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# DRAGON BOAT BEGINNERS GUIDE

Presented by: Boston Dragon Boat Festival  
[www.bostondragonboat.org](http://www.bostondragonboat.org)



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**Thank you!**

## WELCOME TO BOSTON DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL

The **Boston Dragon Boat Festival**, as the oldest Dragon Boat Festival in North America (established 1979), conducts the premier dragon boat race in Boston annually in June on the Charles River near the Weeks Footbridge. In addition, the Festival embraces the Asian culture with Asian dance and martial art performances, Asian arts and crafts, and a wide selection of Asian cuisine (for purchase). See the website for additional information.

Because of strong demand, dragon boat teams are encouraged to register their teams to race as early as possible to avoid being waitlisted. Registration details are typically available annually in February. Teams should select an individual to be their Team Manager and/or Team Captain to coordinate registration and race day activities for their team. Teams may elect to train on Festival-owned boats in the month before race weekend with limited coaching assistance by Festival Dock Staff when available.

## TEAM CAPTAIN / MANAGER RESPONSIBILITIES

**Team Captain/Managers** are the primary organizer for a team, and shall be responsible for:

- Ensuring all athletes have properly registered and signed waivers
- Verifying every registered team member is listed on a team roster
- Athletes' good conduct on and off the water
- Communication and Distribution of information to the Team
- Communication with the Boston Dragon Boat Festival
- Ensuring athletes are familiar and comply with all **Boat Safety Procedures, Practice Rules, and Race Rules**
- Scheduling team practices with the festival and making sure athletes meet minimum requirement
- Collection and submission of all requisite information and forms with Boston Dragon Boat Festival
- Being the primary liaison with race officials
- Attendance at the pre-race Team Captains' meeting (location, date and time to be provided)
- Local Captains must attend the orientation with their designated steers-person prior to or at the first practice

## ATHLETES

**Registered athletes** must be 18 years old prior to the first practice session or if between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, have a waiver signed by the parent(s) or guardians. Participants under eighteen must be fitted with an age and weight appropriate flotation device by their team, if the Boston Dragon Boat Festival cannot do so.

- A person may be a registered team member of more than one team only if the other team(s) is in a different division. Clubs with more than one team cannot interchange members among teams if they are in the same division. This rule will be strictly enforced to ensure equitable racing (this is grounds for a team DQ)
- **Teams** are allowed a maximum of **24 registered members**, a minimum of 16 and a maximum of 20 paddlers may race at one time, comprising of:
  - **1 Drummer**
  - **1 Steersperson** qualified by Boston Dragon Boat Festival
  - **20 Paddlers**
    - Each team must compete with a maximum of **10 women paddlers** per Boat. If a team is short the required 10 women paddlers, it shall race shorthanded accordingly
    - A **women's team** may use a male drummer and male steer person
    - Remaining paddlers are to be considered **alternates** and may paddle as the captain wishes
    - **Team Captain** must be a person from one of the registered members above
- **Drummers and Steerspersons** may race in multiple teams. They need to be registered on their dedicated team but doesn't have to be on the roster for teams they are helping (Subject to approval by the Boston Festival Race Committee)
- All **local athletes** have complimentary practices offered by the festival. Signup instructions will be posted.
- All **club/visiting teams** must attest to their race experience with the Race Director a week prior to the race

## RACE DAY PREPARATIONS

- Only registered athletes can participate in on-water activities. Any team permitting a non-registered person to participate in any on-water activity may face a 5 second time penalty or be disqualified immediately.
- All **athletes must wear similar team uniforms** when racing.
- Boston Dragon Boat Festival Race Committee may at any time require a check of listed crew members against their team rosters.
- Race day **Steersperson & Drummer**:
  - Prior to race day, each team must designate a team member who has been deemed qualified as a **Steersperson** by the Boston Dragon Boat Festival. At its discretion, the Boston Dragon Boat Festival may at any time replace any team's Steersperson with another Steersperson, despite that replacement not being a registered member of that team. At its discretion, the Boston Dragon Boat Festival may at any time direct that a team shall cease further on-water activity due to its Steersperson not being capable.
  - **Visiting teams Steers-persons** must have previous Dragon Boat Race experience as attested by the Captain.
  - A **women's team** may use a male **steer person** and/or **male drummer**.
- Teams attempting to cheat by “**stacking**” or “**tanking**” may face a 5 second time penalty or be disqualified immediately.
- Any team or team member displaying **un-sportsmanship** like conduct on or off the water may be assessed a 5 second time penalty or disqualification from further participation by *Race Officials* or *Race Director*

If you have any questions about boat safety, please ask any Dock Staff member and/or Race Officials who would be happy to assist you.

## RACE RULES

Race Rules will be provided each year as a separate online document on the Boston Festival website in advance of the race. Please be sure to read the Race Rules file for the *current year* since there may be changes from prior years.

The *Race Officials* and *Race Director* will have final say in the application of the Race Rules, and as always, *boat safety will always be of highest priority to the Festival*.

## RACE RESULTS

Race results will be compiled by the *Race Officials* on each day of racing and posted online on the Festival website as soon as they are available.

Please do not email Festival staff inquiring about posting times of the results – your *Team Manager/Captain* will be notified as soon as they are posted.

## SUMMER PROGRAM

The Festival makes its boats available for practice during the summer months of June, July, and August on a limited schedule for a fee. Please inquire with the *Race Director* if your team or individual paddlers are interested. Additional assistance from experienced Dock Staff coaches can also be negotiated. Additional Steering training is also available during the summer.

## TEAM & FESTIVAL PARTNERSHIP

The Festival enjoys growing the dragon boat community and it starts with our local teams. All our operations are volunteer based, and we would love to partner up with your team to create a better race training environment for you and more volunteers for us. Please speak to a dock staff or your race director for deals and information.

## DRAGON BOAT SAFETY PROCEDURES

We take safety very seriously at the Festival, we want all paddlers to have a safe and enjoyable time on the water. The river is big and weather conditions can change rapidly. You are responsible for your own safety, so please always play safely and follow below safety precautions.

## CORE SAFETY RULES

- All dragon boaters [Drummer, Paddler, Coach/Manager and Steerer] must have a life jacket properly worn per Coast Guard rules. You can be issued a ticket by the Police for failing to have a life jacket, and you will personally be responsible for paying that ticket if caught!
- There are many boats sharing the river, some traveling very fast; always be aware of your surroundings!
- No alcohol or any substance that may impair you
- If you see lightning, return to the docks immediately
- Steer person (and ideally all paddlers) must know and operate under the rules of the river

## DURING PADDLING

- Don't stand up in the boat
- Don't lean too far left or right in your seats even when wakes hit and rock the boat -- it only takes one person to offset the balance of the boat and flip it.
- Follow instructions of your Drummer/Coach and Steerer! Emergency commands can come at any time so be alert for commands and keep other discussions for after practice
- Know your commands and execute quickly and uniformly. Some key commands include:
  - **"Hold water"** -- Stopping the boat
  - **"Feather the Boat"** -- balancing the boats left and right from capsizing (aka "Brace the Boat")
- In case of a collision, follow the instructions of your Steerer. Do not stop paddling unless you are told to stop since the paddles in the water will steady the boat.
- Return to the dock and report any injuries to the Drummer, steer and staff members immediately

## BOAT CAPSIZE PROCEDURES

Boat capsizes are a very unlikely scenario, but if it does happen, we want you to be prepared regarding what to do for everyone's safety.

- After boarding the boat, count everyone off and make sure they know their numbers as well as know bench partner (Left and right person of you).
- If the boat flips, expect a shock of cold water, relax and don't panic
- Figure out which direction is up and get your head above water first
- Forget about your belongings
- There are a lot of straps on your life jacket, be sure none are tangled with the boat since these boats can sink in as short as two minutes or as long as 20 minutes
- If the boat is inverted, do **not** keep your head in that trapped airspace under the boat. Swim outside and next to the boat or the boat will pull your head under as it sinks. Stay near the boat but free from it.
- Check on your bench partner & help them and/or call for additional assistance to help keep their head above water
- Do not swim to shore – stay near the boat so you may be counted!
- Once everyone is out of immediate danger with their heads above water and waiting beside the boat, the Drummer or Steerer will initiate a count of every team member to make sure everyone is accounted for
- You may be able to swim to shore if nearby or wait for a rescue boat if instructed. Be aware that rescue boats will attend to the injured first, so be prepared to be in the water for some time.

The best safety rule is always taking precautions before an incident happens, so please review the boat safety procedures again and always remember to be aware of your boat, your surroundings and play safe.

Your Steer person must follow the Charles River navigation rules, along with any further clarifications and/or additions by Festival Dock Staff. As a paddler, you should follow all the directions of your Steer person at all times.

# Charles River Basin 2k Course

Downstream:  
Stay well to the outside  
of the turn, along the  
Boston shore.

Upstream

Magazine  
Beach

BU Bridge

BU Sailing

Lane  
Targets

Pedestrian  
Overpass

BU Boathouse

Caution:  
Stay clear of  
upstream crews  
on the 2K race  
course.

Launching from MIT:  
Stay along shore, watch  
out for upstream crews  
on the 2K race course  
and downstream crews  
returning to MIT.

Finish

1500m

MIT Pierce  
Boathouse

1000m

Harvard  
Bridge

Downstream:  
Aim on the gold dome  
(Beacon Hill), then at the  
Boston corner of the  
Longfellow Bridge.

500m

MIT Sailing  
Pavilion

Marina

Harvard  
Sailing

Start

Union  
Boathouse

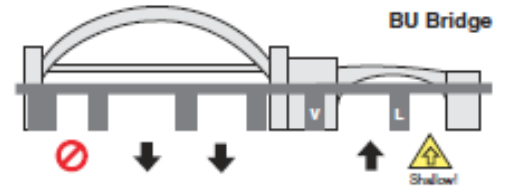
Longfellow  
Bridge

Downstream

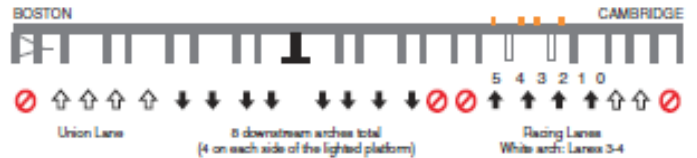
**Guide to Basin Arches**

(View looking upstream)

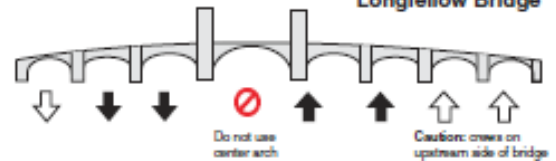
- ↑ Normal Traffic
- ↑ Use only if necessary
- ⚠ Caution: see notes
- ⊘ Do not use



Harvard Bridge (Massachusetts Avenue)



Longfellow Bridge



## 2k Course Notes

### Warm Up

- Warm up along the Boston shores as you proceed to the starting line.
- Once you pass the starting line, you may not return upstream of the starting area.
- Follow a counter-clockwise warm-up pattern downstream of the Longfellow Bridge.
- Do not use the Center arch of the Longfellow Bridge.

### Harvard Bridge Arches

- Lanes 3 and 4 share the RACING ARCH that is marked with white abutments on the Harvard Bridge (Massachusetts Avenue).
- Lanes 2 and 5 have their own arches located to the right and left of the RACING ARCH.

### Steering Targets

- Line up the small targets on the bridge above each lane with the large striped land targets on the Boston shore past the finish line.
- There are also white lines painted on the Cambridge wall at the 500-meter marks.
- The Finish Line is marked by two poles along the Cambridge shore.

## General River Rules

- Keep to the right side (1/3) of the river—especially on turns
- Overtake on the left (port)
- Turn quickly, only where visible
- Move to shore to stop or drill

For full details, see the Charles River Traffic Patterns and Safety Rules



## FIRST TIME PRACTICE

### WHAT TO EXPECT?

As a paddler, you along with up to 20 paddlers will paddle a 40-foot dragon boat in unison through the Charles River for under the direction of a Drummer and Steerer. The Festival will provide you with a life jacket and paddle to use for practice and on race day if you need.

### WHAT DO I WEAR?

Expect to get **very wet**, and dress appropriately for the weather (hot/cold, rain, sun, etc.) – only lightning will cancel a practice. Synthetic fabrics like nylon will be more comfortable than cotton when wet. A lot of paddlers like to wear swim wear under their shirts and pants/shorts for comfort. Wear water shoes, slippers, sandals, or *old* sneakers – your footwear will be soaked by end of practice so skip the pricey Air Jordans. Use sunscreen if necessary. Bring sunglasses to reduce glare and show off your good looks. Do not bring expensive electronics/phones to practice – they often end up in the river or get wet and short out. If you must bring a phone or car key fob (at your own peril), use a waterproof “dry bag” or wrap in at least *two* Ziploc bags.

### WHAT DO I BRING?

For your *first* practice, bring the Picture ID you registered with. For subsequent practices, no Picture ID is necessary. Bring a **plastic** bottle of water or sports drink (Gatorade, dilute juice, etc.) to re-hydrate during practice. **Do not bring any glass**, and do not bring cans which cannot be closed. You will not be able to eat any food during practice. No bathrooms for the duration of practice so drink in moderation. Obviously no alcohol!

Leave your backpack, laptops, etc. at home. There is no room for any of this on the boats, and they may not be left on the docks for safety and theft reasons. If possible, find a team-mate who can store your stuff in their car trunk. See *Festival Practice Rules*.

### WHAT HAPPENS DURING PRACTICE?

At a Festival practice, your Team Captain will provide you:

- Information about boat safety and emergency procedures
- Instruction on how to hold a paddle and teach you proper form of the stroke
- Details of commands issued by the Drummer and Steersperson
- Drills conducted by the Drummer/Coach to improve form, sync, power, timing, etc.
- Race-oriented training such as race starts, power strokes, advanced techniques, etc.
- A *fun* and usually physically demanding time on the water

## FESTIVAL PRACTICE RULES

### 48 HOURS BEFORE PRACTICE

- All athletes [Drummer, paddler, Coach/Manager and steerer] must complete online registration at least 48 hours before practice
- Please determine who will be at your practice [Drummer, paddler, Coach and steerer] 48 hours before practice.
  - If you need additional assistance, please contact Festival Racing staff at least 48 hours before practice:
    - If you and your team need additional help/coach/steer
    - If you need to cancel practice
    - If you have any safety concerns, etc.
- Weather will vary day to day, always dress properly for weather condition
- There will be minimal storing of bags in the boathouse or on the docks due to space constraints and theft.
  - Ask a few athletes to invest in a dry bag to carry **small** valuables on the boat, or determine which of your teammates will be driving to the boathouse and use their vehicle trunks for storing other athletes’ belongings and valuables

## AT PRACTICE

- **All crew/shell operations receive priority on the dock, please be aware and stay clear of their way.** The shells are huge, and hard to move around with limited visibility so always be aware of your surroundings while on the docks
- All paddlers should congregate with their team on the grass strip outside of the boat house (off all roads) and be ready for practice 15 minutes before practice time slot.... **Please stay off the dock until your team is called!**
- While paddlers may use the restrooms / changing area of the locker room (no lockers may be used), they must return to the grass strip when finished -- they cannot remain on the docks or boathouse
- Complete all your pre-workout activities like stretching, speeches, checking seat lineups, etc. on the grass strip *before* coming down to the docks
- About 15 minutes before your practice slot, Dock Staff will verify your team roster/attendance.
  - Please look at the 48 hours before practice rules, if they are not fulfilled player will not be allowed to paddle
  - Please line your team up in 2 lines prior to verification
  - Once your boat is ready, dock staff will direct you to the docks to get your equipment, assign your team a boat and you may proceed onto the loading dock.
    - Please follow staff instructions and proceed in a fast, efficient, and orderly fashion
    - Make sure your life jacket is safely and securely buckled!
    - Board by row and depart the docks when instructed by staff members

## END OF PRACTICE

- Depart and return on time (you only have one hour) or risk cancellation of your next practice
- Ask your paddlers to take all trash with them from the boat and docks, and dispose of it properly
- All athletes are responsible for returning life jackets *buckled neatly* to the storage area, and placing paddles *into* the bins
- Please leave the dock area as quickly as possible - ask your team to congregate on the grass strip to complete any post-practice activities (ex: performance evaluations, future practice and race plans, socializing, stretching, etc.)

## DRAGON BOAT BASICS

This section is meant as a very brief overview of dragon boating. You can find numerous sources of more detailed information and videos at the end of this section.

### PLAYERS

Dragon boats are paddled by a team of up to 22 people. These include:

- **Drummer** – sits on drummer seat at the front of the boat facing backwards, and directs the paddlers with commands during practices and races when the Steersperson yields control of the boat to the Drummer
- **Paddlers** – 20 paddlers occupying left and right sides of ten benches, paddle in unison under the direction of the Drummer and/or Steersperson using a common synchronized paddling stroke for the boat
- **Steersperson** – stands at the back of the boat operating a Steering oar to set the orientation of the boat and is the primary person responsible for boat safety. Yields and takes control of the boat as necessary to ensure safe operation of the boat

Both the Drummer and Steersperson maintain a count of occupants in the boat and ensuring the safety of the team. Usually the Drummer is assigned to coach the paddlers during practices since paddlers cannot see the Steersperson behind them.



## PADDLES

Paddles are composed of the blade, shaft, and T-grip and can be made of wood, plastic, or carbon fiber. They are very expensive and fragile, so please be gentle with the blades on the docks. There are two methods to choose a paddle size that is a suitable length for you:

- **Standing method** -- Stand up and place the paddle under your arm. There should be two to three fingers width of room between the handle and your armpit
- **Sitting method** -- Sit on a flat surface, place the paddle next to you, and reach up to grasp the top of the handle. You should be able to comfortably wrap your fingers around the handle without having to stretch out

## COMMANDS

Teams across the world use different terminology (and languages) for the same set of dragon boat commands. To facilitate training and promote boat safety, here are a set of common commands used in dragon boats in Boston:

1. **"Grab the dock"** – instructs the paddlers to grab the dock so that the boat may be tied/untied to the dock cleats by the Drummer and Steersperson
2. **"Push off"** – instructs paddlers to push away against the dock with their outside hand to provide adequate clearance between the dock and boat
3. **"Bumpers in/out"** – asks a select set of paddlers to take the the rubber bumpers between the boat and docks inside/outside of the boat. Bumpers inside while the boat is in motion, and outside when docking
4. **"Sit up"** – instructs paddlers to get ready for commands
5. **"Sit Ready"** – instruct paddlers to set their paddles in the forward position
6. **"Go"** – start paddling!
7. **"Weigh enough", or "Let it ride/run"** – instructs paddlers to remove paddles from the water and let the boat drift
8. **"Hold (Water)"** – instructs paddlers to place paddles vertically in the water with the blade perpendicular to the boat to slow/stop the boat. This is the only way to stop the boat, so act immediately when this command is called.
9. **"Feather the boat" or "Brace the boat"** – instructs paddlers to lay paddles far out and flat blade in the water to help stabilize the boat during large wakes or significant weight transfers in the boat (during un/loading)
10. **"Power 10"** – a set of very powerful strokes designed to generate short bursts of speed

## SEAT ASSIGNMENTS

Paddlers are assigned to rows (numbered 1 to 10 starting at the front row) as Left or Right paddler on a number of considerations including: size/height/weight, reach, timing/sync, skill levels, fit, strength, boat balance (left to right) and (front to back) with lighter paddlers up front, and various other categories.

Ensure the boat weight is evenly distributed, balancing the weight between left to right, and front to back of the vessel.

The paddlers in each row are assigned specific functions:

- **"Stroke"** refers to the first row of paddler(s) who sets the timing of the entire boat
- **"Timing Box"** refers to the first three rows of the boat collectively because they set the timing/sync for the rest of the boat
- **"Engine Room"** refers to the middle of the boat (often rows 4-8) and seats the bigger, stronger paddlers given the wide benches and beneficial contour of the boat to pull powerful paddle strokes
- **"Rockets"** refer to the last row or two of the boat whose paddlers are often selected for their smaller size given the very narrow bench. They are typically strong, fast-moving and high stamina individuals due to the fast-moving water at the back of the boat

## RACE STARTS

A unique set of strokes is used to rapidly accelerate the boat from a standstill, and is called a race start or start piece. Usually, this involves some pattern of a few powerful strokes at a low rate, another set of strokes at a moderate rate, and another set of short strokes at a very high rate followed by some form of transition to a race pace stroke rate that can be maintained for the remaining duration of the course.

Festival coaches will typically train novice teams with a simple “5-10-10-pace” start piece, which involves 5 long and powerful strokes, 10 power strokes, 10 very fast and short strokes, then a transition to race pace.

## POWER PIECES

For brief spurts of speed to aid in passing or posting a fast race time, the Drummer may call for a Power 10 or Power 20. This command asks paddlers to pull a series of long, deep, strong strokes at the existing stroke rate to surge the boat forward. Based on the fitness level of your paddlers, you can generally call one to three of these power pieces per race before it tires your paddlers.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

There are numerous online sources describing the dragon boating in further detail. There are also numerous articles in the press and cultural sites that you may find useful.

You can find many tutorials, coaching and race strategies, paddling instruction and drills, balancing a boat, etc. by typing “dragon boat tutorial” into your favorite search engine.

This also includes many online videos demonstrating paddling form, both individually and as a boat. Be sure to read about race starts, and other race techniques like Power 10s and Power 20s to help speed your team to the finish.

Here are a few links to get you started:

- <https://bostondragonboat.org/races>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragon\\_boat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragon_boat)
- [https://www.tutorialspoint.com/dragon\\_boating/dragon\\_boating\\_quick\\_guide.htm](https://www.tutorialspoint.com/dragon_boating/dragon_boating_quick_guide.htm)

## QUICK CHECKLIST

Here is a quick checklist to help get you going:

<b>Register your team(s)</b> on Bonzi
<b>Pay the dues</b> and get acceptance to create your Roster
Make sure all <b>members are Registered onto Bonzi’s Team Connect</b> with their pictures
<b>Sign-up for 6 practice</b> time slots for your team ( <i>Boston local teams</i> )
Set up your preliminary roster line-up for your boat: who are the left/right front/back paddlers, drummer, and steer
Ask your athletes to read this manual and know the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• what to bring; practice procedures; basic commands; river &amp; safety rules; time/date commitments; seat assignments, etc.</li></ul>
Ensure your steersperson is designated and he/she goes through the <b><i>proper training and certifications</i></b>
If you need a coach or steersperson, inform the festival as soon as possible
Prepare your rooster for practice and have fun
Enjoy Race weekend!

We are excited to have you join the dragon boat community and can’t wait to see you on the water! If you have any questions, always feel free to reach out to any staff members or email us at [race@bostondragonboat.org](mailto:race@bostondragonboat.org).

**Hope to see you soon! – Your Friendly Boston Dragon Boat Festival Dock Staff 😊**