

Safety Guidelines (originally published 3/1/99)

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Charter & Implementation

In the spring of 1998 a safety committee was established with the agreement and cooperation of all major programs that row on the Georgetown section of the upper Potomac River (between Haines point and Fletchers Cove). This was deemed necessary to deal with increasing river traffic caused by

the explosive growth in rowing, canoeing and kayaking. The purpose of the committee is to provide the rowing/paddling community with guidelines for safe use of the river, and to provide an avenue for concerns. The committee will do this by supporting enforcement by the Metropolitan Police Department of existing legal requirements for equipment and boat safety through aggressive awareness, educational, and self-help initiatives.

The information found in the following sections has been drafted by the committee with the greatest concern for safety. The guidelines are based on DC Harbor Patrol, U.S. Coast Guard and USRowing guidelines in addition to the extensive experience brought to the committee by its members. The committee considers safety to be the number one priority of all organizations, coaches, coxswains, and rowers who use the river. It is often easy to underestimate the potential for disaster. This document is meant as a means to educate and provide the tools for safe use of the river. These rules are written for everyone's benefit. Furthermore it is emphasized that all coaches should go over regularly with their crews proper safety procedures and ways to handle emergency situations of all kinds.

All coaches and individual scullers/paddlers are expected to make themselves familiar with the guidelines and work to make sure others are aware of them also. Through out the fall and spring members of the safety committee will be actively reminding users of the river if they are not following the guidelines. Frequent disregard for the rules may prompt the committee to inform the governing authority for the individual, be it a club president, boat house manager, athletic director, or police of the person's actions.

The safety committee shall be composed of representatives of:

- Georgetown University Crew
- Georgetown Local Organizing Committee (GLOC) (for the VASRA)
- George Washington University Crew
- Potomac Boat Club
- Thompson's Boat Center
- Washington Canoe Club
- Individuals designated by the current committee as a whole.

Tasks of the Safety Committee shall include:

- Develop and maintain on the water rules and recommendations
- To meet a minimum of 3 times per year, prior to each season to review safety issues
- To hold fall and spring safety meetings with mandatory attendance by all coaches
- Sponsor safe boating and other educational classes
- Respond to breaches of rules and other unsafe practices referred to it for action

Implementation:

The major programs and organizations shall be responsible for implementation and enforcement of on the water rules issued by the safety committee. Violations should be dealt with within the sanctions available. Recurring incident evidencing blatant disregard of the rules may be referred to the Safety Committee for resolution in accordance with the following procedures:

- 1. Individuals or organizations not satisfied with resolution of reported violations by individual organizations should refer the matter to the Safety Committee. Referrals should be in writing and should describe the incident in as much detail as possible.
- 2. The Safety Committee will review the referral as follows:
 - a. Review the facts of the incident(s) at issue
 - b. Establish the seriousness of the matter against the relevant rule or safety protocol
 - c. Determine action to be taken, to include:
 - Dismissal of complaint with reasons
 - Meet with individual or organization who/which is the subject of the complaint
 - Formulate action to be taken with parent organization

The safety committee will make decisions binding on organizations, and/or individuals and be subject to institutional rules with which he/she is affiliated. If sanctions are imposed they could involve the following:

- a. Revocation of privileges, e.g. Limitations on use of facility and/or equipment
- b. Denial of entry to sponsored regattas

Any questions concerning the committee or issues requiring resolution should be first addressed to the Safety Committee member who represents your governing club. In the event that individual is unavailable, contacting of another committee member is acceptable.

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Safety Rules

I. River Traffic Patterns and River Hazards:

These are directions for rowers/crews. Paddlers and kayakers should contact the Washington Canoe

Club Aquatics Committee. Users of rental boats should consult the rental agency for information. Notation of river traffic starts at Fletcher's Cove and works progressively downstream. Most information concerns rowing shells. Paddlers are asked to use the river closest to the D.C. shore from Key Bridge to Fletcher's Cove and to use the prescribed traffic pattern downstream. For simplicity *US* = upstream, and *DS* = downstream.

For Maps, [CLICK HERE](#)

A. Fletcher's Cove

1. *US* crews should turn no more than 10-20 strokes above the end of the island on the starboard side (or D.C. Harbor Police Buoy) that signals the beginning of the cove.
2. Crews should be aware that there are many rock hazards on the D.C. side of the cove.

B. Hens and Chickens

1. *DS* Crews must follow the VA shoreline closely at all times. The area is prone to congestion and is narrow.
2. *US* Crews should follow a near straight line from Three Sisters Islands to the Hens and Chickens.
 - In the area between the Three Sisters Islands, and the Hens and Chickens, slow moving crews or crews wishing to do drills should slide to the D.C. side of the river to avoid faster moving traffic going *US*. However, crews must be aware that the river area 250 meters from the D.C. shore is used by and the domain of canoes and kayaks.

C. Three Sister's Islands to Key Bridge

1. When passing between the Three Sisters Islands and the VA shore team boats (4's and 8's) should be no more than 3 abreast, smaller boats no more than 4 abreast.
2. *DS* Crews should follow the curve of the VA shore and pick a course through the second arch from starboard of Key Bridge only after passing the Three Sisters Islands.
3. *DS* Exiting Key Bridge, crews should aim for the point of land on Roosevelt Island that is directly opposite Thompson Boat Center at the bend of the river.
4. *US* crews should go through the 2nd arch from D.C. on Key Bridge and aim for the Three Sisters Island that sits farthest towards the VA shore. The 1st arch of Key Bridge on the D.C. side is reserved for Potomac Boat Club crews who are landing.
5. *US* After passing through Key Bridge, crews should pick a point just to the port side of the Three Sisters Islands. Crews should work together so that they may pass the islands as closely as possible and still remain out of the path of crews headed downstream.

D. George Washington Race Course - 3 Sisters to Thompson's Boat Center

When the GW Race course is in place during the mid to late spring, the following rules apply during non-regatta days.

1. *DS* Crews should use lanes 2-4 (lane 4 is closest to VA shore) *only!* No crew heading *DS* should use lane 1. *US* crews should stay off the course except when passing around the Three Sisters Islands.

2. Slow moving crews using the course above Key Bridge should give way to faster crews. No crew should stop and impede traffic while on the course.
3. Crews should leave the course and take a standard course on the river once they have reached the upstream end of the “Crew Wall” (where crews have their team color painted).

E. Theodore Roosevelt Bridge

1. **DS** Use the 1st arch directly next to Roosevelt Island.
2. **US** Use arch number 1 or 2 from DC shore. The first arch is primarily for crews returning to Thompson Boat Center.
 - Once crews enter the bridge they should take a course that points them on the “white tower” visible in the Washington Harbor complex.
 - Once at the bend of the river crews should point on the “slanting” building visible in Georgetown and then align themselves to go through the 2nd arch of Key Bridge.

F. T.R. Bridge to Memorial Bridge

1. **DS** Use the arch one to the right of dark gray center arch.
2. **US** Use the 2nd arch from the D.C. shore.

G. 14th Street Bridges and Below

1. **DS** Use the arch to the right of the Channel Arch (the one with lights and wood buttressing).
2. Once through the bridges crews should aim for Haines Point (on the D.C. shore). However, crews travelling upstream have the right of way.
3. **US** Crews should follow the seawall on the D.C. shore and pick a line through the bridges that will line them up with the 2nd arch on Memorial Bridge.

H. Specific River Hazards and the Use of “Little River”

1. The D.C. side of Fletcher's Cove is very rocky.
2. There are several rocks about 200 meters before the island that forms the entrance to Fletcher's Cove.
3. There are many sunken rocks around Hens & Chickens that are visible only at different tides. No crews should ever go to the D.C. side of these islands!
4. **US** There is a rock on the D.C. (20 meters) shore approximately 500 meters from Hens & Chickens. It is sometimes marked with a white buoy.
5. At the Three Sisters Islands there are several rocks that sit just below the surface. One sits directly next to the most upstream island. Upstream of the main islands there are several large rocks that are almost never visible. One is marked by a white, round floating buoy. There are several rocks adjacent to this one. Crews should move a minimum of 25 strokes past this buoyed rock before cutting in to the D.C. shore (as warranted). Often at low tide there are mud flats around the islands.
 - No crew should ever go between the D.C. shore and the islands! The water is shallow and navigable only by canoe or kayak.
6. There are mud flats with rocks that appear at low tide located on the VA shore just upstream of Key Bridge.

7. There are several submerged rocks and pipes near a rocky outcrop on Roosevelt Island across from Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown.
8. There is a sunken canal barge approximately 250 meters above Theodore Roosevelt Bridge next to Roosevelt Island. The entire T.R. Islands shoreline is full of sunken debris. Crews should stay around 50 meters off shore.
9. *DS* of T.R. Island is a mud flat at low tide that also contains several sunken rocks.
10. The D.C. shore between Theodore Roosevelt Bridge and Memorial Bridge (In front of the “stairs”) is often full of snags and debris.
11. The area between the VA shore and Roosevelt Island known as “Little River” is very shallow and contains numerous sunken rocks; rowing in this area is discouraged.

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II. Rowing Before Sunrise or After Sunset

Rowing before sunrise or after sunset, when visibility is poor and light levels are low, lighting for all boats is *required by law*. Each individual shell and launch is required to have its own light. This includes coaches' launches, racing shells of all sizes, canoes, kayaks, and dragon boats. Lights must be visible when viewed from the bow or stern. A *bright* white light is acceptable for the bow, with red or white for the stern. It is recommended that two lights, for bow and stern, be used. Using two lights increases visibility, allowing a user to be seen from all directions. Care should be taken that lights are not obscured by the physical structure of the boat in question or clothing worn by the operator.

In addition, coxswains, and a member of straight (non-coxed) crew should carry a whistle or other noise maker for audible warnings. Whistles should be used to alert others of imminent danger, or collision.

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III. Cold Weather/Winter Rowing:

Rowing when the water temperature falls below 50° should be done with great consideration. Hypothermia is a swift and incapacitating killer that strikes when the combination of cold weather and moisture work to decrease body temperature. It can take mere minutes before a full-sized adult is incapable of helping themselves once hypothermia has set in. Keep in mind that you don't have to fall in the water to get hypothermia! Cold air temperatures and any moisture on the body (from being splashed, rain, sleet, snow) can lead to hypothermia (see [Appendix A](#)). The following measures are suggested when working out on the water in cold weather:

1. Sign out in a log book or let others know you will be on the river and when
2. Four Oar Rule- the boat must have a minimum of 4 oars on the water, or
3. Buddy System- if individuals go out they should do so in pairs.
4. Wear inflatable, compact, life vest or wet suit.
5. Stay closer to shore
6. A noise maker of some kind should be carried in each shell and be attached in some manner so as not to be lost if the shell capsizes.

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However, the only true safety device or practice other than common sense is a support/coaching launch. In the event of an emergency a well-prepared safety launch can assist the individuals in question and transport them to safety. Even then hypothermia is an issue. All individuals should ask themselves before launching if being on the water is the best and only way to train. See Appendix A for information on Hypothermia and other weather related emergencies.

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IV. Inclement Weather:

Coaches should use common sense in the face of inclement weather. Fast currents, high winds, large or heavy amounts of debris, extreme temperatures, lightning storms and fog are all reasons for not practicing on the water. Crews should not launch if such conditions exist or are seriously threatening. It is highly advised that coaches and scullers listen closely to NOAA weather channels routinely.

Wind - Coaches and rowers should keep in mind that often times it is easy to launch from the dock but much harder to land in windy conditions. This is especially true with novices and small boats. Waves or swells generated by strong winds can quickly swamp a crew. This is especially true in wide parts of the river (i.e., between Memorial Bridge and the 14th Street Bridge or the area just downstream of TBC).

Heavy Rains & Fast Currents - After heavy periods of rain currents can increase in speed and strength quickly. The river usually will rise over a period of 1-3 days after the cessation of precipitation and recede in about the same amount of time after the peak barring further rain. At these times extreme caution should be taken. Areas for special consideration are around and upstream of the Three Sisters Islands with increasing seriousness as one approaches and passes the Hens and Chicken islands (see [river traffic map](#)). It is *strongly* advised that novice crews be kept below the Hens and Chickens during these times. In all cases the currents can be quite swift and unpredictable due to the depth and topography of the river bottom. Special attention should also be paid to all bridge arches as currents are accelerated as they pass through them. Lastly with heavy rains and currents on the Potomac come heavy debris in the form of large logs, tires, and water logged farm animals.

Lightning Storms - Very dangerous. Crews should return immediately to the dock, or proceed

immediately to shore if the boat house is too distant. There does not have to be rain or thunder to have lightning. If the sky begins to look bad, it probably is.

Fog - Obviously limits visibility, but also mutes sounds. If caught in fog it is recommended that crews proceed with extreme caution and appropriately slower speeds in the direction of the boat house. If the fog is too extreme it may be better to sit still. Be sure to make some noise so that others on the river can be alerted to your presence. Fog is often times thicker upstream of Key Bridge. Do not assume fog that appears to be thinning will continue to do so!

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V. Launches & Coaches:

It is important to have a well equipped and working safety launch whenever working with crews, especially high school and college squads. Coaches should have the necessary training and be certified in first-aid and CPR. Coaches should work to minimize potential accidents and should work in a responsible and prudent fashion.

1. It is the responsibility of *any* coach boat to provide assistance to *any* capsized boat - even if from another sport, or a pleasure boat. Coaches are reminded to stop at a safe distance and offer assistance. Approach with caution and in a controlled manner. Be aware of your prop!
2. Coaches should make sure that for each rower or coxswain that they have on hand a record of the following:
 - Name, and date of birth
 - Address
 - Phone Number
 - Name and phone number for relative or other emergency contact
 - Height, weight, list of allergies or other important medical information
 - Name of medical insurance provider and insurance number
3. No safety launch, no row! No high school or college crew should be on the water with out a safety launch close by. A coach sitting in the coxswain's seat does not count as a safety launch!
4. Occupants of a coaches' launch should be kept to a minimum. One or two extra people in addition to one coach should be the maximum for a safety launch (14'). Preferably launches should be large enough to hold all members of a given crew in the event of an emergency. 16 foot launches are suggested. "V-hull," or skiff style (Carolina Skiff) are recommended. Aluminum "john boats" are not recommended because of their instability with several passengers and less than stellar poor weather performance.
5. The coach should be wearing a life jacket or PFD at all times while on the water. In addition each launch should have the following safety items:

- Life jacket for each person in the launch
- PFD/Life jacket for each member of a crew on the water.
- A megaphone (powered or cheerleader type)
- Emergency Space blankets for each member of a crew on the water
- Signaling device (flares or horn)
- Paddle
- Tools
- Water bailer
- 50ft. Safety line.
- Fire extinguisher

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6. Operators of launches should have a uninterrupted 360° view at all times. Use of heavy ballast in the bow of the launch (log, tire with rim, cinder blocks, passenger, etc) can be used to trim the launch so it rides level. Aftermarket outboard motor accessories such as Dole Fins also work well for this purpose. See the section on rowing Before Sunrise/After Sunset for more visibility issues.

7. Coaches need to be aware of the wake their launch throws. Coaches should do their best to minimize wakes when passing other crews when at all possible. At no time should a launch's wake be allowed to swamp or endanger a shell/canoe/kayak. If a launch needs to pass or maneuver around a crew the coach should clearly communicate his/her intentions.

8. There should be a minimum of one coaches' launch for every three 8's in a given practice.

9. Each launch should be marked with the name of the owner/organization.

VI. Other on the Water:

The following are suggestions and additional rules that should be referenced with all of the above stated material.

1. All shells should be equipped with emergency releases for foot stretchers. This includes heel tie-downs, and quick release laces/velcro.
2. Coaches are advised to purchase a copy of USRowing's Safety Video, and show it each year to all rowers.
3. Each boat (coach or athlete) has the responsibility for watching where it is going and for avoiding collisions. Boats without coxes must be aware!
4. Once crews have been launched they should row to and wait at a spot specified by the coach that is no more than 500m away from the dock. High school and college crews should not warm-up or row with out a coach's supervision!
 - A common place for crews launching from TBC to stop and wait is the “crew wall” where crews

have their colors painted around Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown.

- Crews going downstream should wait upstream of Theodore Roosevelt Bridge.

5. Coaches should avoid taking out crews of differing speeds and skill levels. Having several crews spread over 1000-2000m or more may as well not have a coaches safety launch with them. Furthermore the coach can not adequately supervise or coach crews in this fashion.

6. Likewise to number 5 above, coaches should keep all crews at “racing distance” apart. That is the distance (width) between two crews. Coaches should limit the distance across all crews in a practice to 3 abreast.

7. Coaches must keep their crews on the right side of the river at all times! Please refer to the information concerning traffic patterns for the river.

8. Slow moving crews should yield to faster crews by shifting their course further to the right (starboard) and allowing the over taking crew to pass. Larger shells have right away over smaller shells due to their decreased maneuverability.

9. Coaches who wish to stop and work with crews should do so only in areas where they are not impeding the flow of traffic. Please refer to the River Traffic Patterns section.

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10. Boats should not turn upstream from bridges unless they are *at least* 500m from the bridge. Swift currents can pull shells into bridge abutments very quickly!

11. Boats wishing to turn should make sure that no other crew is approaching first. Do not cut in front of oncoming crews! Furthermore, crews should make sure to complete their turn only after moving to the other side of the river first, before proceeding in the opposite direction.

12. Crews that are landing on the dock have priority over crews wishing to launch. This is especially true in inclement weather.

13. Landing shells should use all available dock space; they should not wait for the very end of the dock to become open if there is space further up the dock. Crews should endeavor to walk their boat up so that other crews can land unless asked by a coach not to (i.e., another boat is going around them to fill open dock space above them).

14. All boats should take not more than one minute on the dock once the boat has either been placed in the water or has returned from a row. If the boat has serious equipment problems or missing rowers, the shell should be removed from the water. Novice crews are allowed some leeway but should be taught how to function quickly on the dock. Boat and oars come before shoes!

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Emergency Contacts

Weather - 202-936-1212
Emergency - 911
Thompson's Boat Center - 202-333-9543
Potomac Boat Club (pay phone) - 202-333-9737
D.C. Harbor Police - 202-727-4582
U.S. Park Police - 202-619-7310
GW Hospital, Emergency Room - 202-994-3211

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Appendix A: Weather Related Health Emergencies

Hypothermia

Hypothermia is a condition that occurs when the temperature of the human body is lowered to a dangerous point due to exposure to cold and/or wet conditions. Cold temperatures and wet conditions work together to pull heat away from the body lowering the body's core temperature. Even in mild conditions, the addition of rain or submersion in cold water can sufficiently reduce body warmth to trigger hypothermic conditions in the body. A person's condition can degrade rapidly impairing breathing and coordination making it impossible to swim or keep one's head above water. Emergency action needs to be taken no matter what the level of hypothermia.

Early Hypothermia

Symptoms: rapid shivering, numbness, loss of strength and coordination, semi-consciousness.

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Action: Maintain open airway. Transfer to a warm environment as soon as possible. Remove wet clothing. Use blankets to help warm individual or if available a warm shower. Warm torso area first. Seek medical attention.

Profound Hypothermia

Symptoms: Person will be pale, stiff, and cold. Unresponsive to stimuli, and possibly unconscious. Little or no cardiac or respiratory activity will be present.

Action: Move or manipulate as gently as possible. Prevent further heat loss, but DO NOT attempt to rewarm. Maintain open airway, and activate EMS procedures. Call for emergency help immediately!

Heat Related Emergencies

Higher temperatures and high humidity can lead to heat related illnesses that coaches and rowers need to keep in mind. As humidity rises the bodies ability to cool off through sweating is diminished

since evaporation is limited. The best way to avoid heat related injuries is to practice at cooler times of the day: early morning or late afternoon. The body needs time to acclimate to increased temperatures. Intake of fluids is also key and should be encouraged. Dehydration further impairs the bodies ability to cool off. There are two major related heat illnesses to be aware of: Heat exhaustion and heat stroke.

Heat Exhaustion

Early Symptoms: heavy sweating, cramps, tiredness, weakness, malaise, mild decrease in performance.

Action: rest and fluid replacement.

Advanced Symptoms: profuse sweating, muscle incoordination, impaired judgement, emotional changes.

Action: If there is mild temperature elevation, an ice pack may be used to help cool the body to normal temperatures. Several days rest may be necessary and rehydration is a priority.

Heat Stroke

Symptoms: confusion, nausea, vomiting, seizures. The victim loses consciousness. Body temperature rises as high as 106. Skin is dry and clammy.

Action: Get medical help immediately! Lower body temp by immersing in water, maintain horizontal position of victim. Stop treatment when victim is conscious.

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Appendix B: Capsize Procedures & Person Overboard

NOTE: It is the responsibility of any coach boat to provide assistance to any capsized boat-even if from another sport, or a pleasure boat. Coaches are reminded to stop at a safe distance and offer assistance. Approach with caution and in a controlled manner. Be aware of your prop!

All crew members should be fully aware of what actions to take when a crew swamps, flips, or capsizes. In any of these events the crew should remain with the shell! The shell will float (an important reason to close bow and stern ports before going on the water). Furthermore the oars will act as flotation devices. If for some reason the shell sinks below the surface, the shell should be rolled so the bottom is facing the sky, as this traps air underneath the shell and increases buoyancy. *At no time should any crew member leave the boat to swim to shore!* A short swim can be far longer than it appears due to currents, wind, water temperature, or personal fatigue.

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Stay calm. The first thing that should be done in a team boat is for the coxswain or bow person to get a head count to make sure all rowers are accounted for. The crew, while holding onto the shell, should attempt to get the attention of other crews, or coaches on the water. Waving and making as much noise as is necessary to attract attention. If no crews or launches are on the water nearby,

attracting the attention of people on shore is the next step.

If the water and air temperatures are low, then the crew members should move along the shell and huddle together in pairs near the middle of the shell. Effort should be made to keep as much of the body out of the water as possible. This can include draping ones self over the top of the hull. A minimum of movement is key to retaining body heat. Constantly check on crew mates and keep up one-on-one communication.

To recap procedures:

1. Stay calm.
2. Stay with the shell.
3. Take a head count.
4. Pair up and keep communicating with each other.
5. Attract attention of launches, crews, or people on shore.
6. If need be, roll shell over and drape the body across the hull. (Sinking shell or cold conditions)
7. Wait for help.

There is one other event that should be addressed that is similar to what was mentioned above: man overboard. A violent crab by an oarsmen can throw them out of the boat. In this situation, it is up to the ejected rower to stay below the surface of the water till the shell has passed (this avoids getting hit in the head by a fast moving rigger(s)). The crew should stop rowing and hold water immediately so they can lend assistance. The crew should get the attention of the coach's launch while the rower treads water. In the event that a launch is not nearby the crew can back up to the rower in question so the rower can use the shell as a floatation device. It is also feasible to pass an oar to the ejected rower, using the oar as a floatation device. Once removed from the water, the rower should be evaluated to determine if the rower is fit to continue or if a medical emergency is present.

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