

Pool program provides kayak practice in winter

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Ivan Bartha (left) teaches the basic strokes to students during a kayaking basics class through St. Cloud State University's Outdoor Endeavors in the Halenbeck pool on Feb. 23. / Jason Wachter, jwachter@stcloudtimes.com

The blue kayak bobbed in Halenbeck Pool like a rubber duck in a bathtub, more difficult to capsize than keep upright.

Without waves, headwinds or murky waters, the controlled environment gave American Canoe Association-certified

instructor Ivan Bartha a distraction-free place to teach beginners the basics — from anatomy of a kayak to safety to basic strokes.

Quick Start Your Kayak gave paddlers a current-free chance to experience how much difference a lift of the knee or rotation of the paddle can make. As I quickly learned while seated in that blue kayak one Sunday in late February, it also exacerbated errors, over-corrections and flat-out mistakes.

Following the lanes in a straight line proved more difficult than it seemed, while executing the sweep turned out to be a fun — if temporarily dizzying — way to spin around. That boat-halting maneuver I'd been doing to correct my course? Turns out there's a stroke that will do the same thing without sacrificing momentum.

"The pool is the best we've got now in Minnesota in the polar vortex," Bartha said after the course. "My philosophy is if we can get people going in the swimming pool and we can start creating some muscle memory, that's going to transfer to a river or a lake."

Most community members who take the class are recreational kayakers. Outdoor Endeavors staff members who sign up — there were five in this class, with majors ranging from education to entrepreneurship — may one day teach the basics.

Like a mermaid

The two-hour Quick Start session began at the pool's edge. Bartha, coordinator for experiential programs at St. Cloud State University's Outdoor Endeavors, explained the differences between watercraft — the more buoyant round-bottomed boats vs. the flat-bottomed designs that resemble a surfboard.

With boats out of the water, Bartha ensured seatbacks and foot rests were properly adjusted.

"It's sort of like being a mermaid," Bartha said of fitting boat to paddler. Position yourself correctly, and the kayak becomes an extension of the body, more responsive to every torso rotation and lean.

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