



ACROSS THE LAKE SWIM

Paddler Certification Guide

For Support and Safety Paddlers

Everything you need to know before completing the paddler certification quiz.

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1. Welcome

Thank you for volunteering as a paddler. Paddlers are one of the most important parts of every Across the Lake Swim event. Without you, swimmers do not get on the water. It is that simple.

This guide walks you through what is expected of paddlers, the difference between a support paddler and a safety paddler, how to handle common situations, and what to do when things do not go to plan. Read it through once before you take the certification quiz. Keep it handy in the days leading up to your event.

The quiz is short and the answers are all in this guide. Nothing tricky. The goal is to make sure every paddler shows up on the same page so swimmers stay safe and the event runs smoothly.

2. Why Paddlers Matter

Open water can feel big. For many swimmers, especially first-timers, the paddler floating next to them is the single biggest reason they feel calm enough to start, and confident enough to finish.

Your job is presence as much as it is paddling. A steady, attentive paddler turns a nervous swimmer into a finisher. That is the entire point.

In short

Paddlers are not lifeguards, and not coaches.

Paddlers are eyes on the water, a place to rest, and a way to call for help.

A calm paddler creates a calm swimmer.

3. Support Paddler vs. Safety Paddler

There are two paddler roles at every event. They look similar from shore, but the responsibilities are different. Know which one you signed up for.

Quick comparison

	Support Paddler	Safety Paddler
Assigned to	One specific swimmer	A zone or area of the course
Primary focus	Your swimmer's safety and pace	All swimmers in your zone
Position	Beside your swimmer	Where the Safety Director assigns you
Resting	Your swimmer may rest on your craft	Any swimmer may rest on your craft
Reports to	Safety Director and event team	Safety Director
Course pace	You match your swimmer	You hold your assigned zone

Support Paddler in plain terms

A support paddler is paired with one swimmer. You stay with that swimmer for the entire swim. You match their pace, watch them closely, and offer your craft if they need to rest. If something goes wrong, you signal for help and stay with your swimmer until safety arrives.

Safety Paddler in plain terms

A safety paddler covers a section of the course. You are not tied to one swimmer. You hold the position the Safety Director gives you, watch the swimmers passing through your zone, assist any swimmer who needs to rest, and call for help when needed. You are part of the event's safety net.

Both roles share the same core rule

Your job is to support and signal, not to rescue.

If a swimmer is in real trouble, you stay with them and signal for the safety boat or the Safety Director. You do not attempt to pull a panicked swimmer out of the water on your own.

4. Experience and Readiness

Before you take the quiz, be honest with yourself about your paddling experience. The questions below mirror what the certification asks. If any answer gives you pause, talk to the event team. We would rather match you to a role that fits than have you out there uncertain.

Open water experience

You should have paddled before on a lake, ocean, or another large body of open water. A pond or a calm river is not the same as a lake on a windy morning. Open water means real conditions: chop, sun glare, distance from shore, and other watercraft.

Wind and small waves

You will likely see wind and small waves on event day. Lakes change quickly in the morning. You do not need to be a whitewater paddler, but you should be at least somewhat comfortable holding your line, keeping your craft pointed where you want it, and staying steady when the water gets bumpy.

If the answer is "not comfortable," let the Safety Director know before the event so you can be paired with shorter or more sheltered sections.

Distance

You need to be able to paddle the full distance of the swim you are supporting, at swimmer pace, which is slower and more sustained than most recreational paddlers expect. A 2K swim can take an hour or longer for a slower swimmer. A 5K swim can take well over two hours. Plan accordingly.

Honest self-check

Have I paddled this distance, in similar water, in the last year?

Can I sit in or stand on my craft for the full duration without losing focus?

Do I know how to handle my craft if the wind picks up halfway through?

If the answer to any of these is no, talk to the event team.

5. Your Craft

Kayak, stand-up paddleboard, canoe, or something else, your craft has to do two basic jobs: keep you stable enough to assist, and offer a swimmer something to hold onto if they need to rest.

Kayak

- Sit-on-top kayaks are easiest for swimmer rests. Swimmers can grab the side or hold a deck line.
- Sit-inside kayaks work, but a tired swimmer can rock the boat. Keep your weight centered and your paddle ready to brace.
- Make sure you have a paddle leash or a way to secure your paddle if you need both hands.

Stand-up paddleboard (SUP)

- SUPs are excellent platforms. Swimmers can grab the rails or use the board as a floating rest.
- In wind or chop, dropping to your knees gives you better control and a lower profile.
- Always wear your leash. Always wear your PFD.

Canoe

- Canoes offer good stability and visibility but are slower to maneuver. Plan your positioning earlier than you would in a kayak.
- Two paddlers in one canoe is fine for supporting one swimmer, but coordinate roles before you launch.

Other craft

Anything else (rowing shell, dragon boat, prone paddleboard, surfski) must be approved by the Safety Director in advance. Speed and stability vary a lot, and not every craft is suitable for a swimmer to rest on.

The stability question

If your craft cannot safely support a swimmer holding onto it while they rest, it is not the right craft for this role.

Stability beats speed every time. A racing kayak that flips when a swimmer grabs the side is more dangerous than helpful.

If you are not sure, tell the Safety Director before the event. We will help you decide.

Required gear

- PFD (personal flotation device), worn the entire time on the water
- Whistle, attached to your PFD
- Paddler wristband or visible identifier provided by the event
- Drinking water for yourself
- Sun protection: hat, sunscreen, sunglasses with a strap

- Phone in a waterproof case if you have one (optional but helpful)

6. Your Role on the Water

Both support and safety paddlers share the same core mission: keep swimmers safe, help them when they struggle, and call for help when the situation needs more than you can offer alone.

As a Support Paddler

Your primary role is to stay with your swimmer, support them, and signal for help if needed. That is the answer to a question on the quiz, and it is the foundation of everything else.

You are not there to lead them, set their pace, or pull them out of the water. You are there to keep them company, watch closely, and be the resting point if they need one.

As a Safety Paddler

Your primary role is to stay with swimmers in your assigned zone, support them, and signal for help if needed. Same core principle, broader area.

You are not there to lead, set pace, or attempt rescues. You watch your area, assist anyone who needs to rest or reorient, and call in the safety boat when a swimmer needs more help than a rest break.

The one-sentence version

Stay with your swimmer (or your zone). Support them. Signal for help if needed.
That is the job. Everything else in this guide flows from that.

7. Positioning and Communication

Where to position yourself: Support Paddler

Stay beside your swimmer. Not in front, not behind, beside. Close enough that you can speak to them without shouting, far enough that you are not in their stroke.

As a general rule, stay on the side away from the main pack so your swimmer is not boxed in between you and other swimmers. Adjust based on sun position so you are visible and not in their breathing-side glare.

Where to position yourself: Safety Paddler

Position where the Safety Director assigns you. That is the answer. Your zone exists because the safety team has thought about coverage across the entire course. Holding your position is more useful than wandering to a spot that looks busier.

Reading your swimmer

- Are they breathing evenly?
- Are they sighting forward, or veering off course?
- Has their stroke rate slowed dramatically or become uneven?
- Are they looking at you more often than at the course?

Any of these signs means it is time to check in. Pull alongside, say their name, ask how they are doing. Most of the time they will say they are fine and keep going. That is success.

Signaling for help

If you need the safety boat or the Safety Director, raise one paddle straight up in the air and hold it there. Use your whistle. Three short blasts is the standard call for help. Keep signaling until you are acknowledged.

If your swimmer is in distress and you cannot leave them, do not leave them. Keep signaling. Help will come.

8. When a Swimmer Gets Tired

Fatigue is the most common issue you will see. Most swimmers who get tired do not need rescue. They need a minute, a sip of water, and a quiet word.

If your swimmer (or a swimmer in your zone) is tired

They are allowed to hold onto your craft to rest. This is the answer to the quiz question, and it is also the reason your craft needs the stability to support a resting swimmer.

Resting on your craft is not the same as receiving forward assistance. A swimmer may hold on, breathe, drink, talk to you, and gather themselves. They may not be towed, pushed, or pulled forward. When they are ready, they let go and resume swimming.

If they cannot continue after resting

Stay with them and signal for safety assistance. That is the answer to the next quiz question, and it is the right call every time.

Do not try to tow them to the finish. Do not leave them to find help. Do not tell them to push on if they have already said they cannot. Stay, signal, and wait.

The two rules that cover most situations

Tired swimmers may rest on your craft.

Swimmers who cannot continue after resting get the safety boat. You stay with them and signal.

Anxious swimmers

Watch the white caps. Swimmers wearing a white cap have told us at registration that they feel somewhat anxious about the swim. They are not in trouble, they have just flagged themselves so we can keep a closer eye. If a white cap passes through your zone, or is the swimmer you are assigned to, expect to check in a little more often and offer reassurance a little earlier than you might otherwise.

Some swimmers panic in the middle of the lake. The water suddenly feels too deep, too cold, too far from shore. You may see fast breathing, wide eyes, or someone clinging hard to your boat.

Your job is calm. Slow your voice. Tell them to hold onto the craft and breathe. Ask their name. Ask what distance they are doing. Talking about something concrete brings most people back from a panic spike within a minute or two.

If the panic does not pass, signal for safety assistance. There is no shame in pulling someone off the course. Better a finished season than a forced finish.

9. Hazards, Conditions, and Calm Decision-Making

Most events run without incident. The events that do not are usually weather-driven. Stay alert to changing conditions and trust the event team's calls.

Wind and chop

Lake wind picks up fast, especially mid-morning. If conditions shift, the Safety Director may shorten the course, redirect swimmers, or pull the field. Listen for whistle signals, radio calls, or instructions from the safety boat. Pass instructions along to the swimmers near you.

Sun and heat

You will be exposed for hours. Hydrate before you launch. Wear sun protection. Watch for swimmers showing signs of overheating: confusion, slurred speech, sudden weakness. Treat any of these as a call for safety assistance.

Cold water

Early-season swims and high-elevation lakes can be cold even in summer. Watch for swimmers shivering hard, struggling to speak clearly, or going quiet after being chatty. Cold water saps strength faster than swimmers expect. When in doubt, call the safety boat.

Other watercraft

Recreational boats, jet skis, and paddlers who are not part of the event sometimes wander into the course. If you see one approaching, get visible. Raise your paddle. The course is marked, but not every operator is paying attention.

Water quality

The event team monitors water conditions before the event. If you see something unusual on event day, a sheen, an unusual smell, or a thick algal bloom, tell the Safety Director. Do not assume someone else has already reported it.

10. What Is Not Allowed

Most of the rules are common sense. A few are worth calling out directly because they show up on the quiz and they matter on the water.

You may not block or interfere

Blocking or interfering with safety boats, other paddlers, or swimmers is not allowed. This is the quiz answer, and it is the only one of these options that is actually prohibited. Staying beside your swimmer, letting them rest on your craft, and watching them closely are all things you should be doing.

In practice, interference usually looks like crowding a safety boat trying to reach a swimmer, cutting across another paddler's swimmer, or paddling through a pack of swimmers in a way that disrupts their line. None of it is intentional. Just stay aware.

You may not perform rescues

You are not a lifeguard. You are not trained for in-water rescue, and even if you are, this is not the role for it. A panicked swimmer can pull a paddler off their craft and turn one problem into two. Stay on your craft. Offer the craft as a rest point. Signal for help.

You may not lead the swimmer or set their pace

Your swimmer chose this distance. Let them swim it their way. Paddling ahead to pull them along is not your job, and it can actually make a tired swimmer push past a sensible stopping point.

11. Identification and Course Access

Every certified paddler receives a wristband or visible identifier at event check-in. Wear it for the entire time you are on the water.

If you are on the course without your paddler wristband or identifier, you may be treated as a recreational paddler and asked to leave the course. The safety team uses these identifiers to know at a glance who is supposed to be where. Without yours, you slow them down and create confusion.

If you lose your wristband, tell event staff immediately and they will reissue.

12. Self-Certification Checklist

Before you sign the certification, confirm you can honestly check every box below. The certification asks you to confirm all five of these in a single statement.

- I can safely control my craft in open water conditions.
- I can support a swimmer resting on my craft.
- I understand my role is to support and signal, not perform rescues.
- I have read and understand the paddler guidelines for this event.
- I will follow all instructions from the Safety Director, event team, and safety personnel.
- I am comfortable staying calm and assisting a swimmer if they become anxious or fatigued.

If anything on this list gives you pause, do not certify yet.

Reach out to the event team. We will help you figure out the right role, or get you the information you need.

We would rather take an extra week than have a paddler on the water who is not ready.

Thank you for paddling with us

Paddlers play an important role in every Across the Lake Swim event. Without you, swimmers do not get on the water. You are the calm presence beside them, the rest point when they need one, and the eyes that catch trouble before it becomes a problem. We are grateful you are part of this.

If you have any questions whatsoever about this guide, your role, your event, or anything else, please reach out. We would much rather answer a question early than have you wondering on event day.

Email us anytime at support@acrossthelakeswim.com.

Across the Lake Swim

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