

River Technique *by*



Steve Fischer

Back in the day, running the dragon's back line in Rapid #4 on the Zambezi was considered to be a burly line. Nowadays, it's a common line and often the cleanest way to run the rapid. I like to apply the principle whenever I get the chance. People think I'm going big but secretly I'm using the river to give me a cleaner line.

'Riding the dragon's back'

The top

of #4 features a curler from right to left feeding into the center-top hole. Behind and to the right of the curler is another smaller hole. If you 'take on the diagonal' you'll be fed into the center hole. If you 'break the diagonal' you'll over shoot into the smaller right hole. (See previous instructionals). The only way to run the curler is to ride the aptly named 'dragon's back'. You clip the upstream edge of the curler and ride right on its spine. It then kicks you left and you've avoided both holes.

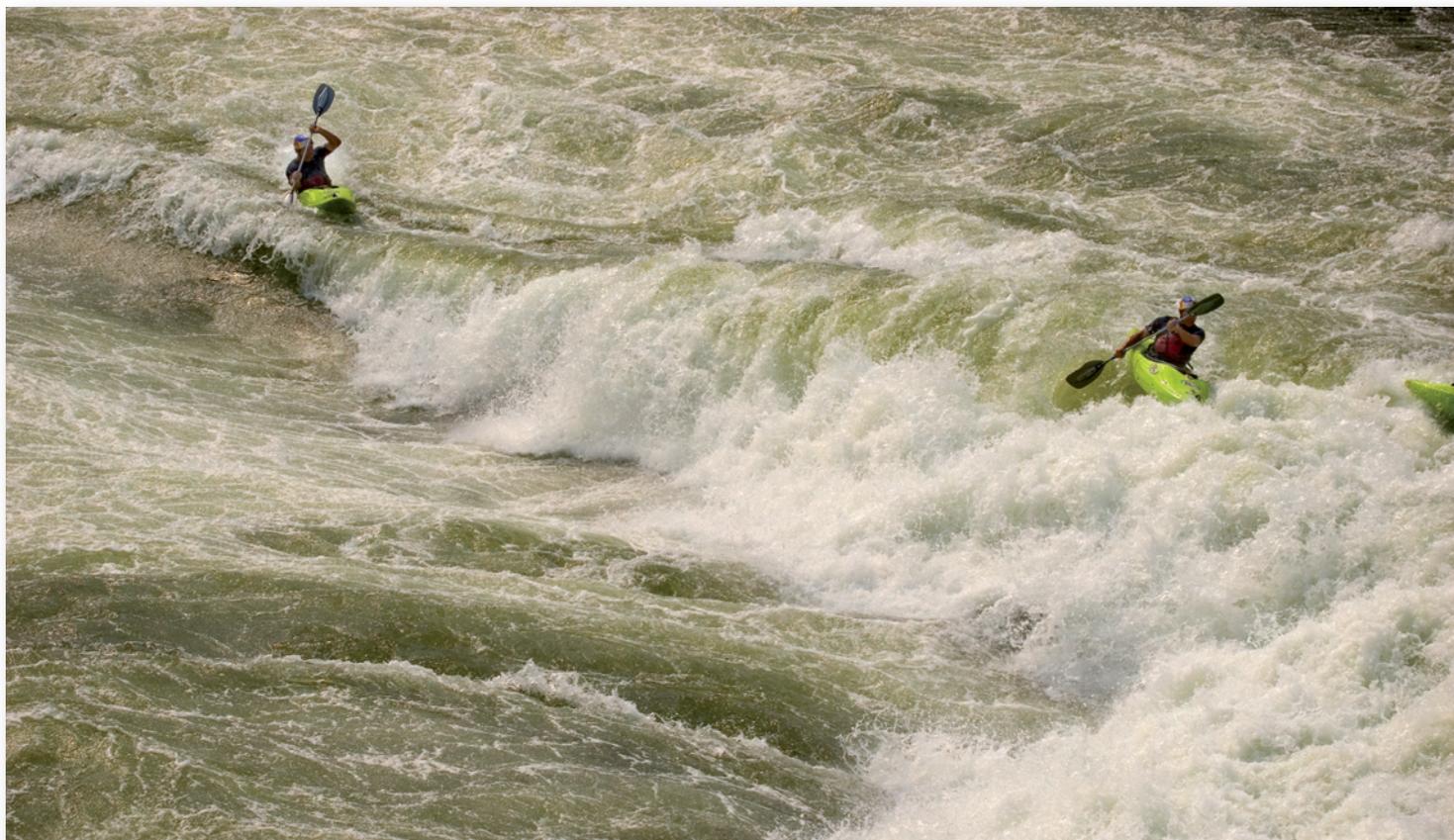
When you encounter curlers feeding into a hole, you'll often be faced with one of the above three scenarios. The three principles should not be confused with each other – first, taking on and punching diagonals; second, breaking over diagonals; and third, riding the dragon's back. In this last case, you're treading the fine line between passing by and being pulled into a hole. You ride on its back and if necessary, use the effective cross current created by the curler as you come out the back. I recently scouted a rapid where easily avoiding a gnarly curler would have put me into a hole downstream. So instead I intentionally clipped the corner of the curler and rode on its back being propelled to the side and avoiding the hole downstream

So step by step how does it work?

Check out the example below: This is the 'pencil sharpener' in 'Itanda' on the Nile. As you can tell, I've got some place that I need to be on river right after I've avoided this hole. Most people shy away from it and then struggle to make it right of the 'Cuban' below.

- First I start further right than I need to be. This way I approach with a safe right to left momentum and I can adjust my position simply by speeding up or slowing down.
- Next, I gently break across the top of the curler and turn the boat parallel to it, if not facing into the hole slightly. Now I keep the boat on the safe side of the curler whilst holding a draw stroke on the danger side of the curler with my right hand. If I feel that things are getting sketchy, I turn the draw into a sweep stroke to point my bow further downstream (I needed to in this case).

Before I know it I find myself a solid 15 feet right of where alternative lines would have put me. The river right momentum sends me over much faster than I could paddle. Of course you do need to be careful treading a fine line, but you'll find that the danger is mostly psychological. One thing you must realize is that the point where a curler meets the hole proper is usually a window flushing through. So even if you go over the falls you'll often push through. And besides, there's just something cool about skirting close and peering into gnarly holes as you go by.



Steve Fisher is sponsored by Riot Kayaks, Helly Hansen, Seven 2 Paddles, Stohlquist, Snapdragon Designs, and Red Bull.

Words - Steve Fisher / Photos - Desre Pickers