



FRONTIER BUSHCRAFT  
Wilderness Skills & Adventure

## Transcript of Ray Goodwin's "Mastering The J-Stroke" Video

In paddling a canoe, a solo paddler or the stern paddler is very often even in easy conditions having to do some form of steering, and there's a whole variety of strokes that you can use. But the classic one, along with its variations, is the J-stroke.

So there are two major families of strokes that we use to steer the canoe. One family, very powerful, use it a lot in white water or coming down a lake with a strong tailwind. And those are the stern rudders and stern pries. And those, put my power stroke in, pull through, and then steer. Now the key with this is that I'm using the power face. Well, you can label either of them, but I'm gonna call this the power face. I can pull through the power face, but then to steer I switch faces and steer with the back face. So it's a case of pull, change blade face, steer with that side. And I can do that either on the gunwale or off the gunwale. Off the gunwale, tend to call it a stern rudder. On the gunwale, a stern pry. A useful marker in this family of strokes, the stern rudder and the stern pry, is that in the steer face the thumb on the grip end of the paddle is at the top or up.

The second family of strokes, all based around the J-stroke, so the C-stroke, the Indian stroke, the knife-J which sometimes goes by the name of Canadian stroke or guide stroke, they're all variants really of the basic J-stroke. And that's subtly different. So with that, I pull through, again using the same power face. Pull through, but this time I twist and I turn it outwards to steer. So I've used the same blade face for power and for steering. So I do that again. Pull through, and steer.

So in the J-stroke, because the paddle is rotated around, this hand now is on the outside, and the thumb is pointing down. So one of the real important things with this is this movement of the hand on the top of the paddle. In the power phase of the stroke, my hand is pretty well on the top. But as it comes down into the J-stroke, my hand slides around slightly so it's no longer gripping the top. But that takes the stress out of the wrist, allows me to pull back very easily.

I could do the same with a T-grip. So hand is on the top for the power element, but as I come into the steer my hand moves round subtly onto that face. Means I've actually loosened the grip with the fingers. Again, removing the stress. Problem with that stress is if you don't get that movement, then as you come into that, some people end up with this really awkward hand position. It's not very strong, it's not very useful, but it's a solution to removing the stress. So you really have to learn to allow that hand to slide round slightly.

So what makes life a lot easier is your position in the boat. Sometimes I will sit, and I'll look at that in a moment, but the majority of time when I'm solo, or it's white water, or it's windy, I'm gonna be kneeling. And we got a number of options here. Because I'm in this boat solo, and it's a small, tandem boat, I actually can paddle it back to front, which is the traditional way with the load up in front of me. And I'm using the bow seat in reverse. If I want stability, I keep my knees nice and wide. If I wanna make my life easier, so I can reach over the side to get a more vertical stroke or for steering, then I can move my knees across. The boat heels over, becomes more maneuverable, but it's much easier to get a good quality power stroke, hands across the side of the boat. Much easier to do my J. And to add a little bit to that, if I can actually tilt my hips and knees so they're facing here, it becomes even easier.

Because I paddle this boat solo, I've actually got a kneeling thwart in it. Makes my life a lot easier, more comfortable. And the reality is I would normally use some padding, and that could either be knee pads or a pad like this on the bottom of the boat. But this allows me to move around, be angled, so my hips face the direction I'm gonna paddle on, and everything is a bit easier.

So if I'm on the rear seat, again I could put that little bit of slant into the body, make life easier, but also what I do quite often when I'm paddling in tandem, I would generally only use this seat when I'm paddling tandem, but then I can sit. But even then, I would generally have my legs slanted to one side to give my body that tilt to make this stroke easier. However, if it gets a bit bumpy, I'll square up again, and I'll face forward, and then I will go to kneeling.

These are nice, easy conditions to practice the J-stroke in. Each of my power strokes will push the nose slightly to the left. You can see it just pushing away there. And so the J-stroke is used to correct that. So there you go, into the J, a little bit of a release, leading edge up, blade comes out of the water. And here, the wind just got me for a moment, so one stroke there, no J-stroke, a little bit of a sweep in it to correct it, and then back into the J-stroke.

Steering very easy. So now the angle on the J-stroke, the actual angle in the water of the blade isn't very high, and it's almost beginning to morph into a knife-J, there, as the blade comes back through the water. Back to a more traditional J, but note the way the blade exits the water. It's a slight tilt up of the leading edge, and the water lifts the blade out. And this is what I would define as the long J. Some people call it the traditional J. So it reaches quite a way back on the boat, and the bottom hand is outside the gunwale. And you can either use the gun or not. In this case, I'm not using the gunwale. If I want an extra bit of leverage I'll rest the paddle against the gunwale.

So here is quite a long J stroke, reaching backwards, because it's the very first stroke of the sequence. So I've got the boat going now, and in this case I'm using the shortened version, what I would call the short J and coming off the gunwales, hence the whipping on my paddle to protect it. This means I can get up a faster cadence, get more strokes in. Saw one just missed there because I didn't need it.

You don't always need to start with a J-stroke. You can start with a stern rudder. Here we've a couple quick stern pries to get the boat accelerated, and then into some very quick, short J's, really fast cadence to try to pick up some real speed. Now, might do this to make a quick move on a river, out of an eddy, or in a rapid. May use it to chew into a wind. And I'll cover strokes like the stern pry in future videos.

Another sequence of the starting boat, and quite obviously holding the steering face at the back of the boat for longer. And now as the boat picks up speed and direction, then the actual time spent in the J-stroke is a lot less, the angle on the blade in the water is less, and then get into my stride.

Back to a plastic paddle, and here I'm demonstrating putting the blade right up on its edge, stroke after stroke. Now I may do that for one or two strokes to get the boat going, but then I'll drop that angle off. If you continue to press on that angle there's a lot of stress on the wrist. So you either remove the stress by swiveling it round onto the correct face, but what some people end up doing, and it's not very helpful, is they swivel the hand onto the back of the T-grip. And that's very weak. It doesn't help you. It removes the stress, but it makes for a very weak stroke. So try to keep that hand on this face.

Another common mistake while learning is to do your J-stroke, but instead of tilting the blade to get the blade out of the water you actually lift the blade out of the back, a bit like throwing up into the air like a propeller blade. It's not very useful. It's stressful on the hand, on the arm. So well worth getting into the habit

of just tilting the blade to take it out of the water. The water does the work for you, and it's then back on its way forward.

So what I'll do is I'll run through some paddles and how they make my life easier or more difficult, the realities of learning a J-stroke with them. So this is a fairly cheap plastic paddle, great for a spare, if cash is a bit short. Great for bashing off of rocks. T-grip at the top, and we'll talk about that in a little more detail. But the disadvantage of it is the blade, and the blade has a spine. And one of the things with a J-stroke is you want a nice, fluid movement through the water. Very often people talk of the stroke being fluent. And the problem is here, as you do, you stroke. The water is gonna hit this, and there's turbulence over it. You don't get the same, clean feel. So I tend to avoid a paddle like this for teaching people how to do the J-stroke.

So here's another plastic paddle. This one is actually an Ainsworth. T-grip again. But there's a real difference now. The blade face is clean. So as a second paddle, or if you're on a bit of a budget, something that's got a clean face like this is gonna actually give you a much better feel within the water.

So here's one of my favorite blades to work with to teach a J-stroke, and this is an otter tail. Long, thin, tapering blade, very subtle in the water. The flow of the water across it is gonna be really smooth. And at the far end of it, this particular grip, some people say it's a Northwoods grip, but it's very traditional. And I can easily go from a hand grip there, and in the J-stroke it allows my hand to slide round just very subtly, very slightly, to remove all the pressure within the wrist.

So my final two paddles are beaver tails. They're much wider down here at the tip. And the idea is with these, great for steering when you gotta do some abrupt steering, great for power because when you drop it into the water, immediately you're getting a lot of blade engaged. Really nice still because it's a smooth blade face. It's wood. Really like that. So it's a great paddle, again, for learning the J-stroke. And at this end, very traditional, is a palm grip. And that enables me, again, power stroke. I can do my power element with my hand there, but as I come into the J, my hand very subtly slides around, and, again, removing the pressure from the wrist.

My final paddle, perhaps my all-time favorite paddle. This is a beaver tail, but it's been ramped up for white water, so it's got a couple of sheets of glass fiber across here and a glass ribbon round the edge to protect it. At this end, a modified T-grip. So it's got that element, slightly more like a palm, but it still means I can slide my hand around there to make life easier, but because I'm

using it a lot in big winds or on white water and I use the gunwale a lot of the time, then I've actually got a whipping here to protect the shaft of the paddle.

Originally when we filmed this we did a lot on left and right, but then for the sake of consistency decided to show the right-handed paddling. But what I would urge you is right from the word go is to practice on both sides. That means that your development muscle-wise is equal. It means that if conditions dictate, you can choose which side that you paddle on. And there will be times when that will be really pushed upon you by wind or current.

And Lina finally stepping out from behind the camera to actually give a really smooth demonstration of the J-stroke in action.