

BRITISH LONG DISTANCE SWIMMING ASSOCIATION



Requirements/advice to kayakers escorting swimmers/providing safety cover at BLDSA championships

Paddler competency

- The **minimum** skill standard recommended is that equivalent to the kayak component of the BCU Two Star award syllabus (www.canoe-england.org.uk/tests-i.../paddlesport-start-i-1-to-3-star/). On many of our longer lake/sea events, skills and experience in excess of this level will be needed, particularly being able to handle wind and associated waves up to approximately Force 4.
- Paddlers must be able to remain with a swimmer and be able to steer a straight course in tail, side and head winds. Tail winds present the greatest challenge to escorting paddlers. If paddling a closed cockpit kayak the ability to exit a capsized boat with spray deck in place is essential. Paddlers of sit on top craft should be able to self-rescue.

Please be aware that paddlers who appear to lack the necessary skills to stay with their swimmer will not be allowed to continue, and the swimmer will be removed from the water by safety officials.

Boats

- Closed cockpit kayaks and sit on top kayaks are suitable for use in escorting swimmers. Inflatable kayaks must not be used in BLDSA events
- The boat must be watertight and have sufficient buoyancy to keep it afloat should it capsize. Boats must be fitted with bow and stern toggles or grab handles.
- Touring/sea kayaks are ideal and are a requirement on some swims e.g. Windermere. Boats fitted with an adjustable skeg are advantageous in cross/tail wind conditions. . In certain circumstances, and with suitably experienced crews, open canoes may be used subject to the approval of event organisers.
- On some events it is a requirement that the swimmers' clothing is carried on board the escort craft. This must be carried in such a way that the safety of the boat and paddler is not compromised.
- Kayakers should have paddled the boat and be familiar with its' handling characteristics before the event
- If in any doubt about the suitability of your boat you should contact the event organiser well in advance of the swim taking place to discuss

The BLDSA reserves the right to refuse the use of a boat should it be deemed unsuitable by event officials.

Personal equipment

- **All paddlers are required to wear a suitable personal floatation device and those using closed cockpit kayaks are required to use a spray deck.**
- Paddlers are advised that they need to wear clothing suitable for being on the water for several hours in potentially changeable weather conditions and to carry food/hydration for the duration of the event.
- On the longer lake swims it is good practice to carry a first aid kit and survival bag. As paddlers are responsible for navigation and course selection it is recommended that laminated maps and a compass are carried.
- All paddlers are required to carry a whistle for emergency use

Flag Alpha

BLDSA rules require that Flag Alpha is flown by all craft escorting individual swimmers. Flag Alpha is a maritime signal flag that when flown on its own indicates a vessel has a diver down or swimmer in the water. Other craft are expected to give a wide berth and proceed at slow speed. Although used at sea, its meaning is also understood by many inland water users particularly in the Lake District. It is recommended that Flag Alpha is mounted on a short pole and attached to the boat. (A section of lightweight tent pole is ideal and can be easily mounted into a drilled out replacement drain bung or taped to the boat.) The practice of placing the flag pole between the paddler and their buoyancy aid is not advised as it could impede exit from the boat in the event of capsize. Flag Alpha must be removed if the swimmer retires.

On the day of the swim

On arrival:-

- Please ensure that on arrival you register with officials
- Before the swim starts, briefings will be held for swimmers and crew. As well as communicating essential safety information, briefings also provide the opportunity for escort crews to ask questions/seek clarification from the event organisers. **You must attend the briefing**
- As part of the briefing process the event safety officer may wish to inspect your boat or equipment and clarify your level of paddling experience.
- Paddlers must ensure they are familiar with the swim course and key landmarks/navigation points en-route.

Before starting the swim:-

- Before the event start paddlers need to ensure that they can recognise their swimmer once on the water. Knowing the swimmer's hat and swimsuit colour helps if it is the first time you have crewed for a swimmer. Agree a start strategy as to where the swimmer will be picked up once the race is underway. If there is a large field it might not be possible to pick up the swimmer for several minutes after the start. It helps the swimmer to know where you will be, so before the start agree if you will be to the left or right of the field and if you will go to the head of the field and wait or approach them from the rear of the field.
- Find out if the swimmer breathes bi-laterally or to one side and which side they would like you to paddle.

- On longer events most swimmers will feed/drink during the swim so discuss their feeding strategy before going on the water. Paddlers will need to ensure that the swimmers' food/drink is stored in such a way that it is both secure and easily accessible.

During the swim:-

- Once underway paddlers must remain close to their swimmers and a maximum of no more than 3 metres away. Safety officials will warn paddlers who are too far away from their swimmer and may ask them to leave the water if they are unable to remain close to the swimmer.
- Try to keep your body parallel or just ahead of the swimmers' line of sight.
- During the swim be positive and try and encourage the swimmer, it does help psychologically to smile at them and offer an occasional thumbs up. Communicating with a swimmer during a race can prove a frustrating experience but try and remember that they will be wearing ear plugs, their ears are covered by a thick silicone or latex hat, goggles steam up and hand signals/gestures can be lost in the glare of the sun!
- Be aware of signs of fatigue, illness, hypothermia etc. and be prepared to seek advice/assistance from the safety boats.
- Escort paddlers are responsible for navigating the swim course and hazard avoidance. Be prepared to shout a warning to other water users if they come too close. Sailing craft have considerable blind spots caused by the mast and sails so a loud shout can be very useful.
- If the swimmer starts wandering off course try to attract their attention to this fact and indicate to them the correct course/position. If they try and nudge you off course or try and swim too close to the kayak, motion or shout to them to move away from the boat.
- Be aware that a cross wind affects a kayak significantly more than a swimmer and can blow the boat onto the swimmer. If you are continually blown towards them then consider swapping and paddling on the other side of them. Only do this with the agreement of the swimmer and remember that some swimmers only breathe to one side and putting the kayak on the wrong side will mean they will be unable to follow you.
- Paddlers should compensate for a cross wind by adjusting their course towards the side the wind is blowing from. The degree of off-set will depend on the strength of the wind. Failing to compensate for a cross wind can lead to competitors swimming further than they need to in order to finish the race. A tail wind can prove tricky for paddlers and it is quite possible that back paddling will be required to stay alongside a swimmer. In anything apart from calm weather stopping to feed can lead to a swimmer drifting off course so paddlers need to ensure that giving food and drinks is done quickly and efficiently. Paddlers must not impede the progress of other swimmers and must follow instructions issued by event officials.

General safety cover at circuit swims

In most circumstances individual escorts are not allowed at circuit swims. This is however at the discretion of event organisers and may be allowed in certain situations. On circuit swims kayak cover will be deployed by the event safety officer and race referee. Usually cover is dispersed to patrol sectors of a swim course or fixed points such as turn marks. Paddlers are expected to attend both the swimmers' and crew briefings. Swimmers are responsible for their own navigation so paddlers should not intervene unless a swimmer is wandering far off course or safety is compromised by other water users. Paddlers must not impede the progress of swimmers and must follow instructions issued by event officials.

In an emergency, or if the swimmer needs to retire

- Ask the swimmer to hold on to the front of their boat, head to one side and legs raised either side of the kayak. This allows you to maintain constant visual contact and speak to them until help arrives

- To attract the attention of the rescue boats, make repeated blows on your whistle. If safe to do so, put your paddle vertically in the air to signal your location. If you are carrying a marine VHF radio, make contact with officials via Channel 10
- The rescue boat will take the swimmer from you – please follow their instructions. Hand over any clothing, medication etc. before the swimmer is taken away. You will usually be asked to make your own way to the finish line and then to check in with officials once you get there.
- Your own safety is paramount. If it is being compromised (e.g. by a swimmer panicking and making motions that might capsize the kayak), back away slightly and await help. If you do capsize and are unable to roll back up, exit your kayak and keep holding onto it for buoyancy until help arrives

If you leave the course of the race for any reason (e.g. rescuing yourself to the side), you must, at the earliest opportunity, inform race officials of your whereabouts. In almost all circumstances, it is better to wait to be rescued. If we are unaware that you have left the water, we will mount a search which may involve police, coastguard etc.!