

## **On Assessment**

*By Gordon Dayton 4/6/06*

I remember my first Skills Assessment. I made the appointment over the phone, had to find my way to a strange place following difficult directions, then spend the day with a strange instructor and other participants I did not know. Although I had studied the posted content, I had never trained with the instructor before that day. So I had little idea what was expected except for a brief review. Fortunately I watched the others perform their skills before I had to do most of mine and got an idea of what they knew. This is how I blew my first try at BCU 3-Star Skills Certification.

But after that I knew the content. I took some targeted lessons and practiced intensely for several weeks. When I returned a month later to retest I was praised for my improvement and skill at modeling the strokes and maneuvers. I even pulled off a roll on the first attempt. But it would have been much less stressful to accomplish my testing with a familiar Instructor and with other applicants who I knew and had trained with. You know, like you can do in the premier clubs in the US and Europe.

Our Club, North Atlantic Canoe and Kayak is a club dedicated to training, safety, adventure and fellowship. It is a requirement of our Bylaws that each member complete a Skills Assessment if they wish to participate in club paddles. It is not surprising if Assessment is not eagerly anticipated by all members, but if so, I would challenge you to look at Assessment in a different light. I would like to point out that Skills Assessment supports each of our four fundamental goals stated above.

### **Training**

NACK is founded and managed by Instructors. They are truly dedicated to the sport and have each invested hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars in their own training. In forming the club it is their hope to find a ready group of students who are interested in paddling and are eager to learn and improve their techniques. With a large

group of members this can be cost effective for all if we work together.

Some people can successfully teach themselves new skills. Others need the help of a coach or instructor. But how do you know if the training you have invested in has been effective? Maybe you missed some key points, maybe your instructor failed to demonstrate effectively, maybe you need a better student/teacher match. Assessment can help sort this out.

Knowing your weak spots will help you focus your efforts on specific areas to jumpstart your development. Practicing poor skills ingrains bad habits. We say: "practice makes permanent; training makes perfect." Good training develops the skills you need to feel confident on the water and the ability to assist the others in your group. Periodic assessment, like a regular medical checkup, is a proven method to verify successful training and to stimulate further development.

### **Safety**

Good skills help make you a safe and valued member of a group. When you are confident in handling your boat and can maneuver well you are more effective in an emergency. When you have an efficient stroke and can paddle with minimal effort, the group is more cohesive. If each member of a paddling group holds a skill rating, the trip leader has good knowledge of the capabilities of the entire group on the water. The leader can better manage the group, assigning support positions with confidence.

Often we hear about self-assessment. In our sport, only upper level instructors are trained in good assessment techniques. Many aspects of paddling are subtle and difficult to explain or master. The self-taught, self-assessed paddler has little basis for seeing or understanding these issues. Peer practice can be useful to develop skills you already understand, but taking training from your buddies is often a way to trade bad habits.

Because much of paddling technique is unseen or poorly understood, bad habits are easy to accumulate. The problem may not

surface until a maneuver is needed in an emergency. More often we see it manifest itself in chronic pain or injury due to improper form or poor understanding of the relationship between body, boat and blade. A good Assessor will help detect these flaws and give you ways to work them out of your repertoire.

### **Adventure**

Paddlers appreciate getting away from the frustrations of daily life. The more intense our lifestyle, the more we enjoy a life-sport like kayaking as a diversion. The more challenging the activity, the more diverting and refreshing, but it is smart to approach such challenges from a basis of good training.

There are many diverse activities that clubs can offer based on specialization of its members. Good clubs make it possible for all members to participate and progress through a system skill levels. Assessment is a tool used by the best clubs to focus this effort and validate improvement. As member skills are developed higher adventures can be tackled with confidence.

### **Fellowship**

Having invested in your own skills you still need a group with similar interests and capabilities. How can you find paddlers that can support your search for adventure on the water? Hopefully clubs like NACK offer this opportunity

The strength of a club is often based on personal relationships. Knowing that your partners think enough of themselves and the group to get a skill assessment helps build an atmosphere of trust. If you know a member who has made this investment then you should not only congratulate them but also thank them.

The more I advance my training, the more challenging activities I can take on as a productive and supportive member of the group. Having a group of trusted people that you can rely upon in a clinch is a rare and valuable thing. A respected place in the group can be cemented by a valid Assessment.

### **How Assessments Work**

NACK Assessments are more relaxed than my BCU Assessment. Most candidates already know each other. They are done in a group setting where you can see others demonstrating the same skills and maneuvers. They are handled very professionally and every courtesy is extended to the participant. It is impossible to come away without new knowledge. Each candidate is given a personal debriefing noting their strengths and weaknesses with suggestions for improvement. Only the candidate knows the status and details of their assessment.

If you perform well it is possible you might be given a higher rating. If you have weaknesses you could be granted a lower rating while you continue to train. If your performance is marginal (as mine was with BCU) you could come back again after more practice to retest on your weak areas. Either way you will come away with sure knowledge your capabilities and what you can do for improvement. That's what its all about! NOTE: At this writing, the Training Committee is working to develop the capability to grant ACA skill ratings in conjunction with NACK Assessments.

### **Who needs it?**

You need an Assessment if you want to participate in NACK trips, or if you wish to become a NACK Trip Leader. All our instructors have all been assessed many times, often requiring days of drills and testing.

You do not need an Assessment to participate in NACK Training, Peer Practice, New Member Paddle or other functions where NACK has supplied appropriate trained staff in a controlled on-water environment. We hope you all will value and take advantage of the free Assessment benefit, but it is not a requirement of any member.

See you on the water!

*(Gordon Dayton is President of NACK)*