



PORTLAND BRIDGE SWIM

2026 Escort Paddler Tips

PFDs and Equipment: Paddlers are REQUIRED to wear their PFD. Each vessel must have a second PFD stored within quick reach in case of a swimmer emergency. If a paddler is seen not wearing their PFD, their swimmer may be disqualified and pulled from the race.

Other helpful equipment:

- Butt cushion
- Feed rope (10-20 ft long), clips on both ends (thick rope recommended to prevent tangles)
- Watch or timer
- Bungee clipped cord to add clippable spots to your kayak
- Hydration/nutrition for the kayaker (hydration bladder/backpack recommended to avoid searching for water bottles)
- Mylar blanket
- Extra anti-chafe
- Sunblock
- Extra rain/warmth layer
- Marine radio
- Thermos of warm water
- Insulated cooler that has “fast access” flap to reach feed bottles

Kayak position: Stay out of the middle of the river, that's where the heaviest boat traffic is. Figure out which side the swimmer prefers to have you on, and how close they want you. You should be eye-to-eye with your swimmer, or even slightly behind their eyeline so they're able to see you each time they breathe to that side, and you're able to evaluate their condition and communicate with the swimmer. The vessel should not be more than 20 feet away from the swimmer at any time. The swimmer cannot be directly behind the vessel unless the race director has given permission (typically reserved for para athletes or swimmers using butterfly stroke).



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Useful hand signals: Decide on how the paddler will visually cue their swimmer: “Come closer”, “go farther away”, “it’s time to eat”, “stop”, “keep going, I have to pee really quick”, and “EMERGENCY STOP”.

Attitude: Your swimmer is experiencing sensory deprivation. They will be on alert and watching you for your reactions to things. We recommend smiling and being reassuring - you’re happy to be paddling, even if you’re getting pelted with hail.

Your swimmer is always doing a great job! Your swimmer needs to feel like you’re making progress. Ask what they want for encouragement, ask if they want to know where they are, how close to the finish, etc.

Stroke rhythm: Learn your swimmer’s stroke rhythm. How many strokes per breath? Notice if it changes significantly, as it can be an early warning of hypothermia or SIPE.

When you do your stuff: When your swimmer looks at you, put on your professional persona/like everything is going really well - make eye-contact, smile, paddle, etc. Once your swimmer isn’t looking at you, feel free to scratch your butt, look at that interesting tree, check the location of that boat you hear or paddle backwards to keep from getting ahead of the swimmer. But when that 6th stroke comes around, it’s showtime!

Stroke Rate & appearance: It’s important to check the stroke rate. Wear a watch, and count your swimmer’s strokes for a minute. Do it maybe every half hour, so you get a sense of what’s normal for your swimmer. Keep an eye on it, because changes could mean trouble. Aim for about 15 minutes after a feeding, because energy levels change before and after feedings.

Feeding: Ask your swimmer how often and how they need to be fed. You’ll need to stop the swimmer for feedings. Secure all feed containers/bottles to ensure nothing is left in the river. Have a plan to retrieve feed containers if there’s wind or frisky water - we recommend using a long (15-20 ft long) feed rope with clips on both sides. Clip one side to the kayak and the other end to a feed container so if the weather isn’t cooperating, you can paddle to stay in place and not pull your swimmer in any direction while they’re feeding. You can also begin paddling with the swimmer and let the feed containers drag



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until you have a few seconds to pull the containers in.

Urination: Depending on anatomy, different urinary devices can be used to avoid peeing in a kayak, like car wash sponges, GoGirl funnels, large bottles, etc. Most of the kayaks we rent through our event are sit-inside kayaks, so there's no way to flush urine out mid-race.

Trouble: You need to watch for hypothermia and/or hyperthermia, depending on conditions. Watch for fatigue, injury, mental exhaustion, health trouble, etc. WATCH THE STROKE. The rate may change, the look may change. If anything worries you, stop your swimmer and check on how they are doing, and of course keep an eye on how much sense they are making when you talk. Signal to a race official if you need any kind of help.

**PUT YOUR PADDLE STRAIGHT UP IN THE AIR TO SIGNAL
FOR HELP & COMMUNICATE LOUDLY AND OFTEN TO
ENSURE THE SAFETY TEAM KNOWS WHERE TO FIND
YOU.**