



Kukui'ula Outrigger Canoe Club

Beginner Steering Clinic

The ability to steer an outrigger canoe, while being very much a science, is fundamentally an intuition. In theory, you can be told or shown how to steer; but in practice, it requires time on the water; lots and lots of it, developing skills, which evolve to a point in being a natural extension of oneself in getting the most out of canoe and crew. While most every good paddler, over time, will make for a fair to good steerer, to become a true master one must make a study of its nuances and possess abilities both natural and acquired.

"If you become part of the ocean and go with it. When the weather is calm and water smooth, enjoy the peacefulness, explore your boundaries and notice the surroundings. Be friends with the ocean, and when it's angry, show respect. When you return to land, thank the ocean for safe deliverance and when in the canoe, feel the ocean and its motion and keep the feeling which keeps you coming back for more."



Jim Foti, one of the world's finest ocean steerers. As a steerer for Lanikai Canoe Club on the Hawaiian Island of O'ahu, he held the distinction during the 90s of steering three of the fastest ever crossings of the Kaiwi Channel between the island of Moloka'i and O'ahu during the annual 66 km (~42-mile) Moloka'i Hoe event. A complex array of skills place him in an elite handful of steering masters.
Photo Steve West

Physical Characteristics

Of all the seating positions in the canoe, the steerer is often the smallest person or jockey of the crew, lightweight while possessing a good strength to weight ratio. For the majority of racing situations, the smaller steerer is preferred. In real terms this may mean a man's weight is less than 80 kg (~175 lbs.) while for a woman it is less than 55 kg (~125 lbs.). The

importance of this comes in trimming the canoe and in minimizing the dead weight a steerer creates each time they are steering as opposed to paddling.

Having said this, there are exceptions to the rule. There are some very fine heavy steerers. In big water as well as canoe surfing and sailing, many heavier steerers do very well and also have the added strength sometimes required in handling extreme conditions.

Personality Characteristics

To specifically identify a suitable personality for steering is a complex issue. However it is possible to say that it requires someone who exudes confidence and a methodical approach to their paddling. Hot headed people rarely make excellent steerers. Strong, calm, assertive, likeable—these are all good qualities in gaining the crew's attention. Over the years, I have observed several character types that seem to be common threads in all of the really great steerers.

The Decision Maker

Decision making is a constant and vital process in being a steerer. The more good decisions you make as opposed to bad will tend to accumulate over time and distance, and show on the results board while developing your level of credibility.

Two essential elements to being a good decision maker are confidence and assertiveness. Without these qualities, procrastination, possibly the worst situation a steerer can find themselves in, creates mental confusion, anxiety and poor decision making. Procrastination regarding where to go, what to do, how to do it, when to do it, what to say, what not to say, and how to say it, all lead to a variety of negative results; though sometimes you may actually get lucky by doing nothing at all.

The most highly prized quality and one which causes one steerer to stand out from others, technical merits aside, is the ability to anticipate a situation even before it happens. Decisions made at the appropriate time, can be considered anticipation, while ones made too late, become lost opportunities, later called hindsight.

The Leader

If the steerer is anything less than the leader or the Captain, then you could describe the canoe as the next best thing to flotsam, mere driftwood at the mercy of the elements. Having a paddler yelling commands from a paddling seat, 'Go left!;' 'Go right!,' is enough to drive any steerer crazy; back seat driving outrigger style. Learning to take charge, while gaining the respect of the paddlers as quickly as possible, is often the best way to put an end to the nagging.

To become a leader, or at least someone that will be listened to and respected, takes time and a legacy of decisions (anticipations) which pay off and of course some that don't. There is a saying in life that goes, '*There are those that follow and those that lead.*' For a steerer, from the moment you begin learning, you must already have a desire to lead, to assume responsibility for the canoe and the crew's safety.

The Perfectionist

A sloppy attitude to steering will lead to details being overlooked and a less than meticulous preparation. Of all the crew members, the steerer is the one who can least afford to be sloppy in their habits, their approach towards their paddling, and the responsibilities which go with it.

Great steerers tend to be perfectionists, preoccupied with details and in ensuring that all contingencies have been covered. They like to know that the covers are well fitted, the canoe is correctly rigged, the bailers are present and in position; hung up and not rolling around the hull floor, and that all safety checks have been made.

They sometimes get upset with unnecessary chit chat in the canoe - though can occasionally be the cause of this themselves. They want to avoid confusion and ensure all the details have been covered. A good steerer knows exactly what the race course is and, if time permits, will have done their homework concerning issues of tides, wind, and swell, and in training will always be demanding of their crew and of themselves.

The Communicator

Of all the seats in the canoe, the one who does the most talking and communicating, is the steerer. They are the oracle of the canoe. In this respect the steerer must be a natural communicator. Their feedback can be crucial to a crew's motivation, performance and ultimately, safety.

The Motivator

Being crew motivator is a tough job. One must be strong and resolute in communicating positive feedback, even when the going gets tough. Keeping your talk positive, even if correcting a paddler's technique or timing, is a skill. Use appropriate words at the appropriate time, which are familiar to your crew. Know what to say and when to say it and know when to say nothing. Positive talk under negative circumstances can be a challenge.

The Pacifier

On occasions you will need to pacify and settle crew members. Your ability to settle hot situations quickly is a skill. You may even need to pacify other crews.

The Rock

Additional attributes of a good steerer is someone who doesn't get fazed by difficult situations. Whatever gets thrown at you, you have to deal with it, positively, effectively, and quickly. Equipment problems, course changes, crew changes, paddlers becoming incapacitated, capsize, support boats breaking down, rough water—just deal with it. Making the most of the situation is essential.

Too much focus on the negatives will drain your energy and sap your mental strength, as well as that of your crew. When all others are losing the plot, the steerer must remain rock-like and resolute. You should also be strong enough to acknowledge when you may have made a wrong decision, said the wrong thing, or failed to act at all. When negative comments are aimed at the steerer before, during, or after a session or race, you will need to be strong enough and thick-skinned enough to cope and learn from the experience.

“...the steerer needs to have skin like a rhino in order to deflect the shots being fired; to avoid being mortally wounded and thereby giving up in the steep part of the learning curve at the beginning of a steering career. Many would-be steerers don't continue long for this very reason; deciding to take the safe option of paddling.”

Todd Bradley

The Control Freak

In essence, the steerer must have an almost pathological want to be in control; in the nicest possible way, of course. Many long term steerers, who find themselves in a paddling seat, feel a sense of unease at not being in control. Their minds are constantly calculating distance travelled, direction, eyeballing other canoes and on occasion find it very hard to deal with the old adage ‘Sit down, shut up, and paddle.’ They want to yell from the rooftops, gain control and do it their way, as they fight the urge to climb back over the paddlers to get to the control seat. Being in control is fine, so long as it's not overdone. The political atmosphere of the crew should be that of a democracy led by a benevolent leader, not that of a republic with a hostile dictator—the last thing you want in the middle of a race is an attempted overthrow.

The Technician

The steerer must develop high levels of paddle skills and apply practical, analytical consideration to every facet of their relationship with the canoe and their paddling, while constantly striving to improve and refine their skills and knowledge.

The Competitor

In a racing situation, it stands to reason that the steerer needs to be competitive by nature. One of the best attributes a top steerer possesses is the ability to focus on the belief they can win from any position. If you're behind, it's believing you can catch up or if you're out front, that you can hold on to that lead, even with all the pressure from behind. Focusing on knowing how to win, what it feels like to win and that you'll do everything possible to make it happen, makes all the difference. When you develop a winning strategy, you gain a reputation for being a strong competitor who never gives in. As a result you gain respect from others.

Ocean Skills

Of all the seats in the canoe, to truly excel and get the most from the canoe and crew, the steerer must have good water skills. There simply is no substitute for this ability. During many coaching clinics we have run, when the subject of steering comes up, the best we can say is that maybe 25% of how to steer can be taught, the remaining 75% cannot; even this may be underestimating the ratio.

Gaining good ocean skills from the back of an outrigger canoe is challenging enough and made even more difficult by the added issue of simply maintaining control over the canoe itself. Get out and play on a solo craft. Learn how you get the most out of the ocean by working with it, not against it. This is a far safer and quicker means of gaining ocean skills, balance, and sensitivity to the nuances of the ocean. Then when you step into your team outrigger canoe, you will feel more confident and be able to relax more into your role. You may learn that initial 25% reasonably quickly, but the remainder is the key to determining your eventual level of excellence and this you will need to pursue with great diligence and passion.

Experience is Relative

There are some older steerers who have steered for many years but who have only ever reached an average level of proficiency. While there are some relatively young steerers with limited experience, bucket-loads of natural talent, athleticism, ocean skills, and tactical analysis, effectively steering well beyond their actual experience level. Age and experience are unrelated to natural ability.

Knowing Your Limitations

Being realistic about one's steering abilities is vital in ensuring the safety of the crew, other water users, and the canoe. While improvements in skill levels will come about by testing your abilities and that of your crew's in increasingly more adverse conditions, when you feel enough's enough and you begin to lose confidence, then it's probably time to turn around and head for territory you're more at ease with.

Three Early Fundamentals

1. You should possess a proficient level of paddle skills and have spent time paddling an outrigger canoe to be aware of some of its nuances.
2. You should have a genuine desire to learn how to steer. An ambivalent attitude is a dangerous one, given the level of responsibility.
3. You should display some level of natural ability, i.e. coordination, spatial awareness, sense of direction, and touch. With prerequisites 1 and 2 in place, when you do finally give steering a go, prerequisite 3 will become self-evident pretty quickly. In calm conditions, after some basic instructions, you should be able to quickly maintain some basic level of control over the canoe.

"Ho'okele or steerer. Sometimes called Papaki'i (papa-kee-ee), literally means, 'sit flat.' Uses a different paddle from the rest of the crew, called uli (oolee). The captain of the canoe. Keeps, poe wa'a (crew) moving forward and focusing on the job. Must be constantly alert to all conditions affecting the canoe including wind, waves, other canoes. Also paddles whenever possible." Terry Wallace Hawai'i