

ISK Classes with Ben Lawry 2016

By Peggy O'Neal

Ben couldn't come to Minneapolis in 2015, so it was fun to have him back this year. For those who don't know him, Ben coaches and teaches paddling around the country and around the world. After leaving Minneapolis this summer, his next coaching stops are Chile and Switzerland.

Ben first came to ISK in 2012. Each year that he's been here, we've offered classes for newer paddlers and also tried to provide options to continue to challenge more experienced paddlers. Over the years he's commented on the growth of club members' skills, as we've worked with Ben and other coaches.

This year we included 3 classes on moving water – Moving Water 1 and 2, and for the first time Moving Water Rescues, which is based on the ACA's River Safety and Rescue class. Finding a "just right" venue for the moving water classes was a challenge after the heavy rains on July 11. The Mississippi was too high at Hidden Falls. Fred and I had scouted Sauk Rapids the weekend before Ben arrived. The features and water were marginal for our purposes, but a big concern was that the river was over the banks, creating a safety hazard as the water flowed through the trees.

Ben arrived at noon on Tuesday and we drove up to scout the Kettle River in Sandstone, which turned out to be a good location. We scouted the river from Banning State Park down, but ended up running the classes at the Sandstone takeout and just above. The flows dropped steadily as the flood waters passed through, starting at 2,200 CFS for Moving Water 2, then 1,700 for the Rescues class on Friday, and 1,250 for the Moving Water 1 class the following Monday.

Day 1: Moving Water 2

Many sea kayakers (especially those whose home waters are inland lakes) start working on moving water to develop and practice skills that will transfer to tidal currents. Some of us are finding that moving water is just plain fun.

We started this class by talking a bit about rescue jackets, as several club members are using them, and pointing out safety features and tradeoffs. On the water, we warmed up and refreshed our eddy line and ferrying skills. The eddy line is cleaner and the waves are bigger farther upriver/closer to the origin, and the fast moving current had a fairly long run out before it petered out. As comfort levels grew, people could start working closer to the small waterfall/rapid. Since most of the group doesn't paddle much on moving water, we took the opportunity to talk about the "anatomy" of the rapid.

After lunch we carried the boats up above the waterfall, did seal launches off the bank, and ran the drop. There were a couple of swims, but smiles were the order of the day. I think it's safe to say that all were tired that night.





Day 2: Forward Stroke 2

Forward Stroke 2 provides an opportunity for people to continue refining their forward strokes as it builds on the concepts introduced in Forward Stroke 1.

There are many reasons to work on our forward stroke. We want to reduce the chance of repetitive motion injuries due to poor technique. Most of us want to go farther with less effort. Good acceleration to catch a wave, get to a swimmer, make the eddy or avoid an obstacle gives us more options.

And yet it's hard to make a change to something we've done thousands and thousands of times. I continue to think I'm doing things I'm not quite doing and am still doing things I think I've broken the habit of. Fortunately it's all fun.

Ben brought a Motionize device this year to try out. We were going to pass it around the group but couldn't get the sound to work. I paddled with it for a bit and after the class we looked at the output. It told me I needed a cleaner, faster catch, which is exactly what Ben had been telling me to do.

Day 3: Moving Water Rescues

This was a high energy class, and it was a lot of fun. It was a "taster" for whitewater rescues, but more importantly it focused on avoidance and simple rescues. We started the day by swimming over the drop. That was probably the most tiring part of the day, especially since most of us didn't get back into the eddy very quickly and had a looonnnnggg swim back to the waterfall. (We were much better at getting into the eddy more quickly after that!) We learned not to "increase our rocker by dropping our butts" (i.e., keep your butt up as you're floating over rocks!) We practiced throwing ropes on land (turns out that many of us are not very good at throwing) and then to swimmers as they drifted by. We practiced a couple of techniques for wading out as a group, then ended up doing mass swims over the drop

when we lost our footing. We swam across the standing waves to the far side of the river and back. We capsized in the current, hung onto our boats and paddles and started swimming to safety, and caught a rope to get towed in. We did the same capsize/hold paddle and boat, but then our rescuers offered a toggle tow to get us to the eddy. We did an on-land demo of how to use ropes and mechanical advantage to free a pinned boat.

More tired paddlers that night.





Day 4: Forward Stroke 1 and Core 1

Forward Stroke 1 is a chance to try and feel and discover for ourselves how different parts of the stroke work – we can see how our posture effects our balance, how the bend in our knees effects both our power and our balance, what happens to our power and our shoulder and elbow joints as our elbow moves up and out, the effect of our grip, how the power can be applied. Just like a golf swing, there's a whole lot going on that we're mostly unaware of. It's too much to take in at a single go – I got more out of the class the second time I took it, and am still learning even after having assisted at it half a dozen times.

Core 1 takes the same ergonomic "feel what you're doing" approach, but focuses on other strokes.

On Saturday we had a storm blow through. The morning Forward Stroke class had to get off the water early due to lightning. We hid out in our cars for a while and finished up on land. The same weather system was still hanging around in the afternoon for Core 1, so we went over to the Lake Harriet Bandstand and did an on-land class. There were several questions about paddles, so we spent some time looking at and talking about a variety of paddle types.





Day 5: Rescues & Incident Management

Some of the class participants have taken this class every year since 2012. Once again Ben managed to come up with new content. We had incidents that involved multiple boats; we towed people and rafts; we problem solved; we discovered that we have some excellent actors.







Day 6: Moving Water 1

We did an introduction to moving water on the last day. We started out doing some "discovery learning", as people sat on the back of their boats and got a feel for spinning on the eddy line. At lunch, we talked about the theory of what we were trying to do, then came back and worked on eddy line crossings and ferries. The river had dropped quite a lot by Monday, so the eddy lines were less well defined. Participants had a chance to run the drop. We discussed how to run it first, then watched Ben run it. A couple of folks ran it after Ben. After that we played with finding tennis balls and worked on eddy lines some more.

More tired people at the end of another hot day. We packed up boats and got Ben to the airport by 8:30 PM.



Themes

There were a few themes that came up repeatedly over the course of the week:

- Practice your rescues for real and with urgency. If you're sloppy in practice, they'll be sloppy when you need them.
- Trips are great, but don't forget to work on technique.
- When you're working on something, you can only work on one thing at a time. Keep your practice sessions short and focused.
- Spend time upside down and swimming. If we're not comfortable falling over, we're not going to be trying.