

Footwear

Introduction

I lead a lot of Swiftwater Rescue & Kayaking classes & trips. A suitable helmet & PFD that fits is crucial of course but how many paddlers think of their footwear as being essential to their safety on the river? I've seen paddlers in bare feet, sandals, and some other footwear that provide no protection should they need to leave their boats – remember, everyone is in between swims. Even if you have a 100% roll, can you portage around an unsafe rapid or make rescue someone else? Let's list the challenges:

- Broken Glass, Fish Hooks, Reinforcement Bar
- Sharp Rocks
- Snag on roots
- Briars
- Sharp Sticks
- Rope or webbing underwater

Footwear Requirements

Let's think about the perfect shoe characteristics:

- Fit – What good is a shoe if it comes off in a swim?
- Sturdy – Paddling is rough on shoes. Many water shoes fall apart in less than one season and that can get expensive.
- Thick Soles – A sharp stick in the ground can easily puncture neoprene booties or shoes with thin flexible soles.
- Sticky – We often walk on wet surfaces and some shoes make you feel like you are walking on ice – yikes! When we slip, we often fall hard causing injuries.
- Good Drainage – When we go for a dunk, the shoe fills with water making it easy prey for slipping off.
- Snag Proof – Who knows what lies below the surface. If your shoe snags you become foot entrapped with potentially deadly consequences.

Rough History

I started boating in 1979, a very long time ago. Back then, the best you could find were flexible rubber soles and a neoprene upper.



Some rubber soles had a gummy feel to them and did reasonably well when walking on moistened rocks. They didn't protect very well against natural punctures, so you needed to be careful on where you took each step. NRS came out with a variety of river boots with a stiffer sole but most of those were very slippery on rocks based on my experience.

Some years later, Keen came out with a stiff and very thin segmented sole. The sole gave pretty good protection against punctures and easily fit in playboats (an issue for people with large feet). They held up well but didn't work out well on slippery rocks. These are the best pool shoes in my opinion. Unfortunately, Keen no longer sells them.

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The first great shoe for our sport was the 5-10 Tennie. These provided great support and came with Stealth Rubber soles – still the best sole in the industry. Earlier models used water-based contact cement which caused them to delaminate (Astral ran into the same issue early on).



This can be fixed with Weldwood Oil Based Contact Cement.

Another key design decision was very light uppers. This really is the only way to go for ankle high boots. Heavier uppers get waterlogged and your feet will rip the upper from the sole in short order.



Later, Astral joined the shoe business with the classic Astral Brewer. They put a great deal of thought in this model. They started with Stealth Rubber, same as 5-10. Their soles are very thick, nothing is getting through them. They used a low top design avoiding the all too common shearing forces on high tops. They baked in the design lots of drainage. Unfortunately, 5-10 was sold to Adidas and they no longer sell Stealth Rubber to others. Their new G Rubber is OK but not nearly as sticky as 5-10 Stealth Rubber. Astral has amazing customer service, they really stand behind their products. Astral has a wide variety of styles but I would stay with their oldest model the Brewer as it holds up far longer than any of their other models. The Ressler has a heavy upper that for me sheared off in just one usage.



5-10 came out with the Canyoneer, great concept – basically a sturdy hiking boot with the best sole in the business. You will feel invincible wearing these. Unfortunately, the heavy uppers shear off the soles in just a few months of usage – stick with the far less expensive and durable Tennies.



NRS made some shoes with felt soles. These really worked great, stuck like glue on wet slippery rocks and are puncture resistant. Didymo (AKA: Rock Snot) became prevalent and felt soles are banned on any streams of significant fishing value. That said, always wash and dry your gear after each river

Footwear

weekend.



Alternatives

Two major issues some paddlers have:

- Big Feet – Size 12 or larger. These are very difficult to fit in low volmes boats like playboats. Good luck fitting in your boat with a big heavy boot like the 5-10 Canyoneer. Even tennis shoes won't fit. I suggest as an alternative – Kevlar reinforced socks:



<https://www.amazon.com/Stohlquist-Waterware-5565-Watermoccasin-Sock/dp/B004ZR9E0G>

You can add ribs with Shoe Goo to greatly increase durability (and stickyness).



- Budget – When starting, it takes time to accumulate decent gear. Regular tennis shoes will provide good foot protection and are washable.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Look at the ideal characteristics for footwear above, pay special attention to a nice snug fit. Most Instructors and many trip leaders will insist that you wear shoes – I know I do. By the way, carrying shoes inside the boat and going barefoot is simply asking for an injury. Don't wear Sandals – they are a death trap! Inspect and replace worn shoes when needed, preferably late in the Fall when most outfitters have exceptional sales. For the best performance, I'd stick with either the Astral Brewer or the 5-10 Tennie until something better comes along. Wash your shoes after each weekend to avoid transporting invasive to our pristine streams – simple detergent works fine.