Flow Kayaks

SharpSki 6.5 Review

1

Summary

“I love this boat”

– Melbourne Paddler

Overview

An elite class ocean racing ski with features similar to the more popular elite models, such as the Fenn Elite, Fenn Glide, Vajda Hawx and EPIC V14. It appears that some SharpSki features, such as the forward position of the seat and rudder are only now starting to appear in other manufacturers elite skis. The key features include:

- Forward positioning of the seat and rudder to improve ability to pick up and stay on ocean and bay swell (*although according to my measurements the V14, Elite and SharpSki have the same seat position relative to the bow, that is 3.45m from lowest point in the seat to the bow*)
- Narrow knife like bow section to slice through chop and improve upwind performance
- Rounded hull cross section to improve flat water speed
- Adjustable foot rest with wing nuts so no spanners required
- Venturi with low drag bullet insert
- Medium rocker to provide good flat water and downwind speed and good turning response
- Predictable stability in big conditions, which I attribute to the snug fit of the seat and which means the ski responds more to the position of your hips than to the side chop. I find skis with less snug seats tend to roll around under me in side chop, which then requires more work to retain my balance.

- Good performance in 70 – 85kg paddler weight range.

Additional unique features include:

- Optional flip up rudder for downriver racing
- Standard construction is a flexible carbon/Kevlar layup that should also withstand some down river racing and scraping over shallow areas with flip up rudder.
- Common hull/deck platform for Flow Kayaks down river kayak
- Tough and light construction with early models showing no sign of any significant failure
- Not prone to golf ball like dents in outer shell like other lightweight honeycomb construction boats.

Overall rating – highly recommended. One of the best-kept secrets out there I think, thanks Garth Spencer for letting this cat out of the bag! For those interested there is an animated GPS trace comparing the EPIC V12, the SharpSki and the Fenn Elite SL around the same 4km time trial course (YouTube link here).

Specifications

Length: 6.4m

Max Width: 43cm

Leg Length*
Min: 95cm
Max: 115cm

Rocker Measurement*
Rear: 10cm
Bow: 11cm

Seat Position from bow: 3.45m

Rudder Position from rear: 90cm

Standard Layup Option: Carbon/Kevlar at around 14kg

Optional adjustable venturi

Optional flip up rudder

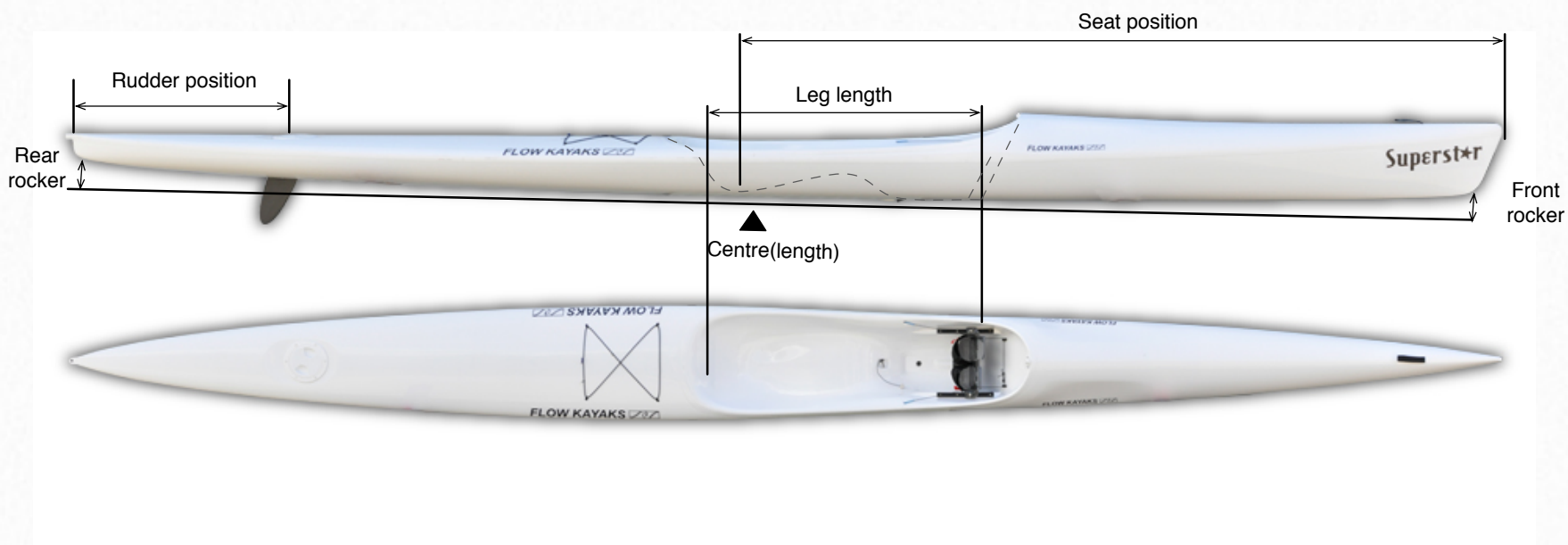
Optional bow handle

Measurements Diagram (picture is a Flow Kayak's Superstar surfski)

Leg length measures the minimum and maximum length between the rear of the seat and the hinge of the rudder pedals (ball of the foot). Use this measure to check whether you will fit in the seat.

Rocker measurements are measured with the centre of the boat touching the flat surface.

Note that measurements are approximately to the nearest cm.



Performance

The ski is fast in both flat water and open ocean conditions and to me appears to be slightly more stable than boats such as the Carbonology Atom or Think UNO.

I have beaten a few paddlers who use these skis in rougher conditions when they would usually beat me when conditions are flat.

The ski comes almost ready to go out of the box, just attach the rudder for which you will need a 4mm Allen key. No boat cover is included.

Some minor improvements could be made, but these don't affect performance in any way, including:

- Some current production models may suffer from issues with cosmetic gelcoat cracks around the seat area. Flow Kayaks have identified the cause and are planning to address this with changes to their production method

- Single venturi is quite small and takes a while to empty the cockpit. Only an annoyance when doing repeated out/in sessions through the surf zone. Seems to cope fine with keeping the cockpit empty when paddling into the wind though

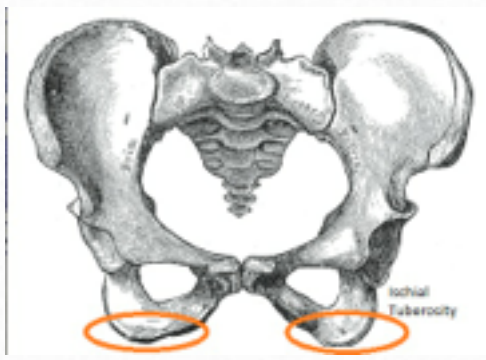
- The carbon surf rudder shaft may be prone to breakage in the surf zone so its best to keep a spare handy. In my experience metal shafts can be bent straight but carbon shaft will just splinter. I just cut down my V12 marathon rudder as a spare, it seems to have the same shaft diameter

- Steering arm may slip off the rudder shaft over time. I ground a horizontal slot in the steering arm to grip the stainless shear pin and prevent any vertical movement.

This ski should be suitable for advanced paddlers in flat and medium conditions and elite paddlers in all conditions.

Because of the narrow seat and limited leg length this ski may not fit larger paddlers (over 85kg or 1.86m tall).

Best try out the seat by going for a long paddle. Initially the seat seems quite uncomfortable but I found I got used to it very quickly and now find it very comfortable. The shape seems to reduce the pressure on the ischial tuberosity, usually a serious source of pain on longer races for me.



Your mileage may of course vary, depending on the shape of your butt.

This ski really seems to come into its own in downwind conditions and seems to be a class ahead of other elite boats in its ability to pick up downwind runners of all sizes. Feels a bit like you are on a wild pony that is champing at the bit, just wanting to take off. The smaller the runners the more this ski seems to outperform other boats including fast flat water ski's such as the Carbonology Atom.

So far my observations of paddlers at Peak Adventure training sessions in Port Melbourne has been that those who find the seating comfortable, and who overcome the initial feeling of instability, end up being astounded by the stability and performance of this ski in virtually all conditions.

The two SharpSkis on right have a hull shape that is only very subtly different from the Fenn Elite hull on left. The Fenn hull is every so slightly more triangular, while the SharpSki has a slightly more flowing rounded shape. The SharpSki also appears more rounded through to the bow. My impression was that the Elite is slightly flatter aft of the seat than the SharpSki.

Comments and Observations

Some of my more recent observations have been the following:

- A paddler, Anon1, who I would class as intermediate recently jumped on the SharpSki in big bay conditions (for Port Melbourne anyway, where we get quite a mixed up chop so it's testing on your stability). Initially he looked a bit tentative and took one swim where I stopped to help him get back in, however he completed the training session with no further swims as far as I am aware. A few days later I again observed him training under similar conditions, however this time he was absolutely ripping the downwind legs looking more like and advanced paddler. Anon1 is a small fit individual and I think he will quickly become very competitive in the SharpSki.
- Another paddler, Anon2, who I would just squeeze into the advanced category has also recently started trying out the Sharp-

Ski, having previously paddled a Fenn Elite but suffered from dead legs (I too find that my legs go numb in the Fenn seat). In the most recent training session, also in big conditions, Anon2 was right out front with the leading bunch on the upwind legs and after a bit of guidance on how to pick and link the runners was very difficult to pass on the downwind leg. Usually I would blast past him without having to try very hard. On this occasion he was able to continuously link runners and keep one wave ahead of me all the way back to the beach. His words leaving the water were " I love this boat!" – nothing more to be said really.

- Our coach, an elite paddler of course, who shall also remain anonymous, was heard muttering about struggling to catch the runners after being dropped on the home straight on a virtually windless day where there were still some small bay runners to be found. Since that day Coach has almost exclusively paddled the SharpSki unless someone beats him getting it out of the racks! Needless to say he has now been restored to his usual position in front of the leading bunch…

2

Detail Photos

Good finish, tough carbon/Kevlar construction, solid footplate and rudder construction.

Forward positioned rudder with optional down-river rudder attachment.

Narrow mid-section hull with round bottom.

Instantly recognisable, knife-like bow shape with unobtrusive nylon webbing handle molded into the deck.

Narrow tail section.

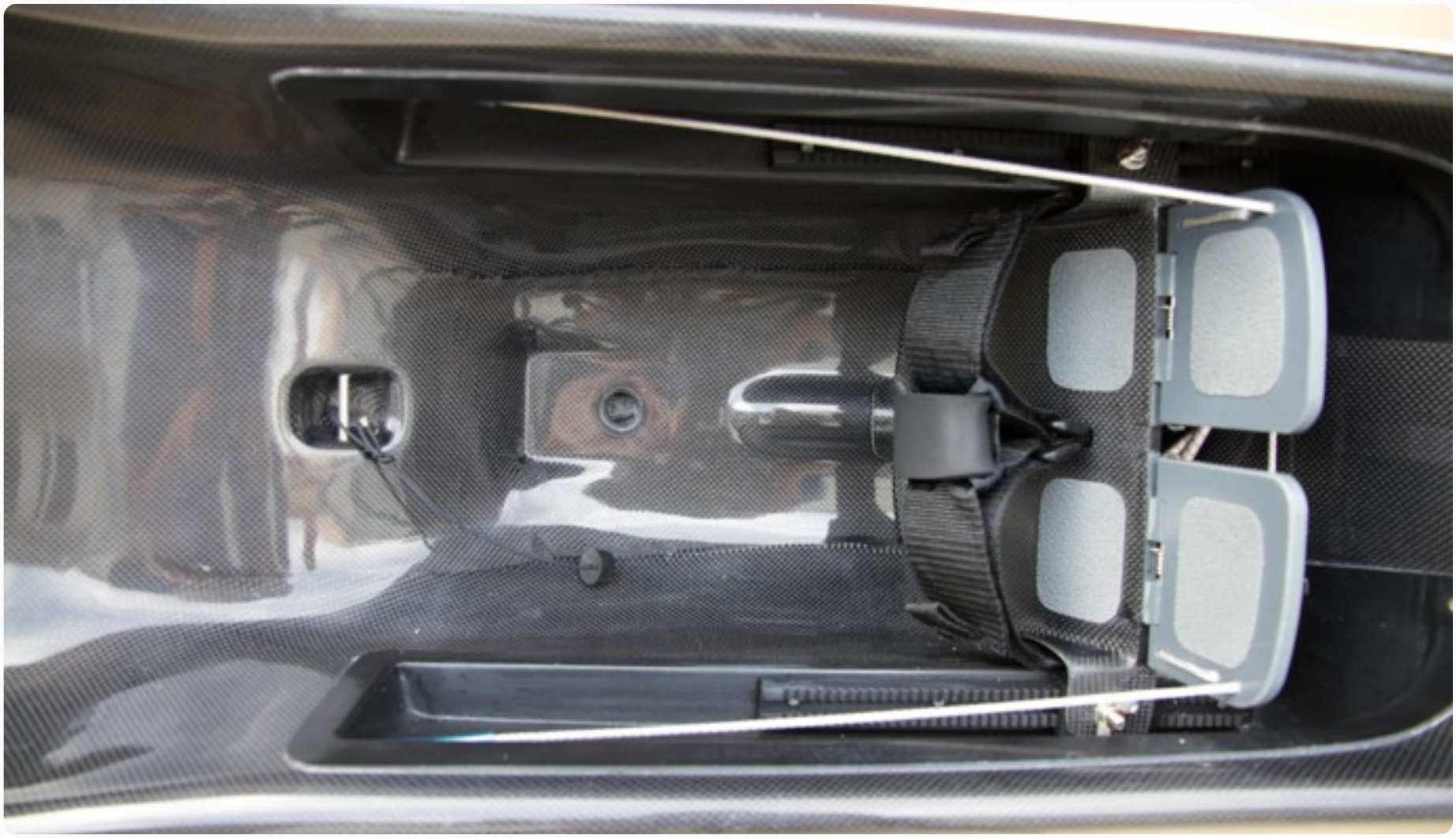
Deck bungee behind seat.

Drainage bung with breather hole in front of foot plate.

Narrow knife-like bow slices through the chop on the upwind leg.

Rudder hatch and rudder attachment detail. 4mm Allen key required.

The rudder shaft has a 2.5mm stainless rod through it which gets clamped by the steering arm. During one training session I lost rudder control and discovered the steering arm had popped off the top of the rudder shaft. Subsequently I ground a horizontal slot in the steering arm such that the stainless steel rod would fit into the slot and so the steering arm can no longer move up or down on the shaft.



Safety leash attachment point and venturi plug.

Recessed foot plate mounting rails. Recess also makes a nice handle for grabbing the ski during those beach starts.

Adjustable foot plate using wing nuts.

Split foot strap arrangement.

Notes:

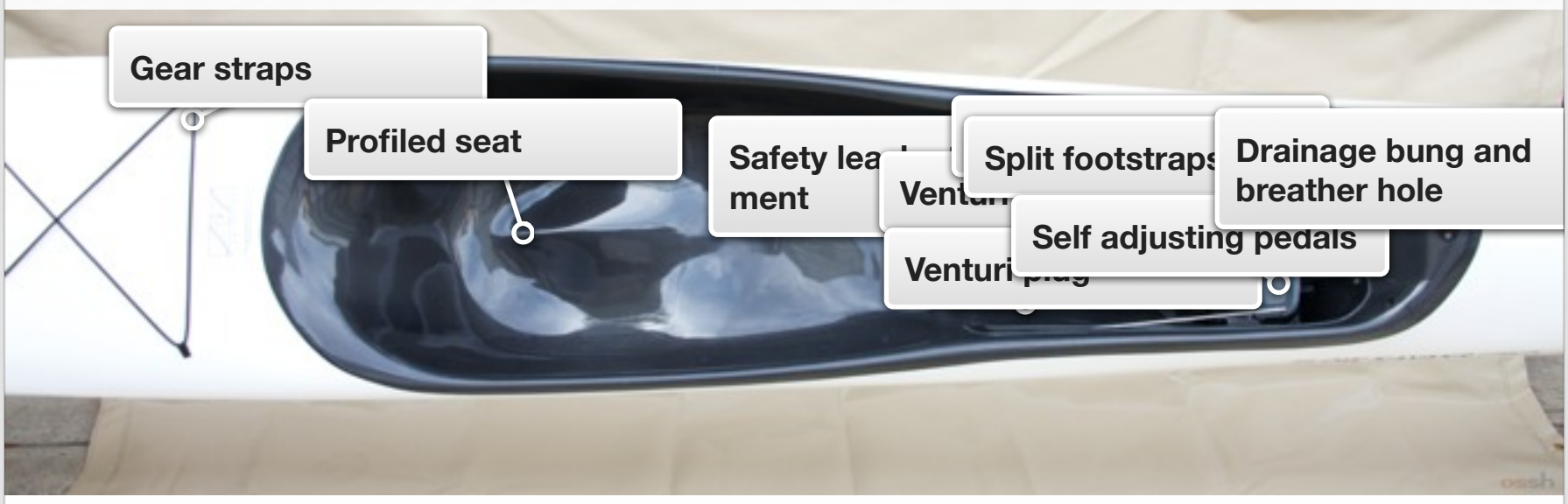
- that rubber GPS mount between footstraps is not included. I have included instructions for making your own later on in this document.
- the rudder rope shown is not the factory fitted rope. I replaced the factory rope with 3mm waxed Dyneema cord (Whitworths Marine at ~$3/m), which seems to be more resistant to fraying. I never saw any wear on the EPIC V12 cord over 2 years, whereas the SharpSki demo boat was showing quite a bit of wear at the rudder attachment knots after just 3 months.

Side view of the foot well. GPS mount is the foam block with a bit of blue showing.

Nylon webbing handle.

Venturi with bullet insert to reduce drag.

Click to see more detail in this interactive image.



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Use your fingers to zoom in to the photo above to see more detail. This works best if you make it full screen by dragging it with two fingers.

3

Customisation

I have made two additions to finish off the ski, a GPS Mount on the foot straps and a groove to grip the rudder shear pin.

Garmin 910CX attached to the GPS Mount.

GPS Mount

GPS Mount Materials

Nylon webbing strap

- 220mm length of 25mm wide nylon webbing
- Fold and overlap the ends by 20mm to form a 100mm long strip
- Pin in position and sew the overlapping ends together to form a strong joint.

Foam rubber GPS mounting block (should suit any wrist watch type training GPS)

- Cut a 40mm square x 10mm thick foam block (blue foam in picture)
- Cut a piece of 5mm thick foam sheet in the shape shown below
- Glue the foam block in position using contact adhesive
- Glue the mating Velcro strips (10 x 20mm) in position as shown using contact adhesive (one Velcro strip is glued to underside of the cut foam sheet under the scissor blade – not visible in photo)

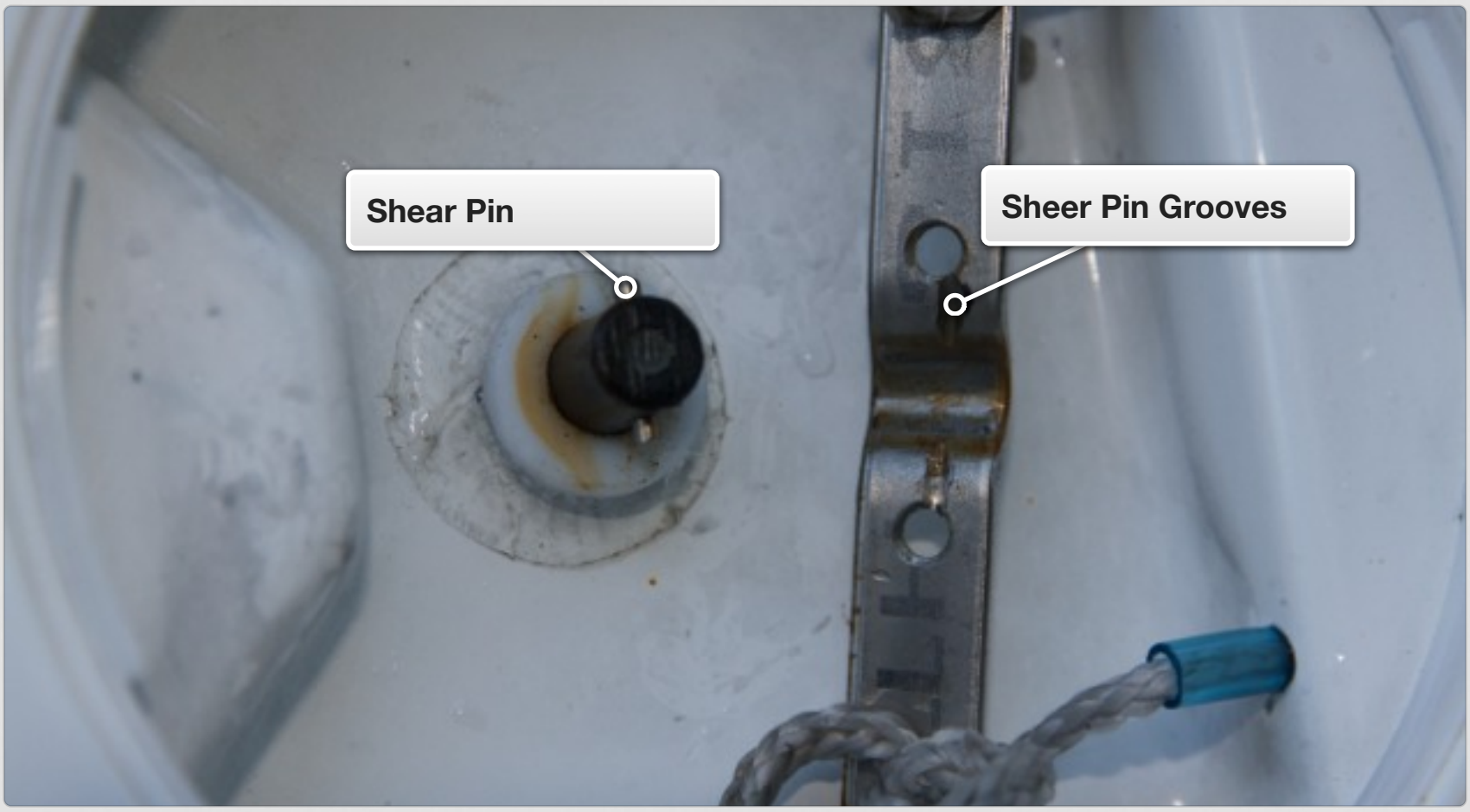
Installation

1. Release the foot strap Velcro and place opposite ends of the webbing strap in each foot strap under the Velcro to form a bridge for mounting the foam rubber block.

2. Wrap the foam rubber block around the bridge formed by the webbing and match up the Velcro strips.

3. You may have to make the foot straps a little bit bigger that usual to allow the GPS mounting block to be positioned away from the foot rest. If its positioned too close then there is insufficient room to get your feet in.

Steering Arm Shear Pin Grooves



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The photo above shows the grooves I cut in the steering arm. The shear pin fits into this groove when the steering arm is clamped onto the rudder shaft and prevents the steering arm from working its way loose and popping off the top of the shaft. This happened to me once during training and I would recommend doing something similar to make sure you don’t loose your steering during an ocean paddle.

4

Company Overview and Contacts

Flow Kayaks are based in Nelson, New Zealand and headed up by the formidable team of Andrew Martin (formerly Andrew Martin Kayaks) and Richard Usher (of Coast to Coast fame). The company makes multi-sport kayaks and surf skis based on the same platform and wing paddles.

Demo boats available in Melbourne, Australia (contact Jarad Kohlar at Peak Adventure).

Please send any comments or corrections to dagroenewald@gmail.com.