

Swiftwater Rescue: You mean Z-drags, right?

For better or for worse, Z-drag has become synonymous with the words “swiftwater rescue.” Nearly every student that signs up for a swiftwater rescue class, hopes the veil of mystery that keeps the mechanics of the z-drag hidden from view will be pulled away and that they will leave the course with the secret knowledge of the rescue world.

This is not completely unfounded. Z-drags, or mechanical advantage can be a very useful tool in a river rescue. They have undoubtedly saved many a kayaker or rafter from hiking out of the wilderness, and have probably directly saved a few lives along the way. However, mechanical advantage is merely one single practical skill out of dozens taught in swiftwater rescue courses. And out of all those skills, none of them add up to the most important part of any safety course, the lessons learned about one’s own judgment.

I have been involved in many different aspects of the paddling community and have made my share of bad judgments. I spent a decade as a slalom competitor, I have been a slalom coach, a class V boater, I have taught kayaking, guided rafts, run gear boats, and most recently taught swiftwater rescue. And through all this, one theme rises to the surface—safety on the river is not dependent upon the practical skills we each may have, but rather the self-awareness and decision-making skills we bring to the table.

We all know stories about technically adept paddlers getting into trouble. I have often heard this explained as a numbers game. They spend more time on the river; hence they have more exposure to the risk. This may be true, but there is more at play here.

A study conducted by Harvard Medicine looked at anesthesiologists and their rate of success; based on mortality and morbidity. What was found was that most mistakes occurred, not during the most difficult times of the operation—the beginning and the end—but rather during the “easier” moments in the middle of the process, when vigilance waned.

I can see this in myself countless times. One example happened just last year. After finishing the inner gorge of Big Sands Creek in Idaho, and coming out into the “boogie water,” I thought to myself, “alright, we made it!” And before I had time to finish that thought, we rounded the corner and found a river wide strainer. Fortunately, no one was hurt. But had we maintained vigilance and scouted this blind corner, this close call would have been nothing at all.

This idea of maintaining vigilance when on the river is at the core of swiftwater rescue, and for that matter, boating in general. A good swiftwater course should not only allow you to learn important and practical skills, such as the z-drag, but also give you the opportunity to exercise your most valuable skill as a boater—your judgment.