

Clothing for the canoeist

Clothing is always a problem in a water based sport, and canoeing and kayaking make special demands on your body, so it is important that clothing should protect the body yet not interfere with its movements during any paddling or related action.

The equipment you need depends on the type of craft you are paddling, the weather conditions, and your personal resistance to the cold. Conditions are seldom constant during the day, temperatures rise and fall; wind force and direction change; sunshine varies in intensity and direction. The Paddlers activity also varies during the course of a day of paddling. Competition canoeists warm up, race, then cool down. Recreational canoeists paddle at varying speeds and may stop to rest, eat or enjoy the scenery. Thus, basic clothing sense means suiting clothing to the varying needs of insulation required by changes in weather, activity and location. In the warmest conditions, a pair of shorts, a tee-shirt top and some form of footwear will prove suitable. In the cold the problem of body insulation assumes greater importance and in these conditions you will require three basic layers of clothing: 1. Base layer (thermal tops) 2. An insulating layer (pile fibre covering) 3. A water / wind proof layer (canoe cag)

Better insulation can come from several layers of garments rather than a single layer of the same total thickness. This is because more layers of air are trapped in and between thin layers than in one thick layer. Multiple layers allow the use of special purpose garments, each fulfilling a particular clothing need. If it is next to the skin it's role is to keep away sweat. Mid layers trap warm air, and outer layers keep the elements at bay. A whole host of firms now produce Base layer garments known as "thermal wear" from man-made polyfibres. Worn on the torso and/or legs this needs to be thin, close fitting, comfortable and are designed to transport perspiration outwards, away from the skin. The intermediate layer needs to be thicker than the base hence "fibrepile" or "fleece", which are generally a "fur" fabric made from polyester nylon or acrylic. This fabric warms quickly by trapping air to provide a thermal barrier, is warm when damp/wet and is available in different thicknesses for use in different layers, but is not windproof. As paddling can often be a wet sport the Water/Windproof layer (the shell) will protect the insulation layer from the majority of external moisture, and counteract the wind-chill effect. Most recently, the use of Gore-Tex and other similar fabrics has helped to reduce the condensation problems found when using dry cags. These breathable materials seems to work best, when kept clean and in generally good condition, not always possible in our sport. Canoe cags are specially cut and shaped "paddling jackets". These are made from coated backed nylon and have close fitting wrist and neck seals to stop water penetration. In recent years with the event of modern materials the "dry suit" or "dry cagoule" have become very popular, especially amongst those who have a tendency of getting wet. The "dry suit" which is made from a thin neoprene backed nylon is worn over clothing of wool or fibrepile for warmth. The suit seals at the ankles, wrist and neck to prevent water entering. Similarly, the "dry cagoule" is a canoeing smock which seals at the wrists, neck and waist and is an ideal top for winter use as this gives you the best chance of staying warm and dry. The choice of footwear is a matter of personal preference.

For most paddling situations a pair of purpose made wetsuit boots or shoes or a pair of neoprene socks protected by sandals are a good choice. Most water sport shoes and boots are designed to give good grip and protection out of the boat but comfort inside it. If wearing trainers or other shoes any loose laces should be tucked well out of the way, so they cannot snag on foot rests etc. The greatest heat loss from the body occurs through the head therefore some form of head insulation is highly desirable. Anything from a woolly hat to a superthin insulating skull cap to be worn under a helmet will greatly improve your comfort through the day. Likewise in the strong sunshine a hat with a wide brim is useful to protect the head and back of the neck from strong ultra-violet rays. For those who canoe in every condition the hands will stay warm if the rest of the body is warm. For kayakers and one sided canoe paddlers the "Pogie" will ensure warm hands. These are cuff-like gauntlets made from neoprene or waterproof nylon that attach around the shaft of the paddle. The paddler places their hands into the Pogie and grips the shaft in the oversized mitt. In the coldest of conditions Pogies are indispensable. Some paddlers who are not comfortable with the feeling of being attached to the blade, use wet suit gloves to keep their hands warm. Some canoeists prefer to wear a neoprene wet suit to combat loss of body heat. These are capable of replacing both the insulating layer and the outer layer. The sleeveless "long John" being the most popular, although warm when wet, does tend to offer some resistance to upper body movement due to its shape and cut, especially around the chest and shoulder areas. One advantage of a wet suit is it offers basic protection to the canoeist while swimming, the foam layer helps take knocks from underwater obstructions etc. In addition, because it traps air, extra floatation is offered. So; if you are likely to swim or spend time in the water, rescuing, teaching or portaging a wet suit may be your best choice.

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