

River Technique *by* Steve Fisher



It's not a matter of IF; it's a matter of WHEN. At some point you're going to end up off line and take a thrashing in a hole. That's what kayaking is all about – evaluating, planning, executing and then having your plans changed completely. Then it's time for a survival-contingency plan, and it's survival of the fittest...or the smartest. When I scout a rapid I visualize the best-case scenario first, but then I start looking at the alternatives. There are all kinds of things that can go wrong in river running, but for the purpose of this article let's focus specifically on getting beaten down in a hole

When Good Times Go Bad - Holes

First Impressions

First you need to establish what kind of hole you're looking at. I could give a technical description that characterizes holes but the best way to learn about holes is through the experience of you and your paddling friends. Ask yourself these questions - How retentive is it? If you flush, where will you flush? How violent will the beating be? If you were to swim what would happen? Would you flush once you've swum? What's downstream? Most importantly, if you're looking at a hole and you don't know what it may do to you, you should not be running the line. When you end up in a hole you need to know exactly what's about to go down.

A Plan

When I run a line that involves a nasty hydraulic, I decide before the run what I'll do if I end up in the hole. I consider how I might get out and on what side of the hole I'll get out. I also decide in advance if I'd swim early or not. For a very retentive pourover it can be a good idea to swim immediately so that you have plenty of air and energy for your swim. This happened to me once and it may well have saved my life – I pulled my skirt as soon as I landed in the hole, knowing that it was a lost cause fighting it. I got re-circulated a couple of times but was able to hold my breath and deal with it because I was fresh. On other occasions, like in the photo below, I know that the beating will only last a few seconds or up to a minute so I just hang-in until I flush out. In that case the beating is violent but less consequential than a swim.



Exit Strategy

So how do you exit a hole? In smaller ledge holes it's best to stay upright and side surf your way to an exit point in the hole – find a spot where the hole is not retentive and pull aggressively to that point. In medium-sized holes that aren't too retentive it's good to cartwheel or bury the ends of your kayak until you flush. Some folks flip over and stretch both arms above their head to catch the undercurrent with their paddle blades. This method works but is a recipe for a broken paddle or a possible dislocated shoulder. For the most part I try to keep my elbows close to my body while leaning forward with my head down. If you're really aggressive and actually initiate moves you can stay in control. Leaning back is the fastest way to lose control. Another exit strategy is to charge down into the incoming green water in front of a hole and go super deep and wash out the back. A final handy trick in big water (when there are no consequences downstream) is to pull your skirt but stay in your boat. The boat fills and you 'sub-out'. Once you resurface simply paddle the sunken boat to shore, narrowly avoiding a cussing from your mates.

So what is the bottom line? Plan for the best, but have a contingency plan whatever the scenario. If there isn't a sure way to recover from a change of plan, perhaps it's time to hop on the good foot and portage. Learn to identify different types of holes. Know when to pull the pin or not and have a strategy for survival surfing. Don't find yourself with an unexpected challenge and without a plan B.



Photos by Desre Pickers