

Rapid Resolution

by Gordon Grant

Two of the activities I love best are rock climbing and river running, activities that have similar appeal, with the most obvious being the presence of some form of risk. Even on a moderate climb or on a Class II river you are exposed to hazards and some measure of risk. Many of us derive our pleasure from recognizing and accepting the risks inherent in these sports; then, we take the challenge by exercising good technique and good judgment.

I read in a paddler's newsletter of the North Texas River Runners an excellent comment that went something like this: "Good judgment comes from experience, and you gain experience from making bad judgments." This is quite true, but in the sport today we are witnessing a growing number of paddlers whose technical paddling skills build up faster than their judgment.

Here is a mental process which, in my experience, whitewater paddlers will find to be pretty bomb-proof when it comes to making decisions about running a rapid. The technique is as important as your paddle strokes or your roll: It is the application of a series

of critical questions you should ask yourself before running any rapid about which you have doubts. Really, these mental checks should take place before any rapid. The fact is, many unnecessary accidents have taken place in rapids that were not considered terribly difficult by those running them. The checklist usually takes seconds. On serious rapids it may take much longer. But it is always a necessary part of deciding whether to "go for it" or not.

Here's the checklist:

1. What Moves Are Required To Run This Rapid? Does it require a tough ferry on a breaking wave to thread two holes, or a diagonal "boof" move off a high drop? Maybe there is a wave that might knock me over; can I roll there?

2. Can I Do Those Moves? This means, can you consistently do that move to the point where you are guaranteed of making it in this ease?

3. What Are The Consequences If I Miss The Required Moves? Does the water push you towards any hazards: logs, undercuts or a long swim through continuous rapids?

4. Am I Willing To Accept Those Consequences? This is the biggest one

of all. Having looked at all the risks, you must ask yourself if you are willing to deal with the consequences. This is true whether the rapid is a class III or a VI. If you are not willing to accept the consequences, it's time to carry the rapid, and that will always be the right judgment for that rapid on that day.

Hey, some people might say, isn't this a little heavy? No, just honest, for it gives you a clarity of focus on what you can do. This doesn't mean I never run rapids where I am uncertain of the results; it just means that I have paid attention to the consequences. I used to paddle at a spot called Gregg Shoals, where we would fling ourselves into the biggest holes I have ever surfed. However, I knew that a swim would be just that; the rapids emptied into a long stretch of flatwater.

If each paddler answered this checklist with complete honesty, we would have fewer people running rapids just because they saw a buddy do it: "Well, Marvin did fine, and he was upside down through the last half!" Unlike a climbing ascent, a successful paddle descent of a rapid at your limits can be largely due to luck. Gravity and momentum serves both the intermediate and the expert alike. We have all seen paddlers of marginal skill sail through a drop cleanly, when moments before or immediately following, we watched an expert get completely thrashed. This rarely happens in climbing; it is hard to stumble and fall upwards.

If you follow the mental checklist above, you are using your own judgment, not just blindly following another person's lead—even if that person is a highly qualified instructor. No matter how good your companions are, they cannot paddle your boat for you. Personal judgment and decisions are much of what the joy of the sport is all about. Exercise this power and harness the joy for yourself. ★



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