

Paddle Float and Rescue-Stirrup Re-Entry for Sit-On-Top Kayakers

By Tom Holtey, author of "Tandem Sit-on-top Kayaking" and "Sit-on-top Kayaking, A Beginner's Guide"

One of the primary reasons paddlers choose Sit-On-Top kayaks is for the ease of **deep-water re-entry**. There are some paddlers, however, who have great difficulty with this most important skill. The reasons for this are just as varied as those who paddle. For most it is the lack of upper body strength needed to lift oneself up and into the cockpit. Others have trouble with their chest, belly or PFD clearing the gunwale. Some Sit-On-Top kayakers have very high sides, or are very tippy, making re-entry difficult. Also of note are assorted physical limitations and lack of coordinated athletic ability.

There is a solution. We look back to the skills, techniques and equipment that have long been in use for traditional Sit-In-Side kayakers. The paddle float and rescue stirrup are standard gear for our SINK cousins. These seemingly useless (for SOTs) safety devices can really come in handy when someone in your group is having difficulty after a capsized; when you encounter a SINK paddler in need; and, of course, if you have trouble with the standard deep-water re-entry techniques yourself. **Paddle Floats**

The paddle float is quite common and can be found in any kayak shop. Most are an inflatable cushion with a pocket to slip the paddle blade into.



Some are made of a solid foam block, no blowing necessary, also with a paddle pocket.

The advantage of the inflatable is that it is space saving, but will take an extra step, blowing it up, when in use. The advantage of the foam float is the rapidness of deployment, but it will take up more space on deck.

I would recommend the inflatable for those who paddle warmer waters and will be less likely to need a float on a regular basis. I would recommend the foam float for those who are paddling very cold waters or would need the float quite a lot.

The paddle float attaches to one blade of the kayak paddle, making the paddle and float combo into an out-rigger to increase stability of the kayak during re-entry. It is the primary piece of self-rescue gear that SINK paddlers carry every time they go out onto open water. (they carry a bilge pump too) The process is called Self-Rescue in the SINK world, but for our purposes I will call this general process Deep-Water Re-Entry, as the SOT kayak does not flood with water and the situation seems not as dire.

The intrepid and ever practical **Audrey Sutherland** uses a stuffed dry bag as a paddle float. Her motto: "If you can not use it for more than one thing, leave it behind." So a dry bag can be used in a pinch, but I prefer a blow-up paddle float. I would suggest an experimental run with any dry bag to see how it will do before you depend on it. I could also say, in the spirit of "use for more than one thing", that a foam paddle float would make a nice seat cushion for picnics on rocky shores and an inflatable paddle float will be handy as a pillow for camping and sun bathing.

Rescue Stirrup (and how to make one)



The rescue stirrup (also known as a rescue sling) is as simple as a long loop of rope. This rope will hold the paddle & float as an outrigger to the kayak deck and serve as a step so the paddler can use the stronger muscle groups of the legs to lift themselves back onto the kayak from water that is over head.

You will likely not find a rescue stirrup in any kayak shop. This is a homemade device, custom to your needs and easy to build. Start off with a long rope, maybe a recycled roof rack strap, about 12 foot long or more. The simplest of slings is just a big loop, a circle you could say, that is about head high when held up in front of you. I like to use a 3/8" nylon rope, twisted or braided, because it is soft on the hands and easy to tie. Nylon will absorb and hold water. Polypropylene will not hold water (or mildew) but it is rougher and harder to tie.

The stirrup can be enhanced with some optional features if desired. Nylon rope will not necessarily float, so I have added a short length of pipe insulation, about 16", and knotted it in place. This padded section can be useful in the "assisted version" of the Deep-Water Re-Entry. It contacts the paddle shaft and can prevent slippage.

On the other end I have added a short length of plastic tubing, about 12", to serve as a stirrup. This is also knotted in place. The tubing can be an old scrap of recycled garden hose if you have it. It will help the stirrup end sink as well as hold open a foothold that will be easy to find. If you use polypro rope that floats you may need the tubing to help sink it down to foot level.

You should be able to get everything you need to make your own stirrup at a local hardware store, or maybe recycle from stuff in your garage or basement.

How To Use The Paddle Float & Stirrup

As we all know, you will never be able to predict when you will tip, so therefore we should be prepared. Preparation starts with deep-water re-entry practice. If the standard method is not within your grasp you will want to practice with float and stirrup in controlled conditions before you go out onto open water. Try this close to shore, in calm water, maybe with a buddy standing by.



Once you have got the hang of it, always pack along your float and stirrup, on deck in a handy to reach spot, like a backrest pocket or net bag clipped to the deck.

When you tip it is important to keep a hold on your paddle and do not let it drift away. A **paddle leash** can be quite useful for this. Bear in mind also that you cannot let your kayak get away from you either. If you do not use a leash tuck your paddle shaft between your legs or under an arm while you reach for your float & stirrup, still holding onto the kayak.



The next step is to mount the stirrup and float. I like to start with the stirrup first, but you can do it any way that works best for you. The traditional paddle float mounting is done just behind the sit-in-side cockpit. It is done this way because SINK paddlers get back into the kayak largely from the back deck.

I have found that the stirrup can work better for SOT kayakers when mounted to the front of the cockpit because SOT paddlers get back onto the kayak in the middle. This will also make de-rigging the out-rigger easier. You can go either way. My preference is for front mounting and you can interpret the instructions as necessary.



Loop one end of the stirrup loop over the paddle shaft near the blade, the drip ring can help hold it in place. Toss the rope over the cockpit and position the far paddle blade just past the far side gunwale so the shaft is across the kayak at a right angle.

Reach under the kayak for the stirrup. Pushing the kayak away from you will help sweep the rope under the hull to your grasp.



Then loop the rope several times around the paddle shaft leaving the stirrup to dangle into the water. You will find it surprising how close to the surface your foothold will have to be. You can adjust the height of the foothold by winding the rope repeatedly around the shaft for higher, or less for lower.



Next step is to mount the paddle float. Most blow-up floats have two chambers. I like to blow up one first, insert the paddle blade, and then blow up the second chamber.



If you are using a solid foam float this will go quite fast, but the standard blow-up float really does not take that long. Paddle floats will also have a small strap to secure the float to the shaft to ensure it cannot slip off.

Now the out-rigger is set up to use. You may need to lean back a bit to insert your foot into the stirrup.



Use the paddle shaft for support as needed to reach for the cockpit. Grip the far side of the cockpit with one hand while holding onto the close side.

Put all your weight onto the stirrup and use your leg muscles to lift yourself up, not unlike climbing a ladder or stair.



Once up, turn, twist and roll into the cockpit in a seated position. Your legs will be in the water on the same side as the float. Take a moment to rest as needed. As long as you keep your weight leaned to the side with the float you will be fine. Do not lean to the other side the out-rigger will not support you on that side.

Next step is to de-rig the out-rigger. This can be done with the legs still in the water, or fully seated in the cockpit. Un-loop the stirrup side of the sling from the shaft. Be ready to brace with the paddle and float as needed, once the sling is off the out-rigger will not support you. Remove the other end, still ready to brace.



The paddle with float can still be used as an outrigger by holding the shaft firmly to the gunwales and leaning slightly to the float side. (One or two hands can be used) You may need to do this while you regain your composure, rest, and get your boat back into "ship shape". Now is a good time to get your knee straps back on if you use them.

The inflatable paddle float will need to be deflated before removal from the blade. Undo the strap first, you can still brace with the strap off if needed. Open up one valve and as the air is escaping, quickly slip off the float. Foam floats only need the strap off. To fully deflate the float open both valves and roll to force the air out. Seal up the valves to keep water out.

When it comes to stowing your float and stirrup you could, to be extra prepared or lazy as the case may be, leave the float partly inflated, on the assumption that what just "un-horsed" you may happen again. You may even be making a bee-line back to shore to warm up, but do stow your float and stirrup in a manner that will prevent them getting lost overboard or entangling you.

I like to use a net bag to stuff this sort of gear into. It will drain and dry nicely. A bag with wide opening, draw sting and brass clip added is perfect. A bag like this can be found at a scuba shop or in a camping store as a "dunk bag". I checked also the **Large Stow Bag** and found that it will accommodate my **Paddle Float** and my custom Rescue Stirrup precisely. It would have a little more room to spare if the Stirrup did not have the pipe insulation and tubing. I like to mount the kit just behind the seat, tucked under the rear backrest straps and clipped to the deck with a brass clip.

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