

Rescue Tips & Teaching Points for Unrestrained Drivers in Open Cockpit Boat Racing

The following suggestions, recommendations, and reminders have been gathered from the experience of men and women with many years in boat racing rescue. They are not, however, intended to replace or contradict current medical or emergency first aid protocols.

1. Remember that you will NOT be working on dry land. Reaching the person you are trying to help will almost certainly involve getting wet. Dress accordingly

2. Although not a requirement, all personnel on the rescue boat should be able to swim. PFDs (Personal Flotation Devices, aka life jackets) are required for each person on the rescue craft and should be worn at all times.

3. Decide who on the rescue craft will be designated to go INTO the water if necessary. That person should be a capable swimmer.

4. Even if a driver gives the OK signal with his or her arms extended and hands clasped overhead, they may still be in trouble. Take time for a brief triage before bringing the driver out of the water. Discourage drivers from pulling themselves on to the rescue craft unaided. Tell them you will get them out of the water.

5. Because a driver in the water has a very low profile, your visual cues as to their condition may be very limited until you get close to them. As you approach, use the condition of the driver's helmet as an initial indicator of the situation. If the helmet or face shield are missing or if the helmet show cracks or scarring or paint color from another boat, be prepared for head trauma or neck injuries. Make physical contact and secure a firm hold on the driver as soon as possible.

6. Adrenalin and cold water will mask many injuries. Do not immediately take a driver's word that they are OK. Unless it is obvious the driver needs to come out of the water right away, take time to question the driver about their condition as a preliminary triage. Ask them more than once if they are OK. Get them face to face and ask them their name. Knowing their name and using it to question or instruct them can help calm an injured or confused driver and will help determine their LOC (Level of Consciousness).

7. If you have reason to believe a driver has been run over by another boat, prepare for possible serious cuts and laceration. The protective jackets and pants commonly called "Cut Suits" provide a great deal of protection but they cannot completely stop a propeller or turn fin from cutting through and causing injury. Anticipate chest injuries such as fractured ribs or collapsed lungs (pneumo-thorax) resulting from blunt force trauma. Other common injuries you may encounter are fractures, sprains, dislocations and bruising. Do not rule out concussion. Simply put prepare for the worst.

8. Injuries to the legs and feet are typical but may not be immediately evident. Getting the driver to a horizontal position in the water, bringing the legs and feet to or near the surface will allow you to visually check for injuries to the lower extremities. Having a firm hold on the driver will make it easier to maneuver him or her into a better position for visual examination.

9. Knowing ahead of time how to get the life jacket and driving suits off efficiently will pay off when you are treating an injured driver, and time is of the essence! Make sure appropriate shears (scissors) for cutting Kevlar or Spectra fabric are available on the rescue boat. It may be necessary to cut away protective clothing or straps to access an injury. The driving suit is resistant to cutting and normal scissors can be ineffective. Paramedic shears (also called trauma shears), seatbelt cutters, or boot cutter are viable options. Helmets typically stay on unless there is an airway compromise or CPR is needed. Try to expose the chest and abdomen. Access will help medical personnel monitor vital signs. A driver's condition can change quickly. Assess and reassess all the way to the beach.

10. Once a race has started, communications with other rescue craft, the referee, or the pits may be difficult due to noise. Agree on the coordination plan before the race starts. After a crash, you must take into account the other racers on the course and the possibility of wakes from the rescue boat causing further problems. Ensure that the course is clear, or that at least the other racers are aware that you are responding to a crash. There may be occasions when you arrive at crash site with race boats still on the course. Try to position the rescue craft between the oncoming racers and any people in the water. Try to be as visible as possible.

As a final point, Patricia Farr, EMT, offers a technique she used when working on a rescue boat. Adapting a strategy she learned as a flight attendant, Pat reminded herself just where she was - on a small boat in the middle of a race course - and that an accident was to be expected. Those thoughts let her focus on the mental check list that would guide her actions in an emergency.