

Vashon Island Rowing Club (VIRC or “Club”)

Safety Guidelines & Recommendations

November, 2012

The following guidelines and recommendations are intended to help Club members make informed decisions about their participation in Club- and rowing-related activities. They should not be considered to be comprehensive; nor are they a substitute for a member’s own judgment.

These guidelines and recommendations represent the ongoing collective efforts of the Club’s Safety Committee and general membership to compile and share information that will help rowers make better-informed decisions about risks to their own safety, the safety of other rowers, and the integrity of the Club’s rowing equipment during all rowing-related activities.

SAFETY TRAINING VIDEO

All VIRC members, including coxes, juniors and recreational rowers, should be familiar with the contents of the US Rowing Association Safety Training Video. The Club has a copy of the video; ask around to borrow it.

WATER CONFIDENCE

Since Club rowers may find themselves immersed in cold salt water at any time, they should verify that they have the confidence and ability to remain afloat and swim a moderate distance while wearing typical cold-weather rowing attire (long pants or leggings, two layers of shirts). Rowers who lack these abilities increase their chances of drowning in the event of an accident that puts them in the water. In addition, they increase the risk of injury or death for people who may be involved in helping to rescue them in the event of an accident, including rowers in their own or another shell.

PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICES (PFDs)

Use of a PFD may increase a rower’s chances of survival in the event of immersion in water. The Club has a number of PFDs available for use by members and guests. These devices are not inspected or tested by the Club, so they are used at the rower’s own risk. Rowers should inspect a PFD before taking it on the water and satisfy themselves that it is capable of being inflated. Rowers are encouraged to purchase and use their own PFD, and to take responsibility for its maintenance.

If you decide to not wear a PFD while rowing, consider at least bringing it in the boat with you so you can have a chance to put it on in the event of an emergency.

LOW-VISIBILITY ROWING

Rowing when you cannot clearly see obstacles – such as in the dark, in fog, in choppy water or in heavy precipitation – is obviously unsafe. The Club’s home rowing venue on Quartermaster Harbor contains pilings, buoys, anchored boats and floating debris that could easily puncture a shell’s flotation chamber in the event of contact. These obstacles have proven to be difficult for rowers to avoid even in daylight with calm conditions and the presence of a launch; rowing in low-visibility conditions exacerbates these difficulties.

Rowers requiring assistance in low-visibility conditions will be difficult to locate and are significantly increasing their risk of hypothermia and death. Rowing in groups of boats, rowing with lights on the shell or on the rower (e.g., red/green bow light and a white stern light), carrying a whistle and wearing a Personal Flotation Device may reduce but certainly do not eliminate the increased risk of injury or death associated with rowing in low-visibility conditions.

If a Club boat is damaged in low-visibility conditions, all rowers in that boat may be billed by the Club for any needed repairs.

SMALL BOAT USE

Singles, doubles and pairs (“small boats”) are especially vulnerable to flipping or swamping due to mishandling, and to sinking in the event of contact with an obstacle on the water. Rowers in these types of shells should exercise an especially high degree of caution to avoid the dangers of immersion, hypothermia and death.

The Club makes the following recommendations to all rowers contemplating the use of a small boat, especially when not under the direct supervision of a coach in a launch:

- Be a proficient and confident rower in a larger shell (4, quad and/or 8). This typically involves spending dozens of hours on the water in these types of boats in a variety of conditions under the active supervision of an experienced coach. If you have any doubts about your preparation, continue to practice in larger shells before rowing a single, double or pair without direct supervision by someone in a launch.
- Before taking a small boat into deep water, you should become proficient in the following maneuvers by practicing them in shallow water until you can perform them with confidence. Keep in mind that different configurations of boats, crews and seating arrangements may alter your ability to complete these maneuvers successfully; practicing them frequently and with each new configuration is a good idea:
 - Re-enter a capsized shell (a crucial ability in cold water)
 - Row a straight course without looking over your shoulder (100m)
 - Turn while rowing (left & right)
 - Row while looking over your shoulder for obstacles (left & right)
 - Conduct river turns in both directions (360 degrees)

- Back in a straight line
- Back while turning (left & right)
- Wear – or at least have in the shell – a PFD and a sound device (whistle, horn)
- If unaccompanied by a launch or other shells, stay close to shore; avoid crossing the Harbor

WEATHER CONDITIONS

Coaches and rowers should use common sense in the face of inclement weather. High winds, high tides with debris in the water, extreme temperatures, lightning storms or fog are all reasons for not going out on the water. *When in doubt, don't go out.*

SIGNING OUT & IN

The Club maintains a logbook in which members are to record information about each Club shell that is taken out. "Signing out" is not only a good idea from a safety standpoint, to let others know who is out at a given time, but is also an important element in the Club's bookkeeping system: your per-use charges are based on activity recorded in the log. If you do not sign out when you take a Club boat onto the water, not only will you be less safe, but you will not be taking your fair share of the Club's expenses.

ACCIDENT REPORTING

In the event of a serious injury or life threatening emergency immediately call 911 and report the incident. The address for the boat house (you will be asked to provide this) is: 8900 S.W. Harbor Drive, Vashon, WA 98079

If a shell is damaged in an incident, a sign should be attached to a rigger indicating the nature of the damage and that it is not to be rowed.

FIRST AID TRAINING

All members, coaches and junior assistants are encouraged to attend classes to become qualified in the administration of Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) and first aid.

COLD-WEATHER ROWING & HYPOTHERMIA

Rowing on cold water requires careful consideration. Quartermaster Harbor is well under 50 degrees in the winter and only a few degrees warmer in the summer; hypothermia is a serious risk at any time of year. A rower does not have to fall into the water to get hypothermia; wind, cold air and moisture from being splashed or from precipitation can combine unexpectedly to cause hypothermia. The following measures are especially recommended for cold-weather rowing:

1. Wear only polypropylene or other synthetic clothing to reduce heat loss in the event you are immersed or become wet from spray or precipitation. Cotton shirts, even in layers, will not help you stay warm when you are wet
2. When you sign out in the logbook, note the course (route) you intend to follow
3. Have a launch accompany your shell or group of shells
4. Have a minimum of 4 oars on the water, or row singles and pairs in groups of two shells or more
5. Wear an inflatable vest, compact PFD or wet suit – don't just have it in the boat
6. Stay close to shore
7. Carry a whistle or other noisemaker

The signs of early hypothermia are rapid shivering, numbness, loss of strength and coordination, and semi-consciousness. To counter this condition, transfer the victim to a warm environment as soon as possible; remove wet clothing; use blankets or warm water to warm the torso area first. Seek medical attention.

People with profound hypothermia will be pale, stiff, and cold. They will be unresponsive to stimuli, and possibly unconsciousness. Little or no respiratory activity will be present. In this case, move or manipulate the person as gently as possible. Prevent further heat loss, but DO NOT attempt to re-warm. Maintain an open airway and seek emergency help immediately

The best safety device or practice in cold conditions, other than common sense, is a support/coaching launch. In the event of an emergency a well-prepared safety launch can rescue people and transport them to safety. Even with a launch, hypothermia is a risk. All rowers should ask themselves, before launching in these conditions, if being on the water is the best and only way to train.

LAUNCH OPERATORS

Anyone operating a launch on behalf of the Club should be in compliance with all Vashon Park District requirements for launch operators.

The number of occupants in the launch should be kept to a minimum so that more rowers can be accommodated in the event of an emergency.

The launch operator/coach should be wearing a PFD at all times while on the water. In addition the launch should have the following:

1. Life jacket for each person in the launch
2. Life jacket for all crew in the largest shell on the water
3. A megaphone
4. Emergency space blankets for all crew in the largest shell on the water
5. Paddle
6. Towing rope – 50 feet
7. Water bailer
8. Fire extinguisher
9. VHF radio or cell phone

10. Spare gas tank

In the event of an in-the-water emergency, the first priority of the launch operator is the prompt rescue of the stricken individual(s). The retrieval of boats and equipment is secondary. If necessary the operator should request assistance by hailing another boater, if any are in the area, or calling emergency 911 on a cell phone or calling the US Coast Guard on the VHF radio channel 16.

The launch operator should immediately shuttle all rowers to the nearest shore, being careful not to overload the launch. Once all rowers are out of the water they can be shuttled to the shell house if there is not a home or facility nearby to offer aid.

BOAT WAKES

Everyone in a shell should help look out for wakes from passing motorboats.

If a wake is approaching, maneuver the shell parallel to the wake. Keep the oars on the water but let them ride up and down with the wake. Turning into a large wake can invite a swamping as wakes can often be higher than a shell's gunwales and pour into the boat along its length. Particularly with larger boats, crossing a wake can damage the hull.

SWAMPING & CAPSIZE PROCEDURES

All members of the crew should be fully aware of what actions to take when a crew ends up in the water or a boat swamps or capsizes. Specific procedures may depend upon the type of boat and the prevailing conditions.

In September 2009 the Club conducted a practice session in which boats were swamped and capsized, and various recovery strategies were tested. The following recommendations include experience gained in that session.

In general:

- Don't leave the boat to swim to shore. Stay with the boat. Remember the 50/50 rule: a swimmer in water below 50 degrees and more than 50 yards from shore, has only a 50/50 chance of reaching shore without floatation.
- Once flipped, swing your feet out from under and away from hull as quickly as possible to minimize entanglement with the oars, riggers and clothing.
- After flip, insure everyone is OK. Do a head count. Stay calm. Instill confidence and positive attitude through your actions and words. Don't panic.
- Listen for a voice of calm and steady confidence to assume a leadership role to minimize discussion time.
- Keep as much of your body out of the water as possible throughout the procedure. Preserving body heat is crucial; seconds count. Body heat loss occurs as much as 25 times faster in water than in air.
- Use PFDs, flares, cell phones (in ziplock bag) and whistles (on PFDs) for additional survival options.
- Do not use oars as PFDs.

- Do not count on flotation in shells to last for a long period of time, since leakage into the flotation compartments is likely.

For an Eight

- If an eight swamps in deep water and does not have flotation spread throughout hull (which none of our eights have), slip out of the boat in pairs, remove the oars and proceed to flip or turtle the shell, using care to avoid riggers and maintain possession of the oars. The object is to capture air under the hull to give it flotation.
- After the shell is flipped, do a head count and pair off into a buddy system down the length of the boat to ensure everyone is OK and all rowers are accounted for.
- Cooperate with a buddy to straddle the overturned hull with both legs. Do this in pairs with rowers in the water stabilizing the hull and managing oars for rowers straddling boat.
- Rowers on the hull can then use the oars to stabilize the hull while the remaining rowers climb onto it.
- Avoid placing excessive weight in the middle of the boat; flotation is in the bow and stern, so distribute rowers along the hull with most of the weight at the ends.
- After all rowers are out of the water and on top of the hull facing forward, paddle the shell “canoe-style” by choking up on the oar handles. In the exercise, rowers were able to propel the boat toward shore with this method.
- Consider lodging an oar or two under the boat at right angles to the length of the shell to act as a stabilizing outrigger.
- If a launch is present, ferry rowers to the nearest shore in one load if conditions permit, or return for a second load. Once all rowers are on shore, ferry them to the boathouse.
- After the crew is back to shore with the capsized boat, it should be lifted by tilting it slightly to one end, thereby breaking suction and enabling boat to be lifted completely out of water to drain.

For a Quad or Four

- Since most quads or fours have flotation spread throughout their hulls, remaining in a submerged boat does not risk hull damage.
- Both quads in our exercise were flipped or turtled with oars remaining in the oarlocks.
- Rowers should pair off, remaining on opposite sides of the overturned shell.
- Instead of attempting to propel the boat from a turtled position, both quad crews in the exercise flipped their boats back upright.

- Rowers from seats #2 and #3 steadied the boat for #4 and bow to climb back into the boat, then #2 and #3 climbed in. This strategy also worked in reverse order with #2 and #3 getting in first while #4 and bow steadied boat.
- Even though the boat was completely swamped, rowers were able to propel it back to shore fairly efficiently with typical rowing technique.

For A Double

- After flipping, rowers should take positions on opposite sides of the boat and turn it back over into its upright position.
- To do this, it was helpful to push both oars through the oarlocks toward the centerline and perpendicular to boat.
- After flipping the boat to the upright position, the bow seat rower steadied the boat with both sets of oars while stern seat rower maneuvered into a sitting position in the boat. Then stern seat steadied boat for bow seat to get into boat. After both rowers were seated in the boat, it was rowed to shore.

Additional Observations

- A quad was able to rescue two rowers in the water from another boat. Each rower mounted the stern or bow deck, and the quad was able to pull them through the water as they rowed to shore.
- Coxswains wearing winter clothing should always wear a PFD, since their hands may be too cold to unzip heavy clothing to prevent sinking if they are immersed.

Questions for Future Safety Procedure Exercise

- How many rowers can each type of shell rescue from the water by having them lie on or cling to the bow and stern decks?
- What are the best procedures if a shell's flotation cavities fill with water?
- How to propel a turtled quad or four without righting it? We know we can propel a righted shell to shore. Would there be conditions where we would need to propel a turtled quad or four?