

IS AN OAR JUST AN OAR, OR WHAT?

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Creativity and ingenuity. Lifeguards seem to have a fathomless amount of these two characteristics. Long hours of contemplative solitude have given birth to remarkable solutions to some unique problems. I have seen things that defy the laws of nature, gravity, and good taste. You know that I'm talking about: paddleboards patched with bondo, fin straps made out of duct tape. Mayan gods carved into broomsticks with first aid scissors, flyswatters made from rescue cards and tongue depressors. The list goes on. What is the origin of this talent? Necessity? Budget crunch? Boredom? The lifeguard motto is, "Make it work with what you've got."

Since many of the circumstances that lifeguards face are unique, often no specially designed piece of equipment exists to suit their purposes. Basically what we are left with are three options: Use what's available, modify what's available, or make your own. The most glaring examples of these choices can be seen in the oars used by lifeguard boat crews. Surfboats and dories are used in conditions that can be extremely brutal. I don't know of any other watercraft that is routinely taken in and out through a surfline under oar alone. The boat and the oar must be properly designed to survive this severe environment.

Let's list some of the characteristics of the ideal oar and then compare them to our three options. A lifeguard oar must be strong but somewhat flexible, lightweight yet tough, have a blade designed for an efficient stroke in surf, chop, or flat water, and lastly, if an oar breaks it should do so cleanly, avoiding shards or sharp edges. With all these factors in mind we begin our comparison.

The first option is using what's available. The only other type of craft that endures the abuse of lifeguard boats is the river raft. Wood oars of oak and ash are the preferred choice of experienced raftsmen. While they are very strong, lifeguards find them extremely heavy for their purposes. Oars made from lightweight spruce are also available but are less durable than their hardwood counterparts. The majority of this category employ a flat blade design. While very strong, they provide a less than optimum catch. Whether oak, ash, or spruce, when they break, wood oars can produce sharp, pointed ends. This could produce a disastrous result if an oarsman is being tossed about in an unfriendly sea.

Another rafting oar is the plastic type. An aluminum shaft is covered with polyethylene plastic and is attached to a removable plastic blade. These oars are very durable and are well-suited for bouncing off rocks. They don't often break, but they do bend, leaving their strength compromised beyond use. Replacement parts are relatively inexpensive. For surf purposes, plastic oars, like their wooden cousins, tend to be on the heavy side. Blades are available in different widths, all being flat with a center shaft. The occurrence of "catching crabs" with this design seems to be more frequent, especially in rough seas or for the inexperienced. When a plastic oar is shifted, the blade will not stay jammed in the oarlock. An opponent could be halfway through the surfline by the time the oars are reset after a transition. It should be noted that rafting oars of all types are primarily used to direct a boat downstream. Since it is critical to avoid river obstacles, design priorities are placed on steering abilities first and propulsion needs second.

The last readily available type is the racing oar or scull. Sleek, flatwater racing boats are rowed at remarkable speeds. These oars are lightweight and flexible, made from high tech materials like carbon fiber or graphite. They use a unique curved blade evolved over years of

research and development. Sculls are extremely efficient for high speed, flat water racing. Their downfall is their inability to endure abuse. The treatment they receive in the hands of lifeguards far exceeds their design capabilities. Another undesirable quality is their relatively high cost. Breaking a scull means not only being out of the race, but being out your next paycheck, too!

Modifying what's available is our second option. Here is where that creativity and ingenuity really become apparent. Some oars become so altered that I doubt the original manufacturer could recognize his own product. Here are some of the things I have observed at recent races: Oak and ash oars shaved down to reduce weight, flat oar blades carved to a curved or cup shape to improve efficiency, plastic oars having the polyethylene around the shaft removed to decrease weight, plastic oar blades replaced with a modified wood blade, sculls with a wrap of fiberglass cloth around the shaft to improve strength. You can see where each one of these procedures gets one step closer, but still fails to match our ideal oar.

This brings us to our last option, making your own. At some point a person gets fed up with just making do. The competitive spirit and the quest to get the edge over an opponent gives rise to experimental development of specialized equipment. What has evolved is a design that is uniquely suited to lifeguard needs. This hybrid oar has been used by the vast majority of national champion boat *crews*.

First, a blade is carved out of spruce. A curved design has developed with a rounded or V shaped back. The unique shape allows the oar to skip up instead of getting caught in chop. The flexibility of the wood helps the blade stay put when the oars are shifted into the locks. The blade is mated to a fiberglass shaft, similar to a polevault pole. The handle is also made of wood, usually from spruce left over from carving the blade. The final result is an efficient blade in all conditions, a shaft that, if broken, will not create sharp, spiked edges, and an overall oar that is lightweight and relatively strong. Variations do exist. Shafts can be obtained in different strengths and flexibilities. Many blades have come and gone through the years. Their shapes have been mostly affected by experimentation and personal opinion.

Here lies an important point. If you ask a person what the best type of oar is, you will get confusing, different and often contradictory answers. Some will say flat blade, stiff shaft, round handle oars are what you want. Others will expand on the virtue of a curved blade, flexible shaft with a pistol grip. Even others will recommend using plastic or wood oars. The most important thing is to develop your own opinion. Take what's around and get out on the water. After a while you will be able to form a basis for comparison. It makes sense also to try different types of oars as they become available. I hope that after looking at all the factors and variables, you will be able to make an educated selection of your own ideal oar.

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