

Straight paddles vs bent paddles

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Choose your paddle type

Cliff Jacobson and I are presenting together in the next few weeks at the Quiet Water Symposium in Michigan, Canoecopia in Madison and Mid-West Mountaineering Spring Expo in Minneapolis. Cliff is a canoe guru and best-selling author based in the United States; and he knows his stuff! Debating with one another isn't knew, however. We've been arguing over such topics as "dealing with bears" and "what to wear on our feet" for years now. This time its a little different, though. Our heated discussions are going to be on a stage in front of hundreds of other paddlers. It should be interesting; especially because all the shows with be in front of Americans - and I'm a Canadian. I'm a tad nervous!

The debate was my idea though. So I have no one to blame. It started off a few months back when Cliff and I wrote an article for a magazine together

(CanoeRoots) where we debated the straight-shaft paddle against the bent-shaft. I'm straight and Cliff's bent. Here's what we had to say then:

Cliff Jacobson: When I learned that Kevin prefers straight paddles to bent blades for lake cruising, I just rolled my eyes. I fear that boy has spent too much time in the Ontario bush!

Kevin Callan: I don't use a bent-shaft paddle. The reason is simple. I'm Canadian.

I also prefer tripping in Quetico rather than Boundary Waters; just like the majority of American paddlers. The first to take up bent-shaft paddling are Boundary Waters Canoe heads, hence the term "Minnesota Switch." Question is Cliff, why don't they switch to straight shaft while in Quetico like all us Canadians.

KC: I have tried a bent blade and immediately saw the appeal for beginner paddlers. First-time canoeists automatically attempt to travel in a straight line by constantly switching their paddles from one side to the other. Paddling with a bent shaft encourages this natural reaction, with the stern paddler hollering out "Hutt!" every three seconds to indicate the right moment for both paddlers to switch sides, allowing the canoe to stay on track. But I'm not a green-horn canoeist, so using the J-stroke, or even better, the Canadian stroke, gets me across the lake straight enough, and in style.

CJ: Canadian or American—no matter. The fact is that EVERY performance-minded canoeist on the planet prefers the bent shaft for racing, cruising and general all-round canoeing. Indeed, even your precious J-stroke is best done bent. Why? Because the bent blade runs partly under the canoe

during the stroke, whereas a straight blade runs alongside. It is a canoeing axiom that the closer to the keel line you paddle, the less directional correction is needed.

Regardless of how you paddle, the efficiency of bent blades beats straight shafts hands-down. A straight paddle lifts water at the end of the stroke, slowing the canoe. With a bent paddle, the water is pushed nearly straight back.

KC: I respect the physics behind the bent shaft. However, I've never cared about how fast I go while out there. With that kind of attitude you might as well stay home, in my opinion. Speaking of physics, the bent shaft generally came from the world of racing canoes because they deliver the most forward force for the energy expended. But they're crap when it comes to maneuverability; try one in fast water or whenever you want to turn quick. The straight blade reacts the same way regardless of which way you use it. If you're doing the draw and immediately want to do a pry, the straight blade acts in the same in both directions. It's the difference between having your canoe wrapped around a rock in mid-rapid or running a perfect line.

CJ: Kevin, it's not about speed. It's about efficiency and being kind to your body. Bent shaft paddling technique is best described as more push down than pull back, as opposed to a straight paddle, where it is all pull back. This reduces stress on your arms and back. There is also less twisting of the shaft and your hand during the stroke, so carpal tunnel and tennis elbow injuries are minimized. This is a huge advantage if you are paddling solo for hours at a time.

KC: A bent-shaft might be better for such things as carpal tunnel or tennis elbow? I won't disagree there. However, I generally keep myself in shape by paddling lots (with a straight shaft) but not forcing each stroke. It's kind of like Yoga. To me, it's one of the most calming things – both physic and

mental - one can do for relaxation. I can't think of anything better in life than to cruise down a lake using the Canadian stroke with a 5-6 inch wide straight-shaft wooden paddle that cuts through the water effortlessly. You can call paddling with a traditional paddle Canadian or crazy, or both. Or you can simply accept it as a choice that reflects the real reason we go on canoe trips in the first place—to slow down and soak in the solitude.

Whatever the reason, I'll continue to wet my beavertail in the wilderness and thank the good spirits I never have the word "Hutt" break the silence I truly enjoy out there. The bent shaft does have its advantages. Heck, if Cliff and I go paddling together it would work out perfect if he was in the bow with the power and speed of a bent shaft and I was in the stern with the poise of a straight shaft. We'd be like a married couple dancing across the lake.

CJ: I'm all for solitude and slowing down. Ask my friends and they'll tell you I'm the one who always lags behind. Frankly, I find that lollygagging along with a bent shaft is far more relaxing than using a straight shaft.

Kevin won't like me having the last word, but for all you non-Luddites reading this, I'd like to share this final tip: There are good and bad bent shaft paddles. My favorites are made of carbon fiber and have 12-degree bends. Also remember that for lakewater cruising where you will be using corrective strokes, you'll want a paddle that is two to four inches longer than is recommended for racing.