



River Technique *by*



Steve Fisher

Running Wave Trains

This is a basic but key piece of instruction that I've been waiting to cover for a long time: The most certain way of making it upright through a series of pyramid-shaped waves. Whilst it doesn't really matter most of the time, here is a way of greatly improving your chances when it does count.

Unless you're really fast and out-paddling the current, like in a race, it's very rare that you should paddle straight down a wave train. By 'wave train', I'm referring to the strings of pyramid or haystack-shaped waves that you find in most rapids – typically with eddies on either side. Slalom and down-river racers could tell you one or two things about wave trains. Although they paddle quite straight they never hit them in the center of the peaks, and they always try to place their paddle strokes on the crests or just behind. But let's take that a little further for those of us who like to bob along a bit slower. Let's define the physical features of the individual waves: First you get the trough rising to the face, and then the crest in the center of the river. Then there are the features we're most concerned about, which are the feeder diagonals coming in from the sides and 'feeding' towards the crest. They're called diagonals because they're diagonal (45 degrees) to the current. Look how pronounced they are in picture #2 below. If they have their way, they'll feed you (and anything else that floats) from the sides of the river into the center. Then, whilst everything just upstream of the wave feeds to the center, everything behind the crest spreads back outwards towards the riverbanks, before being sucked back to the center by the next set of diagonals. So if you just floated like a cork you'd constantly be getting pushed out to the eddy lines and then sucked back to the center. But the place you want to be is between the center crests and the eddy lines – just ask the slalom paddlers!

Particularly with bigger waves, in addition to avoiding the center peaks, you're doing two things most of the time... You're either pointing at 90 degrees to the diagonal feeding the pyramid wave or you're parallel to it. This means 45 degrees (or less) to the current most of the time. Not only is this part of actively staying in the right place, but it also enables you to lean downstream and avoid catching your stern. Let me explain which you do when and why:

Sometimes you're crossing a diagonal; sometimes you're riding the diagonal. We've covered breaking and riding diagonals in previous issues of KS! If you emerge from a wave and you're in the center of the river, point at the bank and break across the next diagonal. As soon as you've crossed it you're now headed for the eddy line (bad). Turn back towards the center, lean into and ride down the following diagonal back towards the middle. Now you're back in the center... Either keep going past middle in the direction you're already going or turn and point towards the bank you've just come from...Repeat.

All sounds very complicated, doesn't it? We'll here's the bottom line: When you're in a wave train, stay away from the center peaks and zigzag your way down. Just always have your boat pointed slightly to one bank and then the other.

Now check out the pics below:

The first is of me, and the second is of Rusty Sage. Both are of the same wave (despite the different surge). We've both ended up in a different spot after the previous wave and are therefore approaching this wave differently. Each method is correct for the situation but the point to note is that neither of us is pointed straight downstream. Think back to other pics you've seen and you'll remember that this is familiar.



Pic 1: I've been pushed all the way right by the previous wave and need to ride down the diagonal to avoid being pushed further right onto the eddy line.



Pic 2: Rusty has exited the previous wave in the centre of the river, so he'll point to the right and cross the diagonal (with extra motivation from the wave that wants to land on his head). You typically avoid the dead center of a pyramid wave. For the following wave he'll point back left and ride down that diagonal, just as I am on the current wave.

Might I add that this works as well, if not better, on smaller wave trains. Test it and enjoy!

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

Words: Steve Fisher

Photos: Desre Pickers