

Your First Marathon Race

By Dom Murphy, & Banbury Canoe Club

For those of you new to the club who may be thinking of doing your first race, here's a guide, which first appeared on the club website.

Entering

Entering a race is easy. There is a calendar on the club website, listing all the races that are coming up. If it's a **Southern Region** race, an entry form will appear on the club noticeboard a couple of weeks before the race, and all you have to do is sign up. Lisa, the club's marathon rep. or Phredd, the assistant rep. will enter you for the race and will collect the entry fees from you on the day. Quite often, entry forms for races in other regions will appear on the board, too, but if a centralised entry isn't being done, you'll have to send off your own individual entry to the organiser.

Boats

You can use the club boats to race, but you'll need to book them out through Lisa. If two people want to use the same boat, then it's first come, first served! There are normally enough boats to go around though.



You will need to transport your own boat to the race, or find someone to transport it for you. The most basic way to do it is to strap the boat, upside-down to car roof bars. To protect your boat, put pipe insulation lagging onto the roofbars. This can be bought from any DIY store.

You'll need to buy some straps, too. Don't go buying ones with a ratchet fitting: pop down to Halfords and buy a couple of 2.5m luggage straps. Their own brand ones are a lot cheaper than the Thule one illustrated. Put a bit of nail varnish on the end of the fabric to stop it fraying. While you are in Halfords, buy a roll of black electrical tape: you'll need it for your number (see below).



Make sure that someone shows you how to put the boat on the roof and strap it down correctly. Boats need to be strapped pretty firmly, but bear in mind that whilst fibreglass has some flexibility, it's not all that robust. Before strapping the boat down, take the seat out and put it in the car. Also, take the rudder cap off to allow air to flow through, otherwise the buoyancy block inside is liable to get blown out. If it's an overstern rudder, take the buoyancy block out and put it in the car, unless it's very, very firmly wedged in and obviously hasn't been moved for years.

A more secure way to transport your boat, and the way that the vast majority of people use. is to buy a set of bars. These aluminium bars attach to your roof rack hold the boat firmly in place. The bars can be bought



way
v-
and
from

several retailers, but the cheapest way to purchase them is to see Graham who will put in a wholesale order once enough orders have been taken.

Numbers

The one other thing you will need is a numberplate. This is a rectangle of yellow plastic which fits into a slot on the back of the boat. You can have a happy five minutes constructing your number out of the black electrician's tape you bought at Halfords, and then a frustrating ten minutes trying to get the plate into the slot. Numberplates are quite hard to come by. Debbie White, the club's kit rep. holds a small stock (see Club Clothing page on the website). Alternatively, at some of the bigger races, there are travelling shops which sell them, but you can't rely on this. If you're stuck, well before the day of your first race, ask some of the more established club members if they've got a spare numberplate you can borrow. Most will be happy to help.

Divisions

Marathon racing is based on a divisional structure. Apart from Under 12s and Under 10s, everybody races according to ability, not age or sex. You will start off in Division 9, which is the lowest division. If you are in a single boat, you'll be entered for the Division 9 K1 race: if you are in a double boat, you'll probably be entered in the Division 9K2 race, unless you are paddling with a much stronger paddler, in which case you might get bumped up a division. Your number will show your division. All division 9 numbers will start with 9. K1 numbers will be 901 to 949; K2 numbers will be 951 to 999. The boards in the picture above shows that it's a K1 race and there at least 12 paddlers in the race. The same principle applies to other divisions, so for instance, 721 would show a division 7 K1 paddler, and you'd now there are at least 21 paddlers in that race. Division 9 races are normally about four miles. Under 12s and



Under 10s have their own races in lightnings: these are normally between one and two miles.

Procedure.

Before the day, find out what time your race starts, and what time the briefing is. Choose clothing appropriate to the weather. Wear a club tee-shirt or vest if possible (you won't score points for the club if you're not in club colours). Make sure you arrive a good half-hour or more before the briefing. When you arrive at the race, you'll need to book in. If Lisa has done a centralised entry, she'll have booked you in already. Just find her, pay her and she'll tell you what your number is. Otherwise, sign in and pay at the booking in desk. If you are a member of the British Canoe Union, you'll be asked to show your BCU card. If you aren't a member or haven't got your card, you'll have to pay an extra £3.00 for a "Day Ticket" which gives temporary membership, and means that you are allowed to paddle on that particular river or canal and are insured whilst you are on the water. You are allowed one race on a day ticket and after that you need to join the BCU. When you do join, make sure you get comprehensive

membership rather than basic.

Get yourself ready and get your boat set up. Make sure all the wing nuts on the footrest are tight - they might have come loose during the journey. If you took the buoyancy out, make sure you've put it back and it's secure.

At the briefing, the race organiser will explain the course, talk about any hazards and then announce the order of the races. Races normally go off at one minute intervals, and Division 9 races are usually the last, or among the last, to go. You'll be told where to warm up, and where to wait for the start of your race.

On the Water

After the briefing, there will be a rush to get boats on the water. Take your time: you're in no hurry. One on the water, do some warming up: get used to the choppy conditions - with boats everywhere, the water can seem very lumpy. Try practising a few starts. After a while, the first races will be called to the start. Now's the time to find where the rest of the Division 9 paddlers have located themselves, and to join up with them. Watch the other starts and see how paddlers go sprinting off to gain a good position.

The Start

Eventually it will be your turn. Don't be tempted to tuck yourself in behind the other boats: all that will happen is that you'll get a lot of choppy water to deal with. Get on the front row and get ready to sprint. The starter will try to get the boats into some sort of line: this can take a while. Eventually, the starter will say, "Are you ready? Go!", or "Attention! Go!" or something similar. If you wait for the word "Go" you'll find yourself on your own: everyone else will have gone on the "A" of "Attention". Now the fun starts. The water will be incredibly choppy; there will be boats everywhere, and you might find that your boat develops a mind of its own. Don't panic. Just keep paddling as hard as you can and maintain your balance. If there's a boat where you want to put your paddle, reach over and paddle on the other side of it. If you can't do that, just paddle on one side (if you can only paddle on the right, kick your rudder hard right as well so you go straight). Eventually, the carnage will settle down and you'll find yourself in relatively calm water - still choppy, but manageable.

The Race

If you are going downstream, stay in the middle of the river. If you are going upstream, hug the bank. You're supposed to stay on the right hand side of the river, but paddlers often cut across. Copy the boats in front, the paddlers will (mostly) know what they are doing. Try to tuck yourself in right behind another boat and ride on their wash wave. This saves a lot of effort.

Eventually, you'll come to the turn. You'll know you're getting near when you see paddlers from the earlier races coming toward you on their way back. Give them plenty of room. Sometimes the turn is round the pillar of a bridge, but more often it's round a buoy. Take your time. People most often come to grief when they approach a turn too fast. If there are other boats around, be prepared to get bumped into. If you are unlucky enough to swim here, or anywhere else for that matter, get your boat to the side, empty it, get back in and carry on. As you near the finish, you'll hear plenty of Banbury paddlers cheering you in. Put on a good sprint finish and bask in your achievement.

After the Race

Once you've recovered, make sure you get your paddler snack. Food and drink is provided free to all paddlers. Sometimes this can just be a drink of squash and a piece of fruit; sometimes it can be considerably more than this.

Results are usually put up quite quickly after the race: you can find your position and compare your time with those of people in other races.

Promotion

If you have done exceptionally well, and your time is as good as those in Division 8, you might find yourself promoted to Division 8. In rare cases, paddlers have been promoted in their first race, but normally it takes a while before this happens.

Points

Racing is regional. We are based in the Southern region, and whilst we can do races in any of the regions (Midlands, Eastern, London&SE, Wales, Yorkshire, N.West, S.West, Northern, Scotland) we only score points if it's a Southern region race.

The first paddler home in each race scores 20 points, the next scores 19 and so on. Each club's top 12 paddlers count toward the team score. The winning team overall scores 10 points, the second team 9 and so on. The top four teams at the end of the season go through to the National inter-club finals which are called the Hasler finals. The Southern region is the strongest of all the regions, so it's often a real challenge just to qualify. We've qualified second behind Reading for the last four years, but there are plenty of other strong clubs in contention, which makes for very exciting racing.