



Competitive Surf Kayaking

POINT BREAK

Competitive surf kayaking began in the UK about 30 years ago in what were very much 'garden shed' designs. It wasn't long until these were refined and manufacturers started producing the first surf specific kayaks. Since then, the sport has developed to become one of the most progressive forms of kayaking on the planet, and one in which the UK is leading the way. The top athletes are making a real impact in the extreme sports arena, pulling ever bigger moves and surfing in a dynamic style that is more like that of short board surfing.

Free surfing is certainly fun, challenging and exhilarating and it's hard to beat a good soul surfing session early in the morning as the sun's rising. However, competition adds a whole new level to the game, which pushes you mentally and physically, taking you out of your comfort zone and raising your surfing to another level.

Classes

Surf kayaking is divided into two main categories; International Class (IC), which is for kayaks three metres or more in length and High Performance (HP), which is for kayaks under 2.75 metres. Apart from the length the principals and judging are the same, but parallels can be made with long and short board surfing. The longer IC boats have design restrictions, which include a ban on the use of fins. As a result, they require greater finesse and are more suited to a smooth style with longer, more drawn out turns. The HP class on the other hand has no restrictions and is more radical in design, which enables a more dynamic and explosive style.

A true judge of surfing would be if each competitor had the exact same wave and unlimited time to surf, however, in a competition with limited time, there's a combination of skill, tactics and luck.

Heats

Heats usually consist of four surfers competing against each other for the best rides and points. The length of heats may vary from one competition to the next, but the usual format is 20-minutes with a 1-minute turnaround. At the start of the heat the green flag is raised and may also be accompanied by a hooter. With 5-minutes to go a yellow flag is also raised and a red flag at the end of the heat (red goes in place of green and yellow).

Article by Chris Harvey, images by Steve Childs and Caroline Woolard

Scoring

During the heat you've got 20-minutes in which to impress the judges on no more than ten waves. Each wave has a maximum of 20 points and your top three scores are combined to make the total. The judges are looking for surfers using the most critical section to perform a variety of moves. The more dynamic the surfing, the smoother the style and greater the 'wow factor', then the higher the points. With this in mind, it's important to take your time to surf three good rides rather than ten not so good.

Interference

An interference is basically like a penalty. If you break the rules, the judges may decide to call an interference in which case you'll lose your top scoring wave and the total will be the combination of only the next two. Before competing it's well worth making yourself familiar with the finer points of the rules so that you avoid any interference calls.

'World Surf Kayak Association: Scoring: Judges expect to see changes of direction of the boat on the wave. Such manoeuvres would include bottom turns, re-entries, cutbacks, floaters, aerials, tube rides, top turns, late take-offs, trimming and stalling, etc. How radical they are, followed by the amount of control and commitment put into each of them, will determine how high they will score.'

'It is important to note, even if a surfer has completed 90% of a manoeuvre, it will not score well if he loses control or is not able to continue on the wave.'

Mind Games

The difference between a good athlete and a great athlete is often his/her state of mind. Mental preparation and a cool, focussed mindset in the heat play a big part in success. How you achieve this state is down to you and everyone will have their own routine, but the important thing is stay calm. Under the pressure of the clock it's easy to panic, surf waves that aren't so good and under-perform. Some people will listen to heavy music, some will relax, but the outcome is the same.

For me visualisation plays an important role. I imagine my performance and success weeks before the event to prepare myself for the situation. Prior to each heat I watch the waves and work out a game plan, then I relax. As soon as the heat starts it's a

like a switch turns on and I'm focussed on surfing three good rides. Obviously it doesn't always go to plan but good mental preparation can make the difference between winning and losing.

Entering a Competition

If you haven't entered before, most of the information you need is available on the BCU Surf website (www.bcusurf.org.uk). From February through to July there are regular competitions around the UK and this year, six world cup qualifiers around the world. It's best to contact the organisers to find out the details and complete an entry form prior to the event.

There's a friendly, chilled out atmosphere at competitions, they're great fun and a good opportunity to meet other surfers, share ideas and develop skills.

It's a real buzz and pitching yourself against other kayak surfers helps you to push your comfort zone and improve your surfing. Even if you don't think you're competitive it's worth giving it a go... You might just discover the beast within and have a great time! 

