

The Next Big Opportunity in Paddlesport Education: L2 Rescue Instructors Teaching “Rescue for Rec Boaters”

By Andrea White, ACA Tennessee State Director, Level 2 River Kayaking Instructor, and

Scott Fisher, founder Nolichucky Outdoor Learning Institute (NOLI), Level 5 Swiftwater Rescue Instructor, Level 5 Whitewater Kayak Instructor, Instructor Trainer Candidate

22.9 million people in the U.S. put a paddle in the water in 2018 and the advent of COVID-19 seems to be driving participation even higher in 2020. According to the U.S. Coast Guard, between 2006 and 2018, paddlecraft fatalities increased by about 30%. In Tennessee, there have been 6 paddling related fatalities as of August 1, 2020; five on class I rivers and one on a small lake.

The American Canoe Association (ACA) sets the standard for paddlesports education in the US. Unfortunately, no one, including the ACA, has been able to adequately reach the audience that is statistically most at-risk: casual paddlers. This audience is where we have the greatest potential to make a difference, saving lives and growing the sport.

The History of “Rescue for Rec Boaters”

Four years ago, I felt the drive to make a real, lasting difference in the sport that I love - and I rallied my home club, the Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association, to launch “Rescue for Rec Boaters,” a 2 day class designed to teach safety, accident prevention, and rescue skills for paddlers on lakes and class I waterways.

Conducting the course for the last 4 years has required commitment and leadership from a variety of club officers, Board members, and volunteers, including ACA instructors and past students who return to help out as support/safety paddlers. Course graduates have reported many situations in which they have helped to resolve potential accidents before anyone was seriously hurt. Their quick actions, using skills they learned in our courses, show that creating a community of trained paddlers, who are confident and willing to share their skills, will save lives.

By The Numbers

According to [a recent survey by the Outdoor Foundation](#), 22.9 million Americans participated in paddlesports in 2018 and, of those, 72% own their own boat. The overwhelming majority of those self-identify as casual participants. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to be driving further growth in the sport as people seek safe ways to gather with friends while maintaining social distancing guidelines.

In 2018, the largest sub-group among paddlesport participants were the 11 million Americans who are classified as recreational kayakers, who paddle on lakes and class I rivers. Based on U.S. Coast Guard statistics, these are the people who are most likely to be involved in paddling accidents, and according to the Outdoor Foundation survey, 79% of them have had no formal paddling education.

Data from the U.S. Coast Guard’s Office of Boating Safety shows that between 2006 and 2018 paddlecraft fatalities increased by about 30%. The actual number of kayaking deaths increased dramatically over the same time frame, from 27 to 84, whereas canoeing deaths showed a large decrease, from 72 to 44. These trends appear to be driven by participation numbers.



Jonathan Ryan, and ACA River Kayak and Safety & Rescue instructor with significant coastal kayaking experience was the initial “Rescue for Rec Boaters” lead Instructor. He took elements from swiftwater rescue, coastal kayak, and river kayak classes to create a program specifically targeted to new recreational kayakers. These targeted classes helped build skills and confidence in these students. For example, many students had never tried to re-enter their kayak in deep water. Learning this skill developed their confidence in their own ability to self-rescue.

Of all the exercises used in the “Rescue for Rec Boaters” course, the strainer bar drill was the most eye opening for participants. Even in modest class I current, experiencing the force of a dynamic river feature makes a lasting impression. Using the strainer bar drill, students experience the power of the water. Students with a prejudice against life jacket wear at the beginning of the course suddenly wanted to wear a life jacket. That simple change in attitude makes a tremendous difference in boating safety.



The “Rescue for Rec Boaters” instruction team always included at least one certified swiftwater rescue instructor. These instructors would teach advanced rescue skills and drills to more experienced whitewater paddlers, but the recreational kayakers needed, and greatly benefited from, a modified version of the same drills.

Although the program was successful for our target audience, the local demand for first responder and advanced whitewater training was directly competing with our desire to recruit, teach, and certify paddlers whose goal is to teach recreational paddlers. What we needed – and what most of the country still needs – are certified rescue instructors specifically prepared to teach recreational kayakers. There’s a base of Level 2 paddling instructors who focus on recreational kayakers but many don’t consider themselves candidates to be ACA Level 4 or 5 Swiftwater Rescue instructors. However, they all have the foundation and potential to become ACA Level 2 or 3 Rescue instructors, who can then provide the key educational opportunities needed by nation’s 11 million recreational kayakers. In addition, those Level 2 and 3 skills serve as the foundation for even the most challenging whitewater. Few paddlers use mechanical advantage or tethered swimmer rescues with any regularity – but many use rope throwing, wading, and swimming skills.



The 2020 Experiment

In attempt to fill the identified instructional gap, my first step was to turn to Scott Fisher, founder of the Nolichucky Outdoor Learning Institute. Scott brought nearly two decades of rescue instruction experience to the table. Additionally, he brought forth his ongoing partnership with his Instructor Trainer Educator (and ACA Board Chairman) Robin Pope. Generally speaking, ACA Level 3 River Safety & Rescue instructor certification classes are less common than Level 4 and 5. However, Scott and Robin agreed that offering an L3 course could lead to a noticeable reduction in paddling accidents and deaths. I then started working to solicit and nurture prospective candidates across the state while Robin continued to mentor Scott along the road to becoming an ACA Level 3 River Safety & Rescue Instructor Trainer.

I presented this L3 certification opportunity to leaders from the 5 largest paddling clubs in Tennessee. The 2 clubs with the most expansive training programs - Tennessee Valley Canoe Club in Chattanooga and Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association (TSRA) - immediately came on board. They agreed to offer scholarships for instructors who wanted to pursue this certification and to help us recruit candidates.

In our initial planning we envisioned a class of up to 12 Instructor Candidates; in informal conversations we identified at least 10 individuals we thought would be interested. In the end, several more candidates came out of the woodwork.

And then, in March, as we were continuing with our planning toward a June certification class, COVID hit and the world was shifted. At that time, all training stopped for the foreseeable future.

As the COVID infection rates were rising nationally and statewide, Scott made the decision to close NOLI in early March, a week or two prior to Tennessee issuing its stay-at-home order. He offered some livestream classes in conjunction with ACA Tennessee, but frankly didn't know whether NOLI would be able to safely offer in-person training in 2020, including the Level 3: River Safety and Rescue Instructor Certification Course. When infection rates began to fall and the stay-at-home orders were lifted in early May, followed by the state order authorizing recreation-based businesses to resume operations, NOLI made the decision to re-open in early June with certain caveats. They consulted CDC, state, and federal guidelines and developed an internal physician advisory council, comprised of infectious disease specialists, to inform their risk mitigation plan to ensure effective and responsible management of the safety of students, instructors, and communities.

Among the measures implemented were advance health screenings, touchless temperature checks, social distancing, reduced class sizes, masks, and increased sanitizing practices. After much deliberation, and with a thorough risk mitigation plan in place, they decided to move forward with the Level 3: River Safety and Rescue class, reducing the class size from 12 to 6, and requiring that everyone wear a mask when social distancing was difficult. These measures were implemented successfully during the class without training quality being adversely affected. All participants were fully supportive of the health guidelines, and did a great job in adhering to the measures put in place. Even with the success of this class, NOLI continues to monitor the national and local COVID situation; with national rates now on the rise again, they are prepared to take further action, as needed.



In the meantime, 2020 hit us all with a serious impact. Clubs have taken a revenue hit, tornadoes hit the homes of some of our potential candidates, and everyone is making difficult personal determinations about how much they personally want to travel or interact in groups due to personal health risk factors.

One of the local clubs dropped out of our training offerings for this year, not for lack of support for the mission, but it just wasn't the right time for their members and potential candidates. But TSRA stepped up: the club leaders remembered the commitment they made to training the recreational paddlers in our region, and saw the direct result of trained paddlers assisting other paddlers (and the resulting time and energy saved from not having to call the local rescue squad). TSRA offered a scholarship program for up to 3 candidates. They received 6 applications and awarded 3 winners. It was a tremendous leadership stance for my home club to take to support this initiative, and I'm so proud and grateful they stepped up!

When Scott opened our course registration to the public, the class quickly filled up. In fact, there were more candidates than we had room to accommodate. I credit Scott and Robin for making it crystal clear to everyone that we were going to take COVID risks seriously and follow the strict letter of the law. Their adherence to safety measures and guidelines made candidates more comfortable and informed about mitigating those risks.



Amplifying the Water Safety Message

In June, we were seeing a overflow of people across the country flocking to outdoor spaces, with more new paddlers on the waterways than ever. It became really important to me that we use this opportunity to amplify the message about water safety and the importance of training. I had several arrows in my quiver: the ACA Board Chairman was on board, this program represented a new strategy which encouraged entry level boaters to participate, and we had recruited candidates from across the state to take these skills back to their home communities to address the upward trend in recreational paddler accidents and fatalities.

I managed to recruit a couple more supporters to our mission: the Public Information Officer for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency in East Tennessee, Matt Cameron; he offered to send my press release out to his press contacts. A local photographer (and former EMS volunteer), Alex Stiner, offered to take some pictures pro bono so I could pitch to regional media. Another awesome note: when Alex didn't have shoes appropriate for wading through a whitewater environment with \$5,000 worth of camera equipment, an outfitter in Knoxville donated a pair of water shoes from a well known and respected manufacturer, Astral. I was also able to engage with Ed McAllister at River Sports Outfitters. A big thanks to two campground owners, Rick Murray of Nolichucky Gorge Campground and Matt Moses of USA Raft, both of whom also went above and beyond to make this class possible. All of these individuals were part of our mission-driven team! Everybody contributed a critical piece of the puzzle.

At the conclusion of the course, we certified 6 new rescue instructors and duly knighted them with the ongoing mission to help us change the paddler fatality rate.

Robin and Scott were both very pleased with the way the class came together. Of the six candidates, five were awarded a Level 3: River Safety & Rescue instructor certification and one was awarded an Level 2: Essentials of River Safety & Rescue instructor certification. This is a big win for water safety in Tennessee as we now have more qualified safety and rescue instructors out there committed to teaching others how to be safer on the water. That is both our lasting hope and expectation – that these instructors take these new skills and pay it forward so that together we increase awareness and help ensure everyone gets home safely at the end of the trip. Water recreation is healthy and fun. We believe that this training and these new instructors will help it stay that way.

Lastly, we got coverage on the local TV news on **WJHL**, a story in the local newspaper, the **Johnson City Press**, a mention on the **Tony Sanders Outdoors Talk Radio Show** in Chattanooga, and several employee shout-outs lauding the accomplishments of their employees who participated in our program. We also got a big feature in the July 4th weekend edition of the major daily newspaper in middle Tennessee, the **Tennessean**. Every word of these stories emphasized a statewide initiative to encourage paddler training, and is therefore building a movement and generating more inquiries about paddler training, and more requests for classes to certify additional instructors at this level.

