

Bombproofing Your Roll

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You've got a great roll in the pools. It's effortless. Although you've practiced many drills to simulate combat, in current it isn't there. Instead there's a sloppy, difficult roll that often requires more than one try, if it works at all!

What is a roll anyway? It's a movement. It's a complicated movement but it isn't hard. What can you do to keep the smooth roll with you when you hit whitewater? Finish the movement. It's that simple. It is not enough to start it. 80% is not enough. YOU HAVE TO FINISH THE WHOLE MOVEMENT.

In combat your roll doesn't fail, it's that you fail to do your roll! As when, half way through the movement, you feel air on your cheek, and your head wants up. If you don't do the roll movement 100%, start to finish, how can you expect to roll up?! It's that clear.

Having a mantra that takes you to your finish position is invaluable. "Back hand to ear" is a common one to keep the back hand from punching. "Watch the blade" keeps the head from jerking up.

If, instead of saying your mantra and finishing the movement, you listen to your mind, you will fail to do your roll. It fills you with fear or panic and shouts, "Get up!" or "I don't have enough air!" or "I'm not safe". None of this commentary produces success. It does short circuit your roll movement and drives your instinct to GET UP!

So how do you stay focused? Fill your mind with mantras and the intention to finish every roll. That is the action you must take. Here are some exercises to clear your mind. This is a process called desensitization, intended to reprogram fear into comfort.

First off, being underwater is part of our sport. Accept it. Mentally embrace that in the kayaking world of mere mortals like us, being up-side-down is to be expected. It is OK to be underwater. If you expect to be underwater and find yourself comfortable there, even in the rapids you will roll.

Find some mellow place where you know you'll roll up. Have a friend there with the insurance of a bow rescue. You want to feel 100% confident that you are OK. With lots of air, your nose plugs, a mask, whatever helps you feel comfortable, tuck, flip and stay under for a while.

Open your eyes. Look around. Be curious! What does the water feel like? Is it pushing you? Is it putting pressure on one of your blades? What's the temperature? How is your body responding to the current? And then purposely do the whole roll movement, from start to finish.

This exploration is different. But it isn't bad. Describe it as interesting, bubbly, green. Keep your adjectives in the physical realm. Don't let your mind say it was scary or dangerous. Decide on a mantra that puts you at ease, like, "I have lots of air" or "I'm OK".

Choose different places to practice being up-side-down. Your goal is to get comfortable everywhere. You want to get so familiar being under water that you almost don't even notice! Hang around on mild eddy lines and at play spots. Spend time in deep, tail waves. Gradually move to safe spots within rapids. You are training your mind to stay clear and focusing on finishing your roll, no matter what. This desensitization process loosens your mind's hold over you. Replace the chatter and fill your mind with intention.

Use your roll often. Once one side is reliable, learn your other side. You won't lose your on-side roll! You'll come away with two rolls! Use them equally. It IS mind over matter, so be sure your mind is trained to support you to finish every roll you start!