

Beginner Book
for
Kayakers

The Beginner Book is an unofficial publication for the Pikes Peak Whitewater Club. It was written and edited by members of the Pikes Peak Whitewater Club.

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Beginner Orientation

Kayakers encompass a wide range of personalities. People like the sport for a variety of reasons; including the adrenaline, the relaxation, the enjoyment of being on water, the culture and camaraderie.

The reasons you enjoy, or are drawn to kayaking will determine the types of rivers you run, the level of risk you are willing to accept and types of techniques and maneuvers you will need to learn. As you begin to discover all that kayaking has to offer, it is important to remember that the line between fun and danger can be crossed very quickly in this sport. Proper training, equipment, experience, and good judgment can help to reduce the risks. One can mitigate the lack of experience through absorbing as much information as possible through paying attention, getting training, and asking questions of more experienced boaters. It is often preferable to learn from other people's mistakes than make them yourself.

There are many ways one can learn to kayak...paid lessons, informal lessons from friends, trips & classes through kayak clubs, and the do-it-yourself method. All avenues to learning have positive and negative aspects. Jumping on the river by yourself without knowledge is the most dangerous way to start and can lead to an unpleasant and downright intimidating experience. For most people, the best way to start is by attending pool sessions and learning how to roll and then try a very mellow stretch of river with people you trust or with paid instructors.

2. LEARNING

Pool Sessions

It is not uncommon to find oneself upside down while floating through a rapid. In this situation, there are two basic options: exit the boat and swim for shore, or roll yourself upright and continue down the river. A couple of swims are usually motivation enough to learn option two. Pool rolling sessions provide an ideal environment to learn the "Eskimo" or "combat" roll, the move that will get you and your boat back upright. If you learn the mechanics of the roll and become consistent in the pool, it greatly increases your chances of rolling upright while on the river.

While most people focus on learning and practicing rolls during pool sessions, beginners can also benefit from the time spent in their boats, becoming more comfortable, enhancing their balance and learning a variety of paddle strokes. As you advance, the pool becomes a good place to work on tricks.

For those just starting out, the roll can be elusive. Some learn the roll in a few hours and some in a few months. You may learn the roll in a day, lose it the

next, and take a few days to regain it. Don't worry; the more you practice the better you'll be.

The more rolls you perform the better off you'll be. Having a solid pool roll does not guarantee a solid river roll, but it will help train your muscles to 'know' the roll. It's easy to get overwhelmed by the sensation of being upside-down in a rapid, so having muscles trained to roll will help a lot.

One of the benefits of joining a club like the Pikes Peak Whitewater Club is that you have years of experience and mentoring at your fingertips. As you attend the pool rolling sessions, you will find that most members of the PPWC are happy to offer advice, share techniques and tips and assist you as you try to become a more skilled boater. Bear in mind, PPWC members are not paid instructors, but friendly boaters with experiences to share. People's learning and teaching styles vary, so be sure to ask around and seek help from as many people as possible until you find suggestions and assistance that click for you.

CLASSES

Many places offer kayak training. Pool sessions for the roll are extremely common and can be found up and down the Front Range through clubs, organizations and kayaking schools. On-river courses are offered by a number of companies for all skill levels. A quality class will do more than just lead you down the river, it will provide you with a personal experience where instructors offer specific feedback and suggestions to correct your mistakes and enhance your technique. Information on courses can be found through the local kayak shops, the CWWA and training companies like the Rocky Mountain Outdoor Center (RMOC). When looking for training, talk with boaters you trust to get their recommendations and suggestions.

Some things to consider when making a decision regarding lessons include:

- Are the instructors all certified?
- How many instructors per student?
- How much time will you have on the water?
- The length of the class you are interested in (single day, full weekend, multiple days, etc.)
- The techniques and skills you are interested in working on.

Pike Peak Whitewater offers a beginner course taught by club members who are ACA certified trainers. For a fee that goes to support the club, this opportunity will take your learning a step up from the instruction you will get at the pool and on club sponsored trips. If you really want to expedite your kayaking learning curve, you may want to consider taking this training course or one offered commercially.

TRIPS

The time has come for you to get on the river and put into practice all the basic skills you have amassed. Herein lies another benefit of being part of the PPWC. Beginner trips are a great way to get on the river with a group of experienced boaters that can offer lots of advice and guidance, while helping you navigate your way safely down the river. Some of the basic skills practiced on beginner trips include recognizing hazards, reading water, maneuvering the boat, entering and exiting eddies, bracing and of course rolling. Be sure to be an active user of our website's Forum to see when and where trips are being planned (more on that later).

Kayaking can be a dangerous sport, and everyone on the water is expected to be responsible for his or her decisions and actions. While beginner trips are geared towards people with little or no experience, you should develop good safety habits so you can begin making informed boating decisions. Ask questions before heading out, learn about the difficulty and characteristics of the river you intend to boat. This will help keep you from getting on a river above your ability. Ask about the experience level of the other boaters. On beginner trips, you'll want to know whether skilled boaters are there to assist swimmers. In general, you want to know what you're getting into and who you're doing it with. If you are a class II boater you who wants to try class III water, it's smarter to try this with a group of willing class III+ boaters than to try it with a group of class I boaters.

How do you find groups to boat with?

- For the 2014 season, the club will plan dates for beginner trips throughout the season. Contact the trip leader if you are interested in going and they will let interested parties know the specific information as the date approaches.
- Use the club web-site, www.pikespeakwhitewaterclub.com and go to "Trip Planner" under the Forum tab to participate in trip planning. It is important to check the Forum often as trip specifics may be changed at the last minute depending on water levels, weather, trip participants, etc.
- Talk with people at the pool sessions and look for people who are willing to boat with you.
- Check the trip planning sections of www.mountainbuzz.com to look for beginner trips.
- Watch the club calendar and Forum for trip postings!

VIDEOS

The club has a lending library of videos you can take home and watch. We have several videos, feel free to ask about the titles to see whether anything

interests you. Check out the videos and watch them a few times. It's an easy way to get quality instruction while you are sitting on the couch.

In addition, books and online chat forums such as the Forum and at www.mountainbuzz.com and www.boatertalk.com offer great advice and insight. Books are another valuable source for information.

3. TIPS FOR IMPROVING

A key to quick improvement is to continually practice skills and techniques while boating. There are many things to practice and it makes being on the river much more fun. This section lists a few skills to practice that will help refine your boating and ability to control your boat. This is by no means a complete list and it does not attempt to explain the required technique.

River Reading

Reading water is a critical skill, which takes time and effort to learn. Look around as you boat to learn how to identify features such as rocks, submerged rocks, waves, hydraulics, logs, and strainers*. Watch and remember how currents and other features affect your boat. Ask questions of more experienced boaters whenever possible. You will probably follow the lines of more experienced boaters at first but start picking your own route through rapids as your comfort-level increases.

As you learn more about the river and how the currents affect your boat, you will be starting down a path that allows you to scout rapids from both your boat and shore.

* Note: While maintaining an awareness of your surroundings is critical, the boat tends to go where your eyes are looking, so don't dwell too long on the intimidating features you want to avoid. Look where you want to go!!!

Rolling

The more you practice rolling your boat, the better your chances will be of getting a roll when you need it in a rapid. If you develop a solid roll in a calm section of the river then begin trying it in places that are more difficult. (Remember to consider the safety of the area before practicing your roll.) Practice in faster currents or near the bottom of a rapid. If your roll is solid then spend more time trying moves that may cause you to flip.

Eddy Turns

Eddy's are places in the river where the water is flowing upstream. They are often found behind rocks or bends in the river. They are excellent places to rest, scout, or wait for the rest of your group.

Entering eddies in rapids takes skill because one needs to get the boat to the correct place at the correct time with the correct angle. As you're entering an eddy, you must change the boat-tilt to keep the current from flipping the kayak. Exiting an eddy is simpler; the main skill is to brace and change your boat-tilt. As you're learning to catch eddies you'll probably start in slow water. Begin catching eddy's in faster currents as your skills progress. Your goal should be to catch any, and all, eddies of interest before getting through a rapid. Next to rolling, entering and exiting eddy's is one of the most important skills for you to master.

Ferry Angles

There are times when you'll need to paddle upstream and/or work your way across the river. The faster the current the more you'll need to keep the boat pointed into the current. The challenge is that you need to keep the boat tilted properly or the current will flip your boat. In addition, the water will try to turn your boat downstream so you'll need to paddle to keep it facing the correct direction.

Begin in slow currents and work into faster currents. Try keeping your boat pointed upstream when leaving eddies.

Bracing

Work on your low and high braces. Practice floating through waves sideways using your balance and paddle to stay upright. The pool is also a great place to practice your brace along with your roll.

Surfing

Surfing in waves or playing in hydraulics is a fun pastime that will teach you a lot about boat control and currents. You will flip when practicing these skills so choose deep water with a slow current below you. The beauty of practicing these skills is that you'll also get great rolling practice.

Remember, before trying any unfamiliar moves, always think about the risks of what you are about to try. Look around and ask more experienced boaters their opinion on the safety of the area. The following list gives you a start of the things to think about before trying a challenging move.

- How deep is the water? Is it deep enough to be upside down?
- Look downstream, are there hazards to a swimmer or an upside down boater?
- Are there submerged rocks near the surface?
- If you swim, is there an easy way to get to shore before the next rapid?

As your comfort level increases, your description of 'safe' will change. The beauty of developing skills in generally benign areas is that you can increase your skills with a reduced level of risk.

4. ORIENTATION TO THE BOAT AND THE EQUIPMENT

Almost every boater can discuss a list of equipment they'll almost always take on the water. One can guarantee the list will include a kayak, paddle, spray-skirt, helmet, and personal flotation device (PFD) as well as the proper kayak outerwear. Additional items are likely to include a throw-bag, nose plugs, first-aid kit, extra clothing, food, rescue gear, and float-bags.

Kayak designs have changed a lot in the last couple decades. There are many types of new and used boats on the market. Some boats can turn really quickly but are relatively slow. Others are fast but can't turn as quickly. Some are exceptional for performing various rodeo moves (or flipping with beginners), while others are designed for buoyancy. Most beginners choose a stable boat with plenty of volume (buoyancy). By choosing a boat with a lot of volume, one won't be able to perform the moves that play kayaks are designed to make easier. That being said, there are many boat styles and you'll get LOTS of advice from anyone at the pool sessions. Try as many boats as you can before making any decisions. You can do this by attending kayak demos or by asking people at the pool if you can try their boat. Find out what you like and what works for you. The pool won't be a perfect example of how the boat will behave on the river, but it will give you a feeling.

As far as paddles go, you may want to try different ones too. Paddles vary by their length, shaft design, and offset, which is how far differently the two blades are angled. Most whitewater paddles sold today are offset by 30 degrees. Straight shafts are most common, but bent shafts are designed to be ergonomically correct and are getting more popular all the time. The proper paddle length is a subjective call and depends largely on the user. Try them all and make up your own mind.

Consider paying the extra money for a quality helmet. If you spend much time kayaking you will hit your helmet on a rock. That helmet is protecting important merchandise so consider the fit, material, and coverage of the helmet.

As you learn more about the sport, you'll develop your own list of equipment that you always bring on the river. Spray skirts keep the water out of your kayak. Choose a size that will fit your cockpit. Almost all PFDs meet the minimum requirements for flotation. Pay special attention to how well it fits and whether you can move your arms and easily get to your rolling position.

Float bags are an extremely smart thing to have in a boat. They make life easier when the owner is swimming to shore, because the inflated bags keep water from entirely filling a kayak. This reduces the weight of the kayak and can make the difference between a long swim and a quick push to shore.

5. SAFETY

TRIP PLANNING

Safety is not just something to talk about or something to consider when on the water. It should be on your mind as you're planning the trip.

- Have you researched the section of river you plan to run? You should know whether the stretch is within or above your comfort-level.
- Do you know the skill level of the rest of your group? If everyone is trying something outside their comfort-zone then the chances of receiving help are reduced. You should also have a feeling for who is more likely to need help. If you expect to need help you should make sure the more experience boaters are willing to take on a leadership role.
- Does the group have adequate gear? Who has rescue equipment? What about a First Aid kit, food, and extra clothing? Is there an easy way to get away from the river or are you committing to the entire stretch? The type of gear you need may be affected by the commitment you are making.

ON RIVER

For beginner trips, there will be a designated lead and sweep boat. The lead boater will show everyone the safest route and be ready to help a swimmer get to shore. The sweep boat stays in the back of the group the entire time to sound the alarm if there is a problem. NO ONE gets in front of the lead. NO ONE falls behind the sweep. The lead and sweep can't do their jobs if they are not in the lead and tail positions.

Rapids with horizon lines should be scouted, either from shore or by boat. Beginner trips will typically beach their kayaks and allow everyone to walk to a vantage point where the rapid can be seen. Experienced boaters will discuss the possible ways to run the rapid. There are usually several ways, but after all the talk and plans, one route will be chosen, a safe but fun route. The lead will talk about each move that must be made to run the route. Any questions? Then everyone back into the boats and follow the lead!

Experienced boaters also scout rapids on their trips, usually only the more challenging rapids, and the discussion is quicker and more technical. There is seldom a need to discuss the detailed moves required to make the route happen because they are experienced boaters.

As your skill and experience increases, you should shoulder more of the duties for group safety. Make it a practice to keep track of everyone in your group. As you're passing a rapid, look behind you to see how the next person is doing. If they need help, you may be the closest person to offer support.

The emergency signal is 3 blasts on a whistle. Even one blast on a whistle should be taken as an emergency signal. Maybe the person got flipped after one blast and it's hard to blow a whistle under water. What do you do when the emergency signal is given? You get to an eddy and stop. Let the experienced boaters deal with the emergency without the distraction of having to worry about you!

Some signals will be given by the lead using 'paddle signals'. The lead will discuss the signals before the trip starts. Just remember, the lead (and you) will NEVER use the paddle to point to an obstruction or danger area. ONLY point to the clear safe route!

Keep hydrated! You lose a lot of water out on the river regardless of the weather conditions. You are working hard too. Keep drinking because as you dehydrate, your muscles can't work as well, your mental processes become slower (and eventually sloppy), and you become a risk to yourself and the group. Even in cooler weather you will need to eat and stay hydrated. Both water and food are fuel for your engine!

CLOTHING

Clothing requirements depend on the weather, the water temperature, the difficulty of the rapids, and accessibility of outside support. Spring water flows are typically caused from snowmelt. The water is cold and can quickly cause hypothermia when one is submerged in it. ALL kayakers should wear enough clothing so that they can stay warm during and after a swim.

Some boaters always plan their clothing to allow for extended periods in the water. The rationale is that one never knows when one will be in the water for extended periods. These people view it as their duty to be prepared for any event, be it an extended swim on their part or an extended rescue effort. Other kayakers gamble that they won't swim, and dress with this assumption in mind. .

The rationale behind the latter dressing style is that the individual feels they probably will not swim, if they do, they feel their clothing is adequate to safely get out of the water. Regardless of which thought process you lean towards, make sure you consciously decide how much clothing you need. Early and late season water can be very cold; it quickly saps the strength from a swimmer. Dress warmly for your first few times, if you're too hot you can always take clothes off or do a couple rolls.

Exactly what you wear comes down to personal preference. Neoprene, fleece, fuzzy rubber, drytops, are all employed in various combinations. Proper footwear is also an important consideration that should not be overlooked. Talk to experienced boaters then assess what combination of gear you may feel best with.

6. ACQUIRING EQUIPMENT

BORROWING

It makes sense to try-before you buy. Some members of the club will loan you items they are not using. Many people have multiple boats and will be happy to loan them out. Make friends at the pool sessions and learn who might be willing to loan you equipment for a trip. Ask. It can't hurt and usually works. While borrowing may not take care of all your gear, it will reduce the amount of things you need to buy or rent.

RENTAL

Another route to try-before you buy is to rent gear. Many kayak shops rent equipment, unfortunately there aren't any in Colorado Springs that rent. The Edge Ski & Paddle in Pueblo rents kayaks. CKS in Buena Vista will also rent gear. Almost any kayak shop located near a river will rent them. Renting (and demos) is a great way to try boats so you can decide what is right for you. The other benefit of renting is that you can rent all the gear you need. Many shops will apply rental costs against the price of a new boat, so if you know you plan to buy a boat and equipment it pays to continue renting from the same company.

BUYING

Kayaking, like every other sport, has many startup costs. The main question you need to ask yourself is whether you want new or used gear. You will easily spend \$1,500-\$2,000 to get started with new gear. Buying used gear can get you started for a fraction of the cost. Many people use a combination of new and used gear when starting

One can often find package deals for new gear for \$1,200 - \$1,800. The packages should include a boat, paddle, helmet, and sprayskirt. If you buy separately, a new boat can cost between \$1,000 and \$1,300. A sprayskirt and PFD will each cost about \$100. A helmet will cost between \$50 and \$150. A dry top can be had for as low as \$150. A wet suit is at least \$100. An inexpensive paddle can be found for about \$150.

Used gear can be found at Gearonimo in Colorado Springs or on web-sites like www.mountainbuzz.com , www.boatertalk.com and www.craigslist.com . PPWC members often have extra gear they'll want to sell. Shops like CKS in Buena Vista often host kayak swaps at the beginning and end of the boating season. The benefit of buying a used kayak is that they are much cheaper than new ones. One can buy an inexpensive beginner boat and upgrade once you're ready for something different or sportier. **We would highly recommend not buying a used helmet or PFD.** Safety first. You don't know how much life a used helmet or PFD still has in it. Don't trust your life to something that isn't up to the task. Kayak stores will be able to give you good advice on what equipment suits you best. When buying used gear from an individual, make

sure you understand what you are buying and that it fits your needs; to include the kind of boating you plan on doing and that the gear is the right size for you and that it's in decent condition.

7. RATING THE RIVERS

Rivers are rated on a 1-6 system. Class I -EASY moving water with some ripples and small waves. Few rocks

Class II - NOVICE straightforward rapids with clear channels, occasionally some maneuvering may be required

Class III - INTERMEDIATE rapids with irregular waves. Complex maneuvers in fast current and good boat control in tight passages is often required

Class IV - ADVANCED intense, powerful but predictable rapids requiring precise boat handling in turbulent water. Rapids may require "must make" moves upstream of dangerous hazards. Demands fast maneuvers under pressure.

Class V - EXPERT extremely long, obstructed, or violent rapids. Rapids may continue for long distances between pools or eddies. Swims are dangerous and rescue is difficult.

Class VI - EXTREME for teams of experts only. The consequences of errors may be severe and rescue may be impossible.

The flow of a river is measured in Cubic Feet per Second (CFS). A river flowing at 300 CFS may be a beginner level but the same river flowing at 1200 CFS may be an expert only river. Also, a higher CFS on a river does not automatically increase its difficulty. Each section of river will take on different characteristics depending on its flow. The message is know the river you are going to run and seek out as much information about it as you can before proceeding. Always make sure that the run you are about to try is within your skill set based on **BOTH** the class and flow (CFS). The bottom line is that we want you to be safe and have fun!

More thoughts on gear must-haves

Gear

It's said you only need the basic "5" which are the boat, paddle, sprayskirt, helmet, and PFD and at this time we'll assume you have those. In reality, though, you'll need more than that to paddle in Colorado's frigid waters and cooler air temps. **MUST HAVES** are in **bold font**:

Dry top. This is going to be a MUST as the rubber gaskets on the wrists and neck will keep the water outside. Don't try to substitute a splash top as you'll soaked the first time you roll or swim. Make sure you buy one that's large enough to accommodate other layers underneath. You can try looking for used dry tops but you'll have no guarantee the fabric will still be water resistant; make sure to check the rubber gaskets for dry rot (gaskets can be replaced but that's yet-another cost).

There are "shorty" dry tops, i.e. they have short sleeves and sometimes people wear them on warmer days (usually worn by experienced paddlers who are not likely to swim). However, I like my long sleeves and if I get too hot on the water I can always roll to cool off. Remember, it's easier to cool off in the heat than it is to get warm again if you swim and are under-dressed.

Fleece, neoprene, rash guard layers under the dry top: Consider wearing a long-sleeve "rash guard" top and/or a long sleeve fleece or neoprene top as insulating layers. For warm days some use a short sleeve rash guard but it's a good idea to always wear a fleece or neoprene long sleeve on top. The mantra to follow is *"Always dress for the swim, not the air temperature."*

Pants. Consider wearing neoprene pants, and perhaps splash pants over the neoprenes. Splash pants are pretty good for keeping neoprenes dry in the boat BUT if you swim, the water comes in through the ankles and you'll be soaked underneath. You might invest in a pair of dry pants but they're not absolutely necessary. We advise against wearing shorts, swim trunks or bathing suit bottom. Those won't keep your legs warm nor will they help protect against cuts and scrapes.

Shoes/booties. Look up the selection on water shoes at the CKS website, www.coloradokayak.com. It's ill-advised to wear Chacos or other sandals as those will get pulled off your feet when you swim or you might run the risk of getting your feet stuck in your boat. You don't want to wear something that's going to be heavy when it gets wet so water tennies made specifically for paddling are a good idea. They should go over your ankles and have very tough, grippy bottoms (a MUST for walking on wet rocks). Ask experienced paddlers what they wear.

Also, consider wearing neoprene water booties as your insulating layer in your water tennies if they are made up mesh.

Gloves or Poagies. You don't have to wear either but if keeping your hands warm and protected is a concern, consider either of these options. Poagies are neoprene "mittens" that attach to your paddle shaft and you slip your hands inside to keep them warm as you grip the shaft. They're effective for people who want warmer hands but must be able to feel the paddle shaft under their fingers. However, when you swim the Poagies remain attached to your paddle and it's your bare hands against the cold water and sharp rocks.

Others wear gloves instead and you can find neoprene or rubber gloves. While rubber gloves are not insulated, they're very grippy on the paddle AND, more importantly, they protect your hands during swims and while pushing through stickery, sharp river brush when you're walking to your boat. Neoprene gloves are good for insulation but can be slippery on the paddle. They're also thicker, and can make it harder for smaller hands to grip the paddle shaft. They don't guarantee your hands will stay warm but they ARE warmer than the rubber gloves.

Float bags. If you don't have these for your boat, GET THEM. Float bags are inflated in the stern of your boat and help keep the boat afloat during a swim as well as displace the water that would fill up your boat, making it an un-godly heavy thing for your support boaters to deal with.

Water bottle. You should always carry a water bottle in your boat. Consider carrying a bottle that has a handle you can fasten inside your boat with a caribbeaner so it won't float away if you swim.

Snacks. Beginner trips often take longer because of the number of swims involved. It's best to pack some energy snacks like energy bars, Cliff bars, etc., in a waterproof container in your boat. Since most Cliff and energy bars are packed in water-tight packaging, carry one or more in my PFD pockets. (Some float bags come equipped for you to stash small extras inside them, which saves you space.)

Some of us are known to carry a Five Hour energy drink or other small energy booster in our PFD's. Swimming is strenuous, can be exhausting, and even dangerous if you swim a lot. Having a boost of energy on-hand is a good idea.

River knife-It's a good idea to have one of these attached to the front of your PFD. You never know when you're going to have to cut something you're tangled up in, whether that's fishing line, part of a tree, a rafter's line, etc. The advice I was given was carry the largest one you can comfortably fit on the front of your PFD. Ask experienced paddlers for input on that before purchasing.

A towel, dry clothes and shoes. You'll want these in the car at the takeout so you can change and get warm while people run shuttle.

Ear plugs. A good idea to avoid damage to your eardrum by the cold water. Don't wear pool ear plugs as they'll interfere with your ability to hear on the water. Best to consider something like the Doc's Pro Plugs sold by CKS or other outlets. These plugs help keep water out despite having a small hole in them to allow you to hear better.

Extra caribbeaners, especially a small one to attach your car key inside your PFD if you end up being a shuttle driver. You never want to stash your car key in your boat. It's a good idea to keep a hide-a-key somewhere on your car but avoid common hiding areas if possible. (We'll discuss in class if someone reminds me.)

Waterproof sunblock and/or lip balm

Sunglasses (make sure the stems will fit comfortably under your helmet)

First Aid kit-you can buy these in waterproof boxes or make one of your own.

Aspirin, ibuprofen, acetaminophen, etc. Always best to keep a supply on-hand. You'll be happy if you do.

Allergy meds.

Elbow guards. Most people don't wear them but some do. Something to consider down the road.

Thermo cap/skull cap. This is a neoprene cap that is worn underneath the helmet to insulate your head. If you're going to wear one, make sure your helmet is big enough to accommodate that extra layer underneath.

Dry suit. This is quite an expensive investment (around \$1,000) that seem to be used mostly by experienced paddlers who paddle in the colder temps, usually after the season is over for the rest of us. There are plenty of other more affordable options.

Throw rope-Unless you've taken a Swift Water Rescue class and know how to throw a rope, do not carry one.

What's your physical condition?

Whitewater kayaking can be a strenuous sport and it's a good idea to be strong and flexible. If you haven't been hitting the gym, we strongly advise you consider doing so or incorporate some sort of strengthening program into your activities. This sport demands a lot out of your upper body, from your fingers through your arms and back as well as your core. Those boats aren't light and you'll need to carry your boat to and from the shuttle vehicles, not to mention if you need to climb over boulders with your boat during a portage around a rapid. Get those legs strong as well.

Also, work on cardio. Swimming in rapids is very exhausting and it's best to be in good cardio condition before-hand.

We also suggest using some time during the pool sessions swimming with your paddle. Ask about this at pool sessions.

Helpful websites:

www.pikespeakwhitewater.com

Gear:

www.gearonimosports.com (used and new, located in Colorado Springs)

www.coloradokayak.com (mostly new, located in Buena Vista)

www.confluencekayaks.com (new, located in Denver by the REI flagship)

www.edgskiandpaddle.com (located in Pueblo, mostly new, discount rental program for beginners)

www.mountainbuzz.com

www.craigslist.com

(Inspect any and all gear you purchase off the web very closely. If you aren't familiar, try to have an experienced paddler look over the prospective equipment before you buy.)