

Log Rolling 101

So, you've seen log rolling on ESPN. You hunted around and found a log, and want to learn how to roll. Well, the first thing you've probably found is that log rolling is not nearly as easy as it looks. There is a lot more to just standing on a log and moving your feet. There is a ton of things happening on the log that people don't notice. But before we get into anything too advanced, let's start from the beginning.

Equipment

If you are going to learn how to log roll, you are going to need the right equipment to start learning. First off is the obvious: a log. Where do you get a log? Well, finding a used log to start learning to roll on isn't too bad, and won't break your pocket book assuming that you have some way of getting it shipped or going to get it in a decent method. To learn more about getting a log, visit our equipment page. For a beginning roller, I would not recommend getting anything smaller than a two log. A one log would obviously be ideal for learning, but would quickly become useless as a beginning roller becomes better. It would be possible to learn on something smaller than a two log, but would take much longer, and would probably lead to the roller becoming frustrated and quitting before they began to have fun doing it.

The next item is shoes. Since most practicing rollers nowadays learn on carpet, you won't have to buy or make a pair of log rolling spikes. The shoes that most rollers use to practice in are actually quite affordable, running 5-8 dollars a pair. For more information, visit our footwear tutorial. A lot of the terminology I will use can be confusing at times, so you might want to brush up on your lumberjack terminology.

Getting Started

So you have all your equipment in order, and you've found a decent place to roll that is fairly sheltered from boats, and large waves. Now what?? Where does one begin? Do you just stand up and roll? Well, first we have to establish some ground rules. Since you are just beginning, you don't need to know all the unwritten rules for rolling, but you do have to know some. They state that you have to remain on your own end of the log, in between the painted foul lines (red or blue, depending on what log you're on), and you cannot touch your opponent. That's all you need to know for now. Also, because I'm pretty sure you will be learning around other rollers, please realize that not everyone learns at the same rate. The younger the roller, the easier and faster they seem to learn. Realize that the learning curve is different for everyone.

You may have noticed that some rollers look over one shoulder when they roll, while others look over another. Rollers look over different shoulders depending on how they began. Most rollers, including myself, roll looking over their left shoulder. There is no right or wrong shoulder to roll over. Whatever shoulder a roller is most comfortable with is the one that they generally roll over. Rollers than learn to roll over their right shoulder generally must learn to be great runners, because they will typically be in a running match, versus a bucking match (for more on these terms, see our terminology section at the end). Usually, the person/child simply steps up on the log, and whatever side they feel like rolling on, they stick with.

Beginning Technique

If you are a beginning roller, this next section is one that should be nearly memorized. If you are just starting, and seem to be having trouble getting the hang of it, chances are good that you are doing something wrong that is described in this section. Reading it over after rolling will help you understand and come to terms with the basics. Learning to roll wrong will not only make bad habits, but will also make it very difficult to win over a perfectionist roller. It only takes one misstep or mistake for an experienced roller to throw another off balance, and into the drink.

Rule #1 about learning to roll: No looking at your feet. I'm going to repeat it just because I know that the first thing a person does when they get on the log is look at their feet. No looking at your feet. Your feet are never going to leave the bottom of your legs, so there is no reason to look straight down at them.

Stepping up on the log, a rollers body stays (mostly) perpendicular. The arm closest the center line always goes back, and the arm on the outside (furthest the center line) goes forward. By sticking your arms out, I mean simply mean putting your arms out to help stabilize your total balance. Don't stick them straight out, yet don't leave them at your sides. Find a comfortable medium. The arms should only move a minimal amount when rolling. Moving them around will simply throw you off balance, and serves as a great signal to your opponent that you're off balance.

Contrary to popular belief, the real balance in log rolling is from the waist down, in your legs. Ever watched a crazy recovery, where the roller seemed to be totally falling backward, yet was suddenly back on the log? That's because their lower body was still in balance with the log. A rollers knees must always be bent, as well as a roller's lower back. The lower you are, the lower center of gravity you have, and the harder it will be to get off balance. But how low should your knees be bent, or how much should your back be bent? If you are rolling with your lower back bent correctly, it will start to feel warm, gradually burn like a well worked muscle. This is completely normal, and encourages the strengthening of the lower back muscles. Knees should be bent where it is comfortable, yet low, but not too low so as to inhibit the movement of the legs.

Head, and eyes should be focused on the other end of the log at all times. Remember rule #1 of rolling? Never take your eyes off your opponent's feet. The same applies for practice. Your eyes should never leave the other end of the log.

So far, I have left out one of the most important "steps" in log rolling. Your feet must remain moving at all times. By moving, I mean picking your feet up, up and down, just high enough for your spikes/shoes/feet to leave the log. I typically tell younger beginning rollers to pretend like they are squashing ants. This helps get down the general rhythm. You may choose to move your feet faster or slower, depending on the variables at hand. Rolling against a very good opponent? Moving your feet fast is always a good technique. Rolling on the one log, wanting to conserve energy? You can move your feet a little slower. Knowledge will come with experience. Why must you constantly move your feet up and down? Like I said in the preface to this section, it only takes a split second for an experienced roller to throw a "sleeping" roller off balance. Stopping your feet for even a second is enough time to end up in the drink. The steps must be

small and quick at all times. In rolling, you gradually progress to the next smallest log after exceeding the time limit for each one. As the logs get smaller, so must your steps. The smaller the steps, the faster your feet should be moving. Large steps make your feet slap the water as you run, which in turn creates a large amount of drag on your feet. It also makes you have to pick your feet up, to get back on the log, similar to running stairs.

Now that I've thoroughly confused you when it comes to the basics, I'm going to try and give you a bit of advice for beginners. One of the most common questions is, how exactly should it feel when you are out there on the log? Well, at first it is going to feel very awkward, to say the least. It goes against the basic rules of walking, and running. Your arms stay at your side at all times, no matter how fast you go. As you run faster, your steps actually stay the same size, instead of getting larger. Log rolling takes hours upon hours of practice just to be able to stay on the log, feeling somewhat under control. The basic body posture alone can (but not always) take weeks to become comfortable with. Please understand that I'm not trying to discourage anyone from trying, or beginning the sport. By no means is that what I'm trying to do. I'm just trying to tell everyone that much patience is needed if you are a beginner. It may take days or even weeks before you suddenly "get it". But trust me... when you finally make everything click, and you do everything right, it will be well worth it.

This is the first of a many part series designed to teach anyone and everyone how to log roll. The next tutorial will teach more advanced techniques, once a beginner has become comfortable stepping up and balancing on the log for a decent duration of time.

Log Rolling 201

If you haven't already done so, you should read Log Rolling 101. It is the precedent to this article, and teaches the basic posture and stance in log rolling. You must have the section nearly memorized, or at least fresh in your memory for this section to make sense.

Control

Now that you've figured out how to stand and balance on the log, you're probably wondering, "how in the heck do I control this thing?" The thought can be a little daunting: a 100 or 160 pound roller trying to control a 400 pound log in the water on top of their own weight. Remember the foot stance from the first tutorial? Probably not since I never gave the foot stance. Let me put it in very basic terms.

Think about a log floating in the water for a second. If you push directly down on top of the log what happens? The log will do nothing but bob in the water. Move your hand either back a little bit and push down. What happens? The log rolls backwards. Now move your hand to the front and push down. The log rolls to the front. It is this same basic, common-sensical (yet all too unknown or forgotten) logic that you will apply to your footwork. The foot closest to the center line is always on the back of the log a little, and the foot farthest from the center line is always on front of the log a little. With one foot always on the front and back of the log, controlling it is simple. Just don't forget to keep your foot moving up and down (remember your basics from tutorial 1).

Check Your Heel or Slap the Log

I've told you where your feet should be while rolling, but I haven't told you how exactly you control the log. Have you ever seen a Professional Men's match where their outside (furthest from the center line) foot seemed to be slapping the log, throwing up water? This is done to slow the log while running. If the log starts going faster than the competitor can run, then can slow it down by slapping their forward foot (the one furthest from the center line) down on the front of the log. Of course, you don't exactly have to slap your front foot down to slow the log down. All you simply need to do is move more of your weight to your front foot. This will act as a brake to slow the log down if you are running.

What about your backstep? How do you slow it down then? Checking your heel is probably the most important skill to learn in log rolling next to kicking the log (we'll get to kicking the log later). Checking your heel is how you slow the log down while running on your back step (running backwards), and is almost the exact opposite of stopping the log while running. To stop or slow the log on your back step, bring your back foot (the one closest to the center line) to the back of the log and jab it in with each step. With each jab, the log will slow down. Just like slapping the log, you don't exactly have to jab the log for it to slow down. You can simply place more weight on your back foot. But if you want the log to stop quickly, or need more force (like if an opponent is pulling you on your back step) you'll need to jab, or "check" your heel.

Body Posture

Body posture is very important in controlling the log. If your body posture is incorrect, no amount of checking your heel or slapping the log will help you control the log. Keep your knees bent. Keep your arms and shoulders steady. Do not wave your arms around.

Visual Aids

I will readily admit that simply reading through this section on Control is quite confusing unless you know exactly what I'm referring to. Probably the best way of thoroughly understanding this tutorial is to accompany it with some video of professional rolling

This is the second of a many part series designed to teach anyone and everyone how to log roll. The later examples will teach more advanced techniques, once an amateur roller has mastered controlling the log.

Log Rolling Terminology

back step – running backwards, or back peddling on the log. It is harder to do than front stepping, or running on the log.

bobbing the log – when a roller rocks the log back and forth in the water. The object is to put your opponents end of the log under the water, making it difficult for them to move their feet, hence driving them off the log.

bucking match – this is when two rollers are facing opposite directions, or looking over the same shoulder (usually their left) when rolling. The two rollers generally fight for control of direction of the log. The opposite of bucking is running.

checking it down – another way of telling rollers to slow the log down, and get control of it. Judges will commonly tell rollers to “check it down” so they can call time in to start the match.

corks – another name for spikes.

crowding the center line – this refers to rolling very close to the center line. When two larger rollers surpass time limits and get to a smaller log, they must roll very close to the center line to keep their end of the log from sinking under the water. When a roller’s end goes under the water (sinks), it makes it impossible for them to keep up with the foot speed of the roller whose end is higher out of the water.

dock – a structure fastened to the shore, either supported by supports or floating, that rollers push off from in a log rolling match. It is commonly used to be sure that rollers have enough water and clearance from obstacles to roll safely.

draw – a draw is a fall in a log rolling match that was deemed by the judges to be a tie. A tie happens when the two competing roller’s feet leave the log at the same time.

fall – a fall is when one roller loses control of the log and their feet leave the log before their opponent. A fall can happen with only two steps difference from the time one roller falls in to the other.

foul – a foul is called when a roller breaks a rule of rolling during a match. One of the most common rules broken is stepping on, or across the center line of the log while rolling.

front step – this is what running on the log is commonly called. The opposite is back stepping.

kick – kicking refers to a roller giving the log a sharp jab, or snub of the log in an effort to knock their opponent off balance. Kicking is commonly done with the rollers outside foot, or the one furthest from the center line.

knot – a knot is a hard spot in a log where a branch once grew. Knots can be removed by judges at the request of the roller. They are much harder than the wood around it, and could result in the roller tripping or slipping or catching a spike on it.

on deck – when a roller is in the next match up.

pike pole – a long pole with a metal tip and hook on the end that has been used for hundreds of years to move and jockey logs around.

pole – long wooden or metal poles are used by judges to push rollers out from the dock and/or obstacles before a match can be started.

pole out – the act of rollers pushing out from the dock using wooden poles held by the judges. Rollers must be clear of the dock and/or any obstacles before a match can begin.

quick whistle – a quick whistle is called when the timing judge calls “time in” and a fall happens before it is deemed that both rollers have control of the log. For example, one roller falling as the judge calls time in would be a quick whistle.

running match – This is when two rollers are facing the same direction, or looking over opposite directions when rolling. Much of the match is usually spent running. The opposite of a running match is a bucking match.

spikes – the shoes worn by professional rollers in competition. Today’s spikes are commonly made of soccer shoes that have metal spikes affixed to the bottom. The spikes are similar to old metal golf spikes, except that they have a sharpened tip on them.

splash – splashing is the kicking of water into your opponents’ eyes using your foot, or both feet. It is not against the rules, and though risky, is used to momentarily blind your opponent.

time in – this is when time has been called (or began) by the timing judge, and the match begins with the timer running.

time limit – every log except the four log has a time limit that forces rollers to move to the next smaller log after surpassing it. Rollers do not need to wait for the time limit to go to the next smaller log if the agreement is mutual to go to the next log. Some of the more advanced professional rollers will agree to start their match on a smaller log.

timer – the judge whose responsibility is to time the match, calling time in, quick whistles, etc.

trick and fancy – a sport that has all but been forgotten, it is an event where roller perform stunts on the log. Usually done with a partner, they can range from jump rope, juggling, roller skating, to standing on your head on top of a chair all while balancing on the log.

warm up – in most competitions, rollers are given a chance to step out on each log for a set amount of time before the match begins. This is to allow rollers to loosen up, and “feel the log out” before the match begins.

white water – refers to when the log is moving so fast that white water moves over the log.