

DRY SUITS, NECK RINGS, *and* CINCO DE MAYO

by Larry Kline

NO WAY, JOSE

You probably read Harv's article on dry suits and his thoughts on hard core paddling in winter conditions. And many of you said, "NO WAY, JOSE I don't need a drysuit".

About the time I read his article I saw a TV spot on hiking the canyons of Zion using a dry suit to wade through cold water pools and then my mind began to ponder the possibilities of using a dry suit in multi sport endeavors.

As a result, I too have become aware of the advantages of a dry suit for kayaking during winter and also during the more sublime times of the year.

However, I did not want a full-body drysuit partly because of the expense but mostly for lack of versatility. You can wear both top and bottom in cold situations and the top only in warmer conditions. And most importantly, you don't have to take off all your gear to do your business - either we gentlemen or you ladies. You just drop *trou*, et voila.

I recently purchased a dry suit top and separate dry pants. I decided on the Stohlquist models that have a Velcro-like 6-inch band at the waist. This and an inner-body sleeve on the drytop provide for a reasonable amount of water sealing capacity - say 98%. Not perfect, but better than a simple drawstring like Kokatat dry-tops or those of other manufacturers. I also pondered whether to get the model with the neck gasket or the one without. I went with the neck gasket. I then wondered if I really over did myself, both financially and gear-wise.

I have found that they are very comfortable pieces of gear despite all I had heard. And they leave me with the confidence that even if I tip over and have to wet exit, I will be dry. That gives me confidence to push myself in leaning and bracing in turns, etc. And I may even start work on learning to roll. I can run the Platte or go paddling in windy, cool weather and not worry about getting wet or cold.

Let me share my discoveries with you. And answer those concerns that first come to mind.

ICKY, STICKY

Icky, Sticky I'll get sweaty inside !!! I solved this by buying the GorTex top. It does cost \$100 more than the non-breathing material (ie, \$400 total) but it does not build up water inside when you wear it. Even in warm 70°F weather. My pants are not GorTex and they do sweat a bit and tend to balloon up (think Michelin Man!) as there is no way for air to escape as in the porous GorTex material.

Yet, while wearing them, I do not sense that there is water inside the dry pants because my inner polypro gear wicks away the water. Remember, you need to wear warm clothes inside to keep warm, the dry suit itself provides no warmth - only dryness (hence the name!). A light polypro layer is about all it takes in the spring.

You could upgrade to the Gortex model at a total cost of \$250. A kayak dealer did mention to me that GorTex dry pants would not provide any ventilation advantage while paddling in a kayak because there is no water-vapor differential between the inside of the pants and the inside of the kayak when the spray skirt is in place. Thus, the benefit of Gortex pants comes into play only when wearing them outside the boat.

Other options to consider are to buy a pair of Stohlquist's "Tread" pants or REI has similar pants at its Flagship store that are similar to the dry pants except they have neoprene leg closures instead of the rubber gaskets. These are known as "splash pants" in the trade. Or get some Hydrowear pants sold by LL Bean. These pants are coated and stretchy with a fleece liner. They keep you warm, are wind proof and dry out fast once wet. They are a very good alternate to neoprene.

GAG, GAG

Gag, gag. I can't breath!!! Yes, the neck gasket does choke a bit at first. I solved this by stretching it using a roll of kitchen paper towels for a night or two. It fit much less snug after that. And then Harv told me about neck rings.

They sell them for about \$10 at Northwest Outdoor Center in Seattle, but I made one out of 5/16-inch clear plastic

tubing from the hardware store and a one-inch long wood dowel plug. Cut the tube 2-inches longer than your neck circumference and insert the dowel plug in one end - no glue required. Use it by putting the ring around your neck and plugging the ends together. Pull it down over the neck gasket and then roll the neck gasket up-and-over the tubing. It holds the gasket about 1/2 inch away from your neck. Just unroll/unsnap the gasket when it appears you are in danger of tipping and you are sealed up again!!!

On Beginners Day at Boulder Res in late April, it was sunny clear skies but blowing with small waves. Water temperature was 56°F. I was completely comfortable all the time wearing a light polypro top and long johns under the dry top and pants. I even wet-exited and found it more pleasant than I had imagined. No cold water shock to the chest. I stayed dry after coming up and the waistband only leaked a bit - my butt was slightly damp. I think the water seems to come in from the back where the band is not tight against my body. I intend to try a wide belt to assist in the band compression for a 100% water seal. The pants in no way wanted to fill with water.

A week later on Cinco de Mayo, it was rainy and snowy. Remember those 4 days of rain and snow this spring? The air temp was 50°F and so was the water. I wore medium weight long johns and top. I paddled for 90 minutes and I was snug as a bug in a rug. Ten days earlier I had paddled at Chatfield in 70°F air temperature with moderate breezes. Another kayaker that I encountered there was wearing just a halter-top and I was "Dressed-to-the Nines" in my dry top and pants with light poly top and bottom underneath. I did not feel stifled in the least. And I was worry free with respect to capsizing in the colder water.

Come talk to me anytime about this gear, I'll be the guy in the bright orange top, a red puffy face and gasping for breath!!!!

Anyway, if you want the versatility and confidence that comes with keeping dry, may I suggest a spiffy new dry top. If not, just keep telling yourself you will never capsize!