopt must work with the environment to succeed, not in spite of it.

### 3 – SELF. TEAM. SWIMMER

As they say in *The Italian Job*, 'this is the self preservation society...' during a rescue, your priority is to yourself. This one is easy to grasp in theory, tricky in practice. After all, it's probably a friend or loved one in there. It's easy to fall into the trap of risking your life to save them. What a tragedy if the pair of you end up dead! Sure, do everything reasonable that you can to help them but make sure any risk is measured and acceptable.

### 4 – HELP THE SWIMMER TO HELP THEMSELVES

You'll notice I've talked about 'self team swimmer', as opposed to 'self team victim', which is the more common way of framing the concept. When someone falls out of their boat, are they a victim? Not normally. They're just as knowledgeable and capable as before, only without a boat. They're not a helpless victim, in fact the best person to rescue them is... them! So help them to help themselves. Shout directions of which way to swim, keep their morale high. They're still a part of the team, so make sure they act that way.

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Photo: Ed Waters

## 5 – RESCUE IS WHEN SAFETY HAS GONE WRONG

I'm pretty sure it was experienced expedition paddler, and bona fide white water legend, Dave Manby who coined this and I agree. We focus on rescue because it's sexy. Everyone loves throwing ropes about and jumping in. It's easy to teach how to rescue but tricky how to teach people how to be safe. Being safe is what we need to focus on though and here are some key areas to work on:

Know thyself. By that, I mean understand why you do the sport and what you want from it. If you know that, you can tailor everything you do within the sport to achieve your aims. It'll also make you far less likely to be pressured into a situation you don't want to be in.

As part of this, you have to be honest with yourself as to whether what you want from the sport is realistic for you. For example, I'd love to be world Downhill MTB champion. I know that given time constraints, it isn't realistic for me, so I've reframed what I want from Downhill MTB and I'm happy charging down my local tracks.

I love it when a plan comes together. Once you know what you want and what is achievable for you, you can come up with plans that reflect that. You can pick destinations that will allow you to get what you want, with people that will help you get what you want. Remember to be willing to adapt the plan according to the environment. Some days you boat, some days, you go for tea and cake...

What's the best way to Carnegie Hall? Practice man, practice. There is a simple, irrefutable fact to most activities. The more time you spend doing them, the better you tend to be at them. That's it. There's no coaching magic bullet that makes you better overnight, effort in = performance out. Therefore, it's logical to conclude that the more time spent practising your boating, the less mistakes you'll make and the safer you will be. ►



Photo: Rachel Dance

Get fit, stay alive. People who are really good at a particular sport (darts excluded) tend to train so they are fit, as well as technically excellent. Therefore, if you can improve your fitness, your technical improvement will be swifter, you will suffer less injuries and you will paddle better and safer.

Now, I'm not going to get all evangelical about fitness programmes here or suggest anything ridiculous like giving up fine ale, quality tobacco or bacon sandwiches. They've done studies and 100% of non-drinking, non-smoking triathletes still die. We do this sport for fun and the social side for many, me included, is a huge part of that. All I'm advocating is a little bit of extra work on strength and stamina and the results will be awesome.

Be sensible. Whatever you do has to work for you. If you can't stand running, go for a swim or ride a bike instead. If you find gymnasias repugnant, there are a growing number of 'outdoor gyms' where kayaking, wild swimming and biking replace the torturous ephemera of the local leisure centre. Whatever, it has to be something that you like doing and that fits with your life.

The glass is half full. Back to the watery environment now. No matter how fit, how toned or how technically expert we may be, if we tell ourselves that we are going to muck something up, that's exactly what we'll do. Once you decide that you are going to do something, focus purely on what you are going to do, as opposed to what happens if it goes wrong.

Now obviously, we could delve far deeper into the dualities of safety and rescue, but here is not the place (I know a chap who can help you delve further, more on him in a minute). I do feel that if you develop a reasonable level of fitness, develop your skills and keep a chipper, positive outlook, all within the context of knowing what you want from the sport, you'll have a whale of a time, with nothing more than the occasional humorous mishap. **CF**



### TOM PARKER

One of the UK's leading White Water coaches with over 20-years experience of mucking about in boats. He's kayaked in loads of countries where you can't drink the tap water and shouldn't trust the police. And Devon. He runs Tom Parker Coaching, purveyors of tip-top coaching courses, trips and adventures. To find out more, head to [www.tomparkercoaching.co.uk](http://www.tomparkercoaching.co.uk)



Photo: Dave Hollins

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