

Greenland Paddler

Greenland kayak rolling: fad or functional?

By Christopher Crowhurst

Greenland rolling is like yoga: you can go through life without doing it, but if you do it your life will improve. That sentence alone was probably enough for some to stop reading and turn the page to the next article. Many people that I speak with have dismissed Greenland rolling for a variety of reasons: they can roll already; Greenland rolls have no practical purpose; the rolls don't work in certain conditions; the rolls end in the wrong position to keep paddling; Greenland rolling is just for posers; they don't want to compete; they don't work in their kayak. I could keep going. ►





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>



A while ago I was reading a forum thread on QajaqUSA.org and it was suggested that Greenland rolling and qajaq building should not be promoted and instead cherished and held close to the chest by the few devotees that were conversing. Personally I disagree with this opinion. Greenland rolling has enabled my paddling to improve in many areas, not just in rolling. By highlighting the benefits I hope to convince a few more people to give it a try and learn to roll their kayak the Greenland way, in the Spirito Inuit.

To truly understand Greenland rolling one must look through the plethora of documented rolls and examine the underlying principles that span them all. If you look beyond the theatrics of the competition rolling list, you can quickly classify them into four groups based upon starting and ending body positions: starting forward finishing aft; starting aft finishing forward; starting aft finishing aft; and finally starting forward finishing forward. In each of these groups the end position is with a very low centre of gravity with either your chest or back as close to the respective deck as practically possible, given the paddler's physique and kayak. There is an additional element to the finishing position that is often overlooked: the paddle, norsaqa or hand is in a brace position ready to provide support as needed. This is a high brace when the paddler's back is on the deck and a low brace when the paddler's chest is on the deck.

This is a Greenland rolling principle: finish low, in a brace.

Each starting and ending body position described above is practised in five consistent ways: first with a paddle; then with a norsaqa or rolling stick; then with an open hand; then with a clenched fist; and finally with a brick held in the hand. By following this development progression you learn to stop depending upon the powerful lift created by a paddle and instead focus on using the entire body to right the kayak: using your torso to float; your abdominals and legs to move the kayak; your back to arch towards the surface; and your arms and shoulders to maximize the righting moment.

This is a Greenland rolling principle: right the kayak using all your muscle groups, not just your arms pulling on a paddle.

I have written numerous articles on the importance of using your buoyancy, so I won't labour this point. It is however often overlooked how important it is to transition through the floating position while rolling. Greenland rolling is executed by passing through either a face-up or face-down body position. In both situations the same mechanical advantages are used. The shoulders and chest are parallel to the surface and positioned the maximum distance from the centre of rotation of the kayak to allow the greatest moment of force to be developed by your buoyancy. Invariably this requires considerable flexibility to get your spine perpendicular to the keel and with the torso rotated perpendicular to the legs. Let's be honest though, some people don't float. Despite not floating, if the perpendicular body motions are used then the effect of water resistance acting on their body is maximized by increasing its momentum and so the principle still holds true.

This is a Greenland rolling principle: move your body perpendicular to the kayak to maximize the righting moment.

Putting these principles into practice creates several opportunities that may not exist for people who are not practised in Greenland style rolling. Let's think for a moment about how we capsize: a momentary loss of balance; tripping over your own paddle; the impact of a wave. In each of these situations the only thing that is predictable is the position of your body. Its relationship to the location of the paddle is going to be unpredictable and varies considerably. Greenland rolling provides methods of righting the kayak from nearly every possible position without additional set-up. When you start out with a single roll that can be executed on just one side, the single option for recovery entails moving your paddle and body into a well-defined set-up position from which your muscle memory can be engaged and

the kayak righted. Probably the greatest cause of blown rolls is a hurried and potentially imprecise set-up that drains oxygen, creating muscular and mental tension and preventing the muscle memory from righting the kayak correctly. This results in an ignominious wet exit.

Accomplished Greenland rollers should need very little set-up or adjustment when they capsize. Their skills provide them with a map from any starting position to either ending position. This skill provides the potential for more reliable rolling and the ability to choose where on the kayak to recover (the fore or aft decks).

One of the principles described above entails ending in a brace position. Greenland rolling helps develop competent sculling and bracing. Each of the rolls also has the ability to end in either a sculling or static brace position. You don't need to instantly start paddling after a Greenland roll to ensure stability. Instead paddlers are able to continue the motion of the paddle and scull for support, providing time to compose themselves and mindfully make their next move. By extension, a blown Greenland-style roll can be converted seamlessly into a sculling roll, enabling the roller to recover without having to return to a set-up position. The ability to migrate from one roll into another in midstream provides a powerful method of dealing with tough conditions, where confused waters can create challenging conditions if you have to rely on a single roll executed at precisely the right time.

Learning how to transition between rolls and completing my rolling recovery map has provided me with the ability to enter confidently into conditions that I may otherwise have shied away from, allowing me to grow as a paddler and learn how to take advantage of the abilities of my kayak.

Next time you see a Greenland roller practising their craft, don't dismiss them as a poser. Instead, think about how you might benefit from those skills and could potentially grow in confidence as a paddler. ☺