



## Strings Attached: MAKING YOUR TOW SYSTEM WORK FOR YOU

Text and Photos by Neil Schulman

1. To quickly move a person, rescue or boat out of a dangerous situation. Think of a rescue operation drifting towards the rocks or breaking surf. Your tow needs to be fast, simple, and something you can get out of quickly so you don't become another victim.

2. To get someone from A to B. It could be someone who can't keep up, can't control his kayak in the wind, gets injured or seasick. In this case, you may find yourself towing for miles, through varied conditions. The towee will need both propulsion and, if he's exhausted, injured, or seasick, another paddler to raft up and help him stay upright.

It's not all about which tow system you use. The easiest way to move another boat is often a short push or contact tow, with no futzing with lines and clips—just someone rafting up and pushing the other kayak where it needs to go. But sometimes you need to use a tow system. Whatever your tow rig, you'll need to practice with it until you can get that line unclipped with heavy gloves on without looking or losing your paddle.

### What Kind?

Most systems fall into two categories: tow belts and boat-mounted tows.

### Tow Belts

There are a wide variety of tow belts available, made by Northwater, Expedition Essentials, and Valley, among others. They are worn loosely around the waist and have a quick-release buckle and floating line.

The main advantage of a waist tow is quick deployment and re-stuffing. And since it will swing around your waist when you change direction, you can tow backward easily, without becoming wrapped in line. This can be key in rough water, where you want to be able to go in, get someone out of trouble, and get out as fast as possible—which often means in reverse. And you can use a waist tow with any kayak you happen to be paddling.



The Northwater waist tow with my preferred setup: carabiner and quickdraw, and a float and clip-on loop added to the belt.

The downsides are that towing from the body can exert a lot of force on your back and torso, especially if you're a relatively small person. And the added bulk of wearing a tow belt in addition to spray skirt, double-tunnel drysuit, and PFD can restrict freedom of motion.

### Deck Tows

Towing from a fitting attached to the rear deck of the kayak is very popular among British kayakers. A towline runs through a bullseye and cleat on the deck behind the cockpit, with the line held in a bag (but not attached to it). To release the line in an emergency, the paddler just pulls the line free of the cleat.

When A.J. wet-exits, he somehow gets separated from his boat. So I track it down and go to attach my towline. But with my thick neoprene gloves I have trouble freeing the small clip at the end of the line from the bag around my waist. A.J.'s kayak and I drift farther toward the rocks...

Fortunately, we're just practicing, and there are other people around. A.J. is reunited with his boat with ease. But it was obvious: I couldn't deploy my towline quickly enough.

Of all the kit sea kayakers lug around, tow systems are perhaps the most befuddling. Second only to the skeg-versus-rudder holy wars, tow systems generate the most ongoing debates among experienced paddlers. The reason is that there's no perfect system, and they all take tinkering to make them work for you.

## THE BIG QUESTIONS: WHY? AND WHAT KIND?

### Why?

Before we analyze how you can carry a bunch of rope around, let's remind ourselves why we carry a tow system anyway. There are two main reasons you'll be towing someone.



Deck tow deployed. The line is daisy-chained for a short tow, but can be lengthened for a longer distance.

The appeal of deck tows is reduced torque on the body, and there's no bulk around the waist.

The main downside is that it's more difficult to deploy, since you have to reach behind you to unclip the end, which can be touchy in nasty water. It's also more difficult to re-stuff and re-deploy the line quickly. Deck-based tows require more awareness when back-towing, since the rope will run next to your torso. And you can only use these tows on boats with hardware installed, which means you can't use it with other boats if you switch. Knoydart and Northwater, among others, make deck-based tow systems.

Northwater has recently come out with a hybrid—a waist tow that can be switched to a deck tow. But it doesn't meet my preferences for the next category, which is line length.

## SHORT OR LONG?

Tows tend to come in lengths of roughly either 30 or 50 feet. Each has its advocates and detractors. A shorter line means you get tension on it more quickly, which means you start moving the victim more quickly, which can be critical in tight spots. Less line also means less bulk.

On the other hand, a long tow gives you more distance between you and the victim—which can prevent collisions in the yo-yoing that can happen in big following seas. The last thing you want is your victim's kayak surfing into you.

You can also vary the length by taking a long line and adding a metal clip and daisy-chaining the line to a shorter length. Some systems have a clip inside the bag, or you can add one—release it, and the daisy chain unravels when the end is under tension. I use a 50 foot line on both my deck and belt systems, daisy chained to about 30 feet so I can move someone quickly. I figure that if I'm going to need the 50 foot line for a long tow, I will probably be able to raft up to unclip the second clip to release the rest of the line. And the more line in the water, the more I can get tangled.

## FLOATS AND CLIPS

The clips on your tow system also involve tradeoffs. The bigger the clip on your tow system, the easier it is to manipulate with one gloved hand. But the bigger it is, the more likely it is to catch on someone's deck lines or gear stowed on deck. I've tried lots of variations on my end clip, but I find I prefer a standard-sized bent-gate carabiner attached to a quick draw. I'd rather have the speed on the attachment side—seconds will be less critical when I disengage.



Deck tow behind the cockpit, with bullseye (left) and quick-release camcleat.

Floats also involve similar tradeoffs. I want every part of my tow system to float, so I don't end up with either the clip or bag sinking in current and catching on something underwater. But floats at the clip-in end of the line also catch on deck gear. I've retied the knot on both my systems so the float is about two feet from the clip—giving room to clip into two kayaks without entangling the float. Some belt bags come with flotation sewn into the bag, and sometimes you have to add it.

## OTHER SYSTEMS

There are a couple of other oddball systems out there. I carry a "contact tow," a short length of bungee line with a clip that I can use to hold two boats together in a raft for a long period of

time and that can double as a paddle leash in rescues. I seldom use it.

Whitewater kayakers tend to use rescue harnesses build into their PFDs, which can hold tethers of varying lengths. I'm not a fan of these systems for sea kayaking, since the force rides much higher on your body.

There are also coaming-mounted tow systems, which don't require deck hardware. I much prefer the deck-mount.

## FIVE TIPS TO HAPPY TOWS

No matter what tow system you use, there are a few keys to using it well.

1. Know the limitations. Every tow system has them, and the key is understanding where your system is good and where it's awkward. And one of the ways you figure this out is to...
2. Practice. Try towing with different setups, in rough and calm water, long and short distances, backwards and forwards. See what works for you. Everyone thinks their system is the best—find out for yourself.
3. Clip, unclip, stuff, re-stuff. You want the motions of clipping in and out of a tow, and deploying, stuffing, and redeploying your line to be muscle memory.
4. Modify. It seems absurd to buy a tow system for anywhere between \$60 and \$125, and then have to modify it—change out the clip, add flotation, and so on. When I got my waist tow, there was no flotation in the bag—so I added some, and then the bag wouldn't close, so then I had to add more Velcro. Annoying as it is to have to modify "state of the art" gear, the reality is that I haven't found a tow system yet that I haven't had to customize.
5. Keep a clean deck. Anytime you tow, you run the risk of tangled line. Keeping a clean deck will minimize the chances of this, as well as make your kayak perform better. I'm a stickler about keeping my rear deck clean, and all I'll keep on my front deck is a chart and a spare paddle.

Next time you're out on the water, try to attach your towline to the back toggle of one of your buddies while they're not paying attention. Then they have to tow you. If they refuse, at least you've had some practice clipping in.

Neil Schulman lives in Portland, Oregon, where he does environmental work, kayaks, writes, and photographs, and uses his tow system to hang laundry. 🚣

Live the adventure

**SALUS**

www.salusmarine.com

"We know our stuff"

**Ocean River sports**  
getting you out there since 1981

A Proud "on water" Point 65 North dealer

**POINT 65°N**  
Kayaks SWEDEN

1824 STORE STREET VICTORIA, BC. PH 250.381.4233 • TOLL FREE 1 800 909 4233

www.oceanriver.com

**Steveston** est. 1941  
**MARINE & HARDWARE**

www.stevestonmarine.com  
1.800.656.5559

**C-Strobe Lifejacket Light**

- Life preserver signaling emergency strobe.
- Waterproof and corrosion resistant. Slim, lightweight.
- Comes with velcro strap. Operates more than eight hours on 2 AA alkaline or lithium batteries.

#048807 **Sale \$32<sup>99</sup>**

**GARMIN**

WAAS enabled BlueChart compatible

**GPSMAP 76 CSx**

- Also includes electronic compass, barometric altimeter and automatic pressure trend recording
- Turn-by-turn routing capability.
- Waterproof, rugged housing
- Considered the mainstay among serious outdoor enthusiasts

#602371 Reg. \$549<sup>99</sup>  
**Sale \$449<sup>99</sup>**

**ICOM**

**IC-M34 VHF handheld**

- World's first 5W VHF handheld marine transceiver that floats
- Rugged waterproof body
- Easy to use, easy to hold
- Optional speaker-microphone, HM-165
- Li-Ion battery and charged standard
- Optional battery case for using with alkaline cells

#004163 Reg. \$229<sup>99</sup>  
**Sale \$174<sup>99</sup>**

Floating Handheld  
NEW

**ADVANCED ELEMENTS**  
CUTTING EDGE INFLATABLE KAYAKS  
AdvancedFrame Kayak

- A hybrid of a folding frame kayak and inflatable kayak
- Aluminum ribs bow & stern
- Stern skeg allows for trackability
- Durable 3-layer construction helps resist punctures
- Plenty of on-board storage for extended trips
- Includes carrying Duffel Bag, folding seat, Repair Kit

AE1012 #000535 **Store Special**

**B521 SPREE™ 1 PERSON INFLATABLE KAYAK**

**STEARNS**

- Lightweight & Rugged
- Easy to inflate and deflate, three chamber design for added safety
- The redesigned bow and stern allow easier entry and exit
- Kayaks come with a heavy-duty carry bag that the kayak easily rolls up and fits into

#640329 Reg. \$399<sup>99</sup> **Sale \$299<sup>99</sup>**  
with pump and paddles **\$329<sup>99</sup>**

**STEVESTON MARINE carries everything you need like pumps, paddles, compass fittings etc to outfit your kayak and more!**