

Greenland Paddler

Learning to balance and float

By Christopher Crowhurst

A static or balance brace is often the goal of people that come to our Greenland rolling sessions. Why? First it seems like it should be easy; all you do is lie down in the water, after all. Secondly it looks really cool. For some people however, their body's size, shape and flexibility make it impractical to achieve a balance brace. Even for those that are flexible and buoyant enough it can be a struggle.

In their nice narrow low-decked qajaqs the Inuit are able to hang out indefinitely in the balance brace; I have even heard rumours that they can sleep in this position. There is a variation on the balance brace that includes hooking the trailing edge of the paddle under the chine of the kayak and then resting your head on the loom. This variation requires greater flexibility, and I usually only teach it once a paddler has achieved a solid standard balance brace.

THE BALANCE BRACE

A. Start with the paddle floating parallel to the kayak on the right side. Hold the paddle in the middle of the loom, palm up. Lie straight back on the aft deck. Keep your left arm stretched out to balance yourself.

B. Push your right knee hard against the deck. Relax your left leg. Slide your shoulders off the back deck into the water. Arch your back and push your head backwards. Keep your shoulders flat on the water's surface.

C. Once you are in balance, gently rotate your torso away from the kayak. Keep both arms outstretched. Hold the paddle away from the kayak behind your head. You should be able to rotate until you are perpendicular to the kayak.

D. To recover, rotate your torso towards the back of the kayak. Maintain your shoulders flat and your head pressed backwards. At the last minute, push down on the paddle and lift your back onto the aft deck. Keep your head low and in the water as long as possible.

Sounds easy, right? A recent conversation with a fellow paddler got me thinking about the ways people can improve the stability and success of their balance brace. I am not going to address those issues of kayak design and fit, paddle type or gear you are wearing. Instead, I will just focus on the things to do with your body to improve your success.

SHOULDER ANGLE

Most people naturally sink their forward shoulder as, in order to get our shoulders flat on the water, we need to twist our torso through nearly 90 degrees. Rather than thinking about raising the forward shoulder, focus on sinking the rear shoulder. Take your rear hand (your left one if you are bracing on the right side of your kayak) and hook it under the hull. This will naturally cause that left shoulder to sink a bit which should make your shoulders more level with each other. The sinking of your shoulder can also help increase your back arch.

Why is shoulder angle important? Consider the impact on your depth in the water if you float on your back with shoulders flat, and compare it to how you float when your shoulders are vertical. If you are like most people, your head will be underwater if your shoulders are vertical. Getting your shoulders flat allows a larger area of your torso and shoulders to act as floatation, and it is this floatation that is going to resist the urge of the kayak to roll upside down. The more you float, the better your balance brace. ►

BODY ANGLE

Try and use your rear hand to push yourself away from the hull, causing your torso to swing out further from the kayak. The greater the distance from the centre of rotation of the kayak to the centre of your body's buoyancy, the greater will be the righting momentum provided by your buoyancy. This point is more important for kayakers with reduced flexibility, who might find that their rear shoulder is touching the kayak. In this situation you will have very little support from the water, but by pushing yourself away from the deck you can easily double the benefit of your buoyancy.

BUTT ANGLE

Let's face it: as we get older our spines get stiffer unless we are constantly working to keep flexible. One way to overcome the inability to rotate your core is to start by rotating your butt. Try twisting your butt anticlockwise (for a right-sided brace) in the seat before you lay back. By doing this, you are causing your shoulders to be rotated in advance of any twist that you can then achieve through your core. Additionally, you are moving your right hip forwards which can help overcome a common problem of your hip hitting the cockpit rim and preventing your torso bending.

HEAD ANGLE

Our heads are heavy. The best way to decrease the effect of its weight (the effect of gravity) is to maximize its buoyancy. In an ideal position you would completely submerge your head, but we do need to breathe. Instead, concentrate on pushing your head backwards and curve your neck down. Helen Wilson talks about submerging your eyebrows, which is a great way to ensure you push your head back. This makes sure you are not attempting to lift your head up, which is an instant way to fail. By pushing your head back, you start your spine curving backwards which in turn helps you arch your back more, yielding yet another benefit.

BACK ARCH

When most people start trying to perform the balance brace, the angle of their kayak is such that it is trying to fall over on top of them. It is desirable to get the kayak to sit as upright or flat as close to its normal resting place as possible. It is essential that it is not leaning beyond 90 degrees from horizontal (beyond the vertical position) or it will be fighting to collapse on top of you. The angle of the kayak is greatly affected by the amount you can arch your back. The ability to get your centre of gravity as low as possible and as close to the bottom of the kayak as possible will greatly reduce the twisting or capsizing affect that your body has when floating in the water. Or to put it another way, the flatter the kayak, the more the kayak is helping you stay afloat as opposed to helping to sink you. Work on land to develop the ability to get your shoulders on the ground and the kayak as flat as possible. If you can't make it work on land, you have no hope in the water.

LEG TENSION

A balance brace works by using knee or thigh pressure to push the kayak flat while using your buoyancy to resist the force. If your opposite knee is engaged with the deck it will subtract from the good force of your correct (right) knee pushing the deck. The best way to avoid this is to completely relax the opposite leg. You can go as far as removing it from the foot pegs and dropping it lower in the kayak against the right leg. If you need additional help you can gain an advantage if you can push your opposite heel down. This gets both legs engaged, but working them in opposite directions: the on-side legs lifting hard against the deck/masik in the traditional way and the off-side leg (heel) pushing down hard on the bottom of the hull. This provides an additional force to assist the kayak's rotation and allow your torso to float higher in the water. ►

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Crowhurst, an ex-pat Brit now living in Minnesota USA, is slightly obsessed with Greenland rolling. In 2010 he founded Qajaq Rolls, a philanthropic business that promotes the traditional art of Greenland-style kayak (qajaq) rolling. Christopher has developed video, diagrams and written instruction to help paddlers learn the traditional Greenland rolls. During 2010 he self-published Rolling with Sticks, a waterproof guidebook of 25 Greenland- style rolls, and followed this up with a companion DVD. In 2011 he used the business to establish and fund a program of free rolling clinics, providing hands- on training for paddlers looking to develop their Greenland-style kayak rolls. Contact Christopher through his website <http://qajaqrolls.com>





SLOW DOWN

Rolling in with a splash and hoping to hold the balance brace can be a challenge. As the kayak rolls in, it will gain momentum that you then have to resist. Try leaning backwards fully (or as far as you can onto the back deck) first. Then slowly slide yourself off the back deck into the water. Aim for the back of your head to be the first thing to get wet. The slower you get into the balance brace, the less momentum you will have to deal with and hence the less buoyancy you will need.

GET FLEXIBLE

As we get older we get stiffer if we don't work to keep the muscles supple. The ability to arch our backs and rotate our cores will vary day to day. If your brace is marginal, you could be impacted by changes in your muscle tone and conditioning. Consider yoga or other methods to regularly stretch your body and keep everything flexible.

GET RELAXED

Last but not least you need to learn to relax. Next time you are swimming, roll onto your back and try to float in a relaxed manner. Then tense your body rigid and try to float. I am certain you will feel the difference. Being relaxed makes it much easier for our bodies to float and bend in the directions necessary for the balance brace to be successful. The only tension that you should have in your body is in your lower half, pushing the right side of the kayak upwards.

The balance brace is not simple, nor is it easy. Hopefully with these tips you will be able to improve yours or hold it for the first time. ☺

THE TRADITIONAL PADDLERS' GATHERING

For the past seven years a small group of traditional paddlers have gathered in Minnesota to share experiences, practice their skills and enjoy each other's company. Traditional paddling is a broad term used to describe the use of skin-on-frame qajaqs and bardaika, traditional Greenland and Aleutian paddles, and the ancient art of harpoon throwing. The event is loosely organised by a cadre of friends who make up the Northern Lights Qajaq Society (NLQS), under the auspices of Qajaq USA which allows the group (among other things) to gain access to a wonderful collection of replica qajaqs and equipment.

This year the gathering was well attended with over 40 paddlers showing up for four days of fun. The local mentors were supplemented by Helen Wilson, a well-known Greenland rolling mentor who has been spreading the love of Greenland rolling globally for many years. This was Helen's fourth year helping at the event.

When many people think of Greenland paddles they immediately think of rolling. What makes the gathering such a great event is the diversity of opportunities to work not just on rolling but on all aspects of traditional paddling. Mentors ran courses on efficient canted forward strokes, turning with a Greenland paddle, skin-on-frame Qajaq rescues, throwing a harpoon and of course rolling.

As always, the event finished with a harpoon competition, giving Joyce the bragging rights for the next year as the victor of the combined Styrofoam seal hunt and rolling competition. For more information about the event and to register, visit <http://qajaqmn.org>

UK GREENLAND GATHERING IN 2014

Are any UK based Ocean Paddler readers interested in attending a Greenland Gathering event in 2014? Held in a convenient location for the whole of the UK the Gathering will focus on sharing and learning, support and networking. For details, email: info@qajaquk.org