



's Most Exciting Coverage of Inshore Saltwater Fishing!

Paddling Pointers Make The Most Of Your Stroke

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The kayak-fishing craze is steadily gaining momentum throughout the country. With each passing week hundreds of new recruits enlist into the ever-growing ranks of the 'plastic navy'.

A big reason that the sport of kayak-fishing is growing at such a rapid rate is the fact that it's simple and affordable. Just a few hundred bucks can get you on the water with everything you need, and a grand can have you paddling in style with top-of-the-line equipment.

There's no expensive insurance policy, no gas to buy, no fancy outboard motor or electrical equipment that needs constant maintenance - no worries.

But buyer beware. The relative simplicity of kayak-fishing can be deceiving. Many newcomers to the sport get their yak on the water only to realize the experience isn't nearly as enjoyable as they thought it'd be. Remorseful customers return to their local paddle shops with reports of back pain, neck pain, arm pain and pain in muscles they never even knew they had.

According to Scott Null, a kayak-fishing veteran and co-author of *Kayak Fishing: The Ultimate* guide, one of the biggest reasons many would-be kayak anglers give up the sport is because of pain, discomfort and fatigue they experience due to poor paddling technique.

Here's Null's head-to-toe rundown of how to reduce the stress on your body and make the most of your stroke.

Heads Up

Like most any activity that requires balance and coordination, a well-executed paddle stroke starts with your head.

"It seems really obvious, but you always want to have your head up and your eyes forward," Null said. "Most people start out paddling that way, but I've noticed as people start to get tired, they'll drop their head down. I've also seen when people try to paddle really hard, they'll put their head down, grit their teeth and try to dig in.

"Your head is key for maintaining your balance, and balance is a huge part of paddling a kayak. Pay attention to what your head is doing as you paddle and you may be surprised. When you're on a long paddle



Photo: Capt. Scott Null

Null says the abs, not the arms, play the biggest role in a properly executed forward stroke.

it's easy to start daydreaming and you start looking down or your posture gets sloppy. Try to stay focused and keep that head up."

Shoulders, Arms and Waist

The shoulders and arms are the two primary areas that Null identified as being most problematic in new paddlers. Contrary to how it may look, the arms play only a small role in generating power on the forward stroke.

"Most people think paddling is an activity that involves pulling with your arms, but that's not it at all," he said. "There's absolutely zero arm-pulling on a properly executed stroke. When you just glance at someone paddling, it looks like they're using their arms. But if you look closely at a well-trained paddler, you'll notice the arms don't have much to do with it."

Instead of bending at the elbows and pulling the paddle towards you, he said to pivot at the waste and rotate your shoulders to generate the back-and-forth motion of the stroke.

"The best way to think about it is to envision that you're trying to scoot your kayak across wet cement," he said. "You're not pulling water with the paddle, instead, you're inserting the paddle in the water and bringing your kayak forward to that point. That's not achieved with the arms. It's done with the waist and shoulders."

He noted that the arms should never bend beyond the 90-degree mark, neither inward nor outward. A good way to do that is to envision you're cradling a beach ball between both arms.

"Try to paddle without squishing or dropping the beach ball. The only way to do that is to keep your elbows and wrists locked. If you're extending one arm and reaching way out in front of you, the beach ball is going to fall out.

"The basic idea is to restrict movement in your arms while rotating freely at the waist and shoulders," he added. "I'm not saying to keep your arms tensed up. Staying relaxed in all your muscles is very important. But stay focused on using your waist and shoulders to move the paddle, not your arms.

"It's easy to just reach out there with your arms and grab water. That's usually what comes naturally to most people, but that's certainly not the most efficient way to do it. Your arms will wear out quickly. But if you use the big muscle groups - your abs, your shoulders and your back - you can paddle all day with less fatigue."

On the issue of fatigue, he said it's important not to lift the off hand too high during the stroke. A common mistake is for paddlers to lift their off hand high over their head and dig in with their other hand. He said the off hand should never go higher than the chin during a proper stroke.

Another important mental note is to not think of the paddling movement as single strokes on each side of the kayak, but rather one complete fluid motion, with each stroke leading into the next.

Legs and Posture

Another common misconception about paddling is that it's an activity performed strictly by the muscles of the upper-body. While the majority of the motion takes place above the waist, proper positioning of the legs and a solid posture are cornerstones of a picture-perfect stroke.



Photo: Kayak Fishing: The Ultimate Guide/Jock Bradley

Your off hand should never get above your chin during the stroke. Bringing the top hand too high creates unnecessary stress on the shoulders.

"I hear a lot of guys complaining of back pain from being in the kayak," Null said. "Part of that has to do with seating. Some kayaks come with adequate back support while others don't. I use an after-market seat on my kayak because it gives me some extra padding and great back support. Some guys prefer the factory seating. You just have to figure out what works for you.

"However, a lot of kayakers have back pain because of poor paddling posture," he noted. "A kayak is not a lounge chair. It's ok to take a break and kick back if you get tired, but when you're paddling, you need to be upright with your back straight and your rear end planted firmly against the back of the seat."

He also stressed the importance of being "locked in" to your kayak. That's achieved by keeping a slight bend in the knees so that you can use your leg muscles to stay braced and avoid sliding on the seat.

Most kayaks come with adjustable footpegs, while others come with molded-in rest points. Either way, it's important not to over-extend the legs.

"I often hear people asking about leg room when purchasing their first kayak," he said. "What you have to keep in mind is that you don't need to be able to fully stretch out your legs. If you're not able to brace your feet on something, then every time you paddle you're going to be sliding and moving in the seat.

"That's just like spinning your wheels. You have to use your legs to keep yourself pushed into the seat. Think of it as you and the kayak being welded together. That way every stroke you make with the paddle is converted into forward motion. If you're not braced well in the kayak, you're losing a lot of that energy.