



TEAM RACING

"Team races require a slower, more controlled pace. Going into our team run at the Worlds, we knew at that controlled pace we could all clean the course."

Bob Robison,
C1 Team
World Champion

Too many people view team racing as three racers taking individual runs on the course at the same time. There is a great deal more to successful team racing than this, and it takes considerable practice to be good at it. The qualities that produce an outstanding individual run -- superior speed, strength -- are not the same ones which produce a winning team run, although, of course, there is a certain amount of carry-over.

There have been many cases in World Championships when the top placers in the individual runs lost to teams comprised of boaters who had not placed as high individually. In Jonquiere, for example Austria won first, second and fourth in K1 individuals, but lost to Britain which had placed third, ninth and fifteenth.

In the words of Poland's Ryszard Seruga, World Champion and two-time Bronze Medalist in C2 Team, "Team racing is all tactical." The first point about team racing is to go for the clean run. Too many teams think this just means approach the course the same way you would on individual runs. If you do that, you will be too fast and take penalties. I find that with a new team, especially in K1W, the temptation is to go much too fast and consequently take a lot of penalties.

The lead boater has responsibility for setting the pace, so he or she must really understand the difference between team pace and individual pace. If the lead boat goes too fast, the other boats will simply try to keep up and consequently hit more gates. All three boats need to know from experience that they will have ample time to clean the course.

Opposite: France's Christian Frossard, Jean-Yves Prigent, and Bernard Renault, during, their ten-penalty run which won them the 1977 World Championship in K1 Team. Ever since 1973, the, winning K1 Team has had only one touch or less.

(Al Button photo)

Penalties add up fast in team races because each boat may hit the same pole if the first boat has left it swinging. I believe, therefore, that a clean team run with all the gates run direct (except by off-side Cls which should usually turn to their on-side) is awfully hard to beat. The strategy, then, is for a team to practice together for many months, preferably many years, and always strive for clean runs. Except in K1, speed is almost irrelevant as long as everything is run direct.

I. Running Order

Since all three boats in a team race have different roles, it is important to practice in the order you will race in. That would be:

A. Lead boat.

Put your cleanest boat first. Cleanliness is next to godliness in this slot so that each succeeding boat will have no swinging gates to contend with. This boat must learn team pace well and in the beginning will have to learn to slow down.

B. Second boat.

Put your worst boat in the second slot. It will be closer to the cleanest boat and will, to some extent, be able to follow its route and indicate to the first boat if the pace is too fast.

C. Third boat.

Put your fastest boat last -- unless it is also the cleanest boat in which case it should go first. This way it will be able to catch up with the others at the team gate and at the finish line. Running behind the others should give this boat a little more time to run the course clean, since team pace will be considerably slower than this boat's individual pace. On the last few gates this boat should try to tighten up the gap between it and the others so that by the finish line it can actually try to paddle right up to the stern deck of the second boat, thus cutting a few seconds off the team's score.

Furthermore, if the second boat does hit some gates, there is a better chance that the fastest boat will be able to avoid the swinging poles since it is more skillful than the second boat.

If you have three boats of approximately the same ability, it is difficult to say what the order should be, except perhaps to put your most consistent boat first. It may be possible in practice to establish which running order produces the best score for the team and then the three should always run in that order in races.

II. The Team Race.

Team races are always held after the individual runs so there may be great difficulty prolonging concentration for two more runs, especially if one of the racers has medalled in the individuals. This is where occasionally going for clean practices -- no hits the entire practice -- pays off. It forces you to keep concentrating long after you feel like packing it in for the day.

In the late afternoon or evening of the last individual runs, the team must force itself to walk the course with the coach and plan team strategy. There will not be enough time to do it properly the next morning and besides, the three teammates should have the night to think about the plan. The primary aim of the strategy is to allow each boat maximum opportunity to clean the course.

In mapping out the team strategy, the following points should be borne in mind, or rather should be so ingrained that they find their way into the strategy without anyone having to verbalize them:

A. The start.

The third boat should leave a little extra room between it and the second boat. This is for weaving on eddy turns. Thus, at the start, the first two boats go off almost together, but the third boat hangs back some. In some cases, it is more advantageous for two boats to start on the side of the river and the third boat on the other side -- or even out in the current. This allows a better approach to the first few gates. See Fig. 8-1 below.

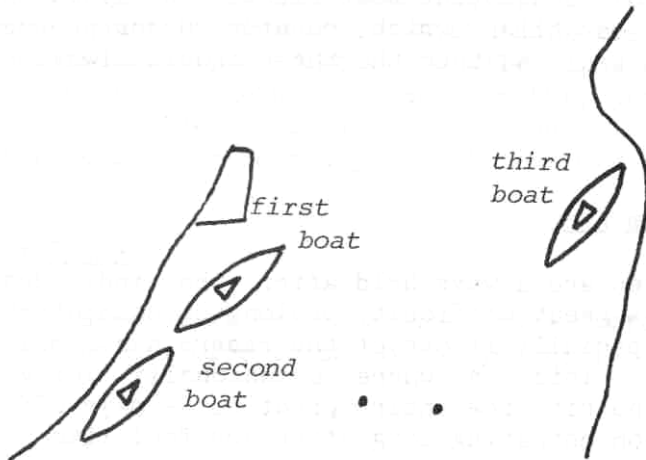


Fig. 8-1. Team Start.

The third boat starts with the others, but goes easy to both save energy and to build up a gap for later weaving. After the start, the proper distance between the boats is shown below.

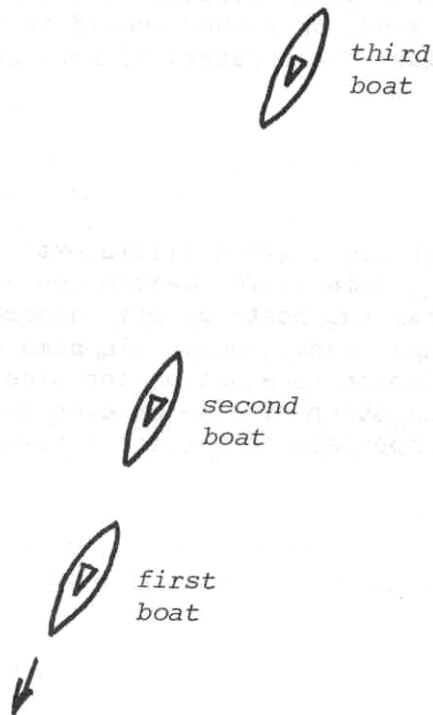


Fig. 8-2. Spacing Right After the Start.

B. Upstream weaving.

On each upstream gate, the first and second boat go into the eddy one after the other. The first boat has to get in and out of the eddy as fast as possible.

After the first boat comes up through the gate and peels out, but before the second does, the third boat comes into the eddy, thus "weaving." The third boat then follows the other two, again maintaining a gap for future weaving. See Fig. 8-3:

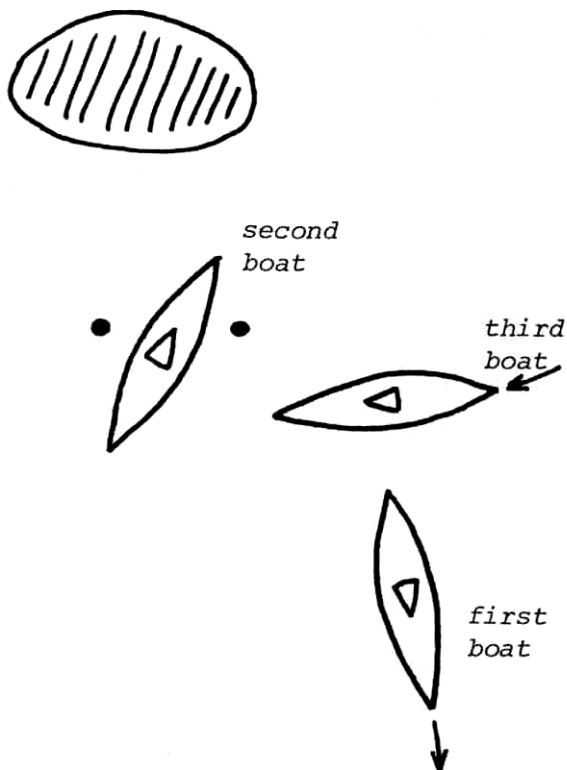


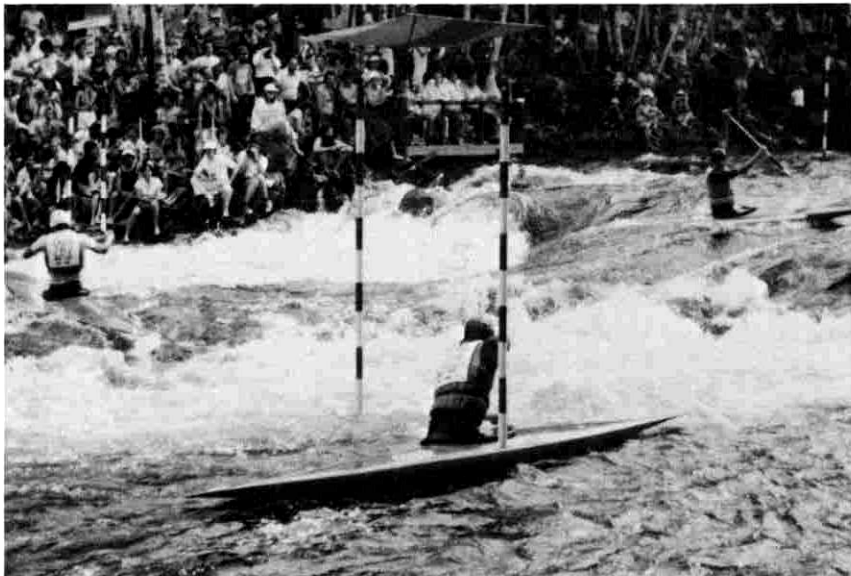
Fig. 8-3. Upstream Gate in Team.
The third boat weaves between the first and second.



1



2



3

Weaving in Team

1. Jon Lugbill, David Hearn and Bob Robison, World Champions in Team at Jonquiere, approach an upstream gate. Note the gap between Robison and the others.
2. Hearn and Lugbill show the proper weave: the boats should be close but not so close that they touch because that might cause penalties.
3. As Hearn comes up through the gate, Robison will cross his path and weave just like Lugbill and Hearn did in 2 above. (Will Summers photos)

C. Midstream Upstreams.

On upstreams in the middle of the river it may pay to have two boats enter from one side of the river and one from the other. This could lead to a faster running of the gates, plus making it easier to clean them since there is less chance for the boats to get in each other's way. See Fig. 8-4. below.

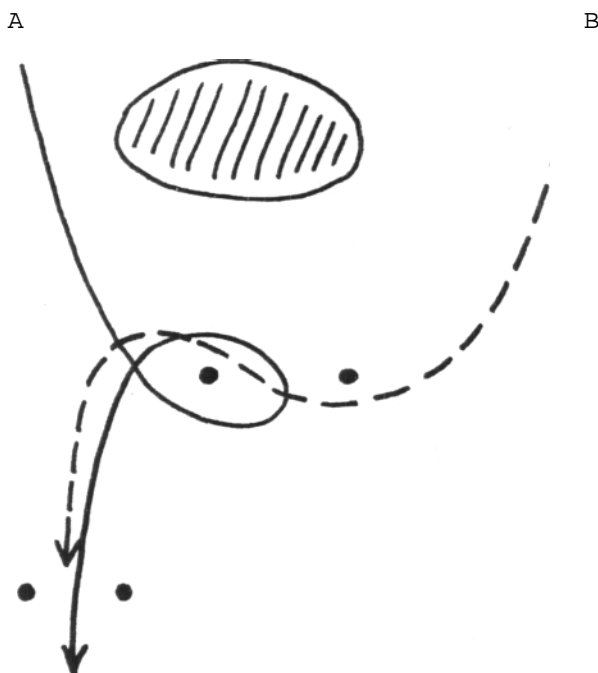


Fig. 8-4. Upstream gate in the middle of the river. The first and second boats take path A while the third boat takes B and is faster because of avoiding the need for weaving.

D. Team gate.

Since the team gate is usually an upstream gate, it should be done just like any other upstream, that is, with weaving. If the team has woven well down the top of the course, there will be no need for the lead boat to wait at all at the team gate. Fifteen seconds -- the time in which the team gate must be negotiated without incurring a penalty -- is a very long time. Practicing team will teach you that you really have a great deal of time here, particularly if the third boat can show its speed and catch up to the others.

B. Finish.

After the team gate, the lead boat must not speed up excessively or do anything else to "panic" the rest of the team. Remember, the team's score is based on the last boat's time, not the first. The lead boat must continue to do everything possible to "lead" the team, not bolt for the finish line until after the last gate. See Fig. 8-5.

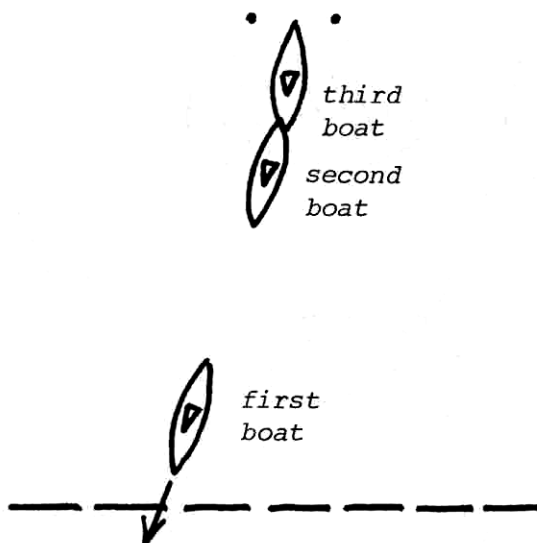


Fig. 8-5. Finish of the Team Race.
The third boat must try to catch the second boat.

F. Sneaking.

Throughout the course the team should avoid all high risk - low gain sneaking. It simply isn't worth it. Go for the clean run. However, there are some instances when sneaking is perfectly safe and should be done in team. Also, since the team races come after the individuals, the boaters should know all the moves cold and shouldn't change anything if it has worked well in the individuals.

G. Speed.

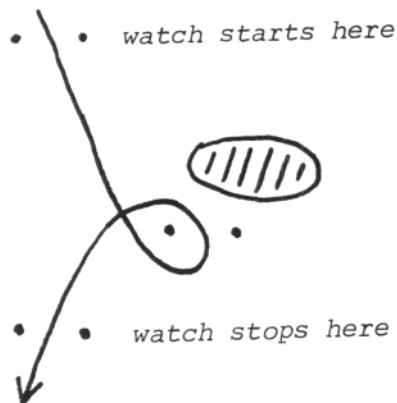
There is nothing quite like a clean team run to shake up the opposition. But as of this writing not many teams can do them, and I think it is because they simply are going too fast. They haven't learned how slow team pace really is. K1 is the only exception: speed over the course is important in that

class -- but you'll still get a medal if you have a clean run and take everything direct.

III. Practice.

Like the rest of slalom, team racing requires long hours of time together in order to do well. It's not possible to take three good boaters who have never paddled together and expect them to do well in team. They will be unsure of each other and afraid of getting speared. This will disturb concentration just a bit and cause penalties. In C2, the problem is particularly acute. There are six individuals to coordinate and achieving this takes a great deal of time and practice.

I believe that team practice should be similar to individual practice: timed and scored runs in whitewater gates. Perhaps twenty percent of training time should be devoted to team practice. This is what the Polish national team (winner of many World Championship team medals) does and I agree with it. However, the Poles time only the upstream gates, never the whole course. More specifically, they start the watch at the gate above the upstream gate and stop it at the gate below it.



This method stresses tight weaving on upstream gates, probably the greatest problem in team racing. While this is certainly a very useful exercise, I personally think it is wrong to limit team training to it alone. It is better to do a lot of team training over full length courses, for time and penalties (with split times for every upstream gate). This allows the team to focus on tactics as well as speed, and speed is more important for K1 and C1 teams.

In Washington, we practice team at the end of individual runs. This allows the team to feel the significant change in pace between team pace and individual pace. If we are running

two different full length courses, we might take two team runs at the end of each. On other days, we might practice team exclusively, usually as a release from a long period (several days) of individual practices.

Finally, if many boats (12 or more) show up for practice at the same time and there are only one or two timers, we will sometimes do team in order to make the workout manageable.