

All In Good Fun

New kayak polo sessions pack Echo Hollow pool.

Screech went the whistle. Paddle blades, taped around the edges with red duct tape, slashed through the water at Echo Hollow Pool as members of the two kayak polo teams sprinted toward the orange ball floating in the center.

A guy from the team that was already winning grabbed the ball first, but not in time — the other team's players were just a few feet away. One rammed the stern of his boat, trying to throw him off balance. Amidst the shouts of excitement and sprays of water, another person on the opposing team reached over and pushed him hard on the shoulder, tipping him over. Upside down with his head under water, he let go of the ball and flailed around, trying to regain hold of his paddle so he could right himself. For a second the ball bobbed in the water before another player grabbed it, ignoring the upside down kayaker nearby. With a shout, she threw the ball as hard as she could to a team member.

"That was a particularly rowdy night," said Aaron Rettig, a city employee who works for the River House Outdoor Program. He and three other kayak instructors from the city's River House Outdoor Program, Tom Powers, Dove Miller and Dave Zinn, organized the games, which started in January. "I like it because you can get a little rough, and the level of play rises to the ability level of the players. Sometimes it's pretty mellow, but if you get a bunch of advanced players, it gets fast and intense."

Kayak polo is similar to water polo, with five kayakers on each team. The objective is to get the ball into the other team's goal. Sometimes that means spirited competition and rough-and-tumble play.

But it's all in good fun, and players of all ages and ability levels are encouraged to participate. Players aren't allowed to tip over boaters who don't know how to roll

their boat upright when they get tipped over. And if someone without a roll flips over and ends up swimming in the pool, play is halted until that person gets back into his or her boat. Because it's in a controlled environment, the referees can moderate the intensity level of play and make sure everyone stays safe.



DAVE CONSTANTIN

A player throws the ball to a teammate just as a member of the opposing team pushes him over.

"I've been surprised by how many of the professional kayakers in Eugene have come out to play," Rettig said. "I think one of the coolest things is you'll have little Ben, who's 11 years old, out there paddling up against Lane Jacobs, a pro boater. I led a river [kayak] trip recently with three of the kids who played last month and they couldn't stop talking about it."

The River House Outdoor Program hosts the kayak polo games the third Tuesday of every month. The upcoming April 18 game will be the fourth time they've played. The March games were packed, with five players sitting on the bench waiting to get into the pool and play. "I've been really surprised by how fast it's gotten popular," said Rettig. And with so many players, they're even thinking of making it into a city league or a team sport. **EW**

The next kayak polo game is Tuesday, April 18 8:30-10 pm at Echo Hollow Pool, 1655 Echo Hollow Rd. Everyone is welcome to play, regardless of experience or ability level. PFDs (personal flotation devices) and helmets are required. It costs \$4 to play if you've got your own gear. For info call the River House Outdoor Program at 682-5329.

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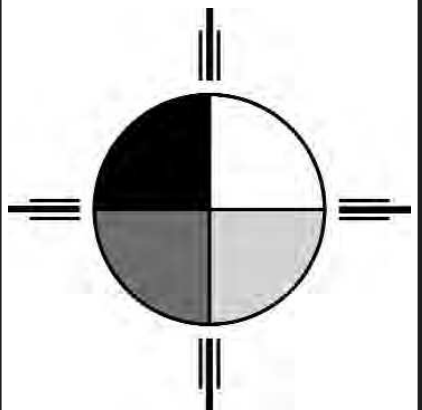
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