

Southern Multisport NZ – Multisport PFD Review

In the first of a series of informative reviews on Multisport equipment, we look at one of the key pieces of mandatory equipment for kayakers – the multisport Personal Flotation Device – and compare the big players.

Us Multisporters are a needy lot, aren't we? The equipment we use must function the way we want it to and it must work around a multitude of external challenges. If it's not right, we fiddle around, try this and that, make some mistakes, and eventually get a set-up that we're happy with. That's because, come race day, it matters. This applies to our Personal Flotation Device (PFD) perhaps more than other piece of kit. If you are a Multisport Kayaker, then you are now extremely fortunate to have several manufacturers of Kayaking equipment that have looked at what we've done and introduced better features on their top-of-the-range PFDs so that you don't have to forego training time to make your own modifications and additions. In this review we put three of the main players head-to-head to look at which PFD best suits you.

Up for review are the **Rasdex Multisporter PFD (\$283.50)**, the **Day Two Multisport Vest (\$219.90)** and the **Hiko Stamina (\$249.00)**. Most Multisporters will already be familiar with the first two which, between them, hold the lion's share of the Multisport market, but the third option is a relative new-comer. I have included this third option - the Stamina - because Hiko used to sell a tonne of Multisport PFDs in New Zealand but a delayed response to the new requirement for a cinchable waist strap left them out of the market for a while. They are back with two updated models and promoting the Stamina as their top-of-the-line Multisport PFD. Their other offering (not included in this review) is the Endurance which boasts many of the same features, is lightweight with great buoyancy and at \$189.00 is excellent value for budget conscious buyers.



It's important to point out that there is no such thing as the perfect PFD; if there was then there would only be one PFD on the market. I'm not trying to find faults with these products and I have no intention of ranking them; I'm trying to find what situations each PFD works best in, to point out features which are useful and to help other Multisporters find the best PFD for their situation.

For this review I have personally used all three of these vests, each in a variety of situations ranging from short flat-water training sessions to long river trips and races.

There are two general functions for Multisport PFD's. Firstly, it must meet safety requirements to help keep us afloat in the event of a swim. Secondly, with the addition of various features it becomes a handy item for managing a plethora of other needs, such as hydration, holding food and other personal items and increasing our visibility to other water-users. So, let's look at how each of the PFDs compare in these areas:

Flotation

A kayaking PFD is classed as a type 406 Specialist PFD and as such, to comply with standards, requires a minimum of 50 Newtons buoyancy to stop us disappearing into turbulent or aerated water. This is based on a minimum person-weight of 36 kilograms which is of course substantially lower than most adults. Therefore, you should expect any PFD that is designed for a larger person to include more than 50N of buoyancy. A very large person would do better with 60 or 70N of buoyancy.

Another key requirement for a PFD with regards to flotation is that it doesn't go floating up and over your head, leaving you to sink deeper into the water. To achieve this, we've long known that we need to be able to reliably cinch the PFD around our waist, under our rib cage. This creates a physical grip on our torso, meaning that as the PFD floats to the surface, it pulls us with it. Several years ago, the safety team for the Coast to Coast introduced a mandatory requirement for PFD's used in that event to include a cinchable webbing waist-strap. Given that most Multisporters will enter the Coast to Coast at some stage or indeed may have taken up the sport specifically to complete it, this could be a non-negotiable pre-requisite in your choice of PFD.

Rasdex Multisporter PFD:

Rasdex don't state their actual buoyancy but they do assert that it exceeds the minimum buoyancy standard of 55N (N=Newtons of buoyancy). Note that Coast to Coast requirements are actually only 50N.



The Rasdex PFD is a side-opening vest which has two straps that buckle together under the left arm; the bottom strap being under the rib-cage. These two buckles, being under the arm, are a little bit fumbly and do slow down the fitting of this vest, so if you've come from a triathlon background and understand the importance of split seconds lost or gained in transition, you'll want to practice this fastening process plenty before race-day if you're going to be transitioning into the kayak. At the other end of the kayak stage you'll appreciate the quickness of being able to release the buckles and whip the vest off like an unemployed Steel Worker in *The Full Monty*.

Day Two Mustisport Vest:

Day Two also exceed buoyancy standards with a stated 55N buoyancy for their Multisport Vest and provide a cinch strap below the rib cage, under the right arm. Note that although the Day Two vest is an over-the-head style, this bottom strap has a release buckle fitted which in my opinion is unnecessary (and I always seem to forget to buckle it up) but it does save having to loosen the strap to remove the vest and re-tighten it when you put it back on.



Hiko Stamina:

The XS sized Stamina includes 50N buoyancy and the S/M and L/XL both include 60N buoyancy.

The Stamina has three light straps around the torso. The upper and lower straps are webbing tape and the middle strap is elastic. The lower strap sits under the rib cage and, like the other two, is cinchable to meet event requirements. There are no buckles, which keeps the fastening system light and simple, but the vest doesn't fall open as easily for putting on/taking off.



Movement and Comfort

We're athletes and our sport is based on movement so we need our PFD to move with us or be minimal enough to not get in the way.

Rasdex Multisporter PFD:

With its many features this PFD is at the bulkier and heavier end of the range but with its high level of adjustability, medium level of buoyancy and malleable foam inserts I have found it to be perfectly comfortable. I'm around 175cm in height and 69 kilograms so I'm not a large guy and a potential issue for me would be that a one-size-fits-all PFD could be a bit bulky and inhibiting, or even ride up towards my chin, but I don't find this at all with this PFD.

Day Two Mustisport Vest:

The Day Two PFD has the most breadth to the front panel but due to the malleable foam inserts and the careful design it does not feel bulky or inhibitive and it doesn't ride up towards the chin while paddling. Anyone with a larger torso than me will find it perfect.

Hiko Stamina:

Being based on a slalom PFD we would expect a focus on uninhibited movement and this vest does not disappoint, being easily the most comfortable PFD. I find the neoprene shoulder straps particularly strong contributors to this success. The other factor is the low cut of the foam, which keeps any bulkiness away from the upper chest and shoulders. The foam is also shaped into a tight curve around the sides which allows the extra flotation without bulkiness on the front or back. It works very well.

Styling

Kayakers mightn't follow the lead of cyclists to the point of wearing our PFDs into the café, but we do still want our gear to look the part. I'm no style-Guru so for this section I've leaned heavily on my style consultants – my Wife and two Daughters.

Rasdex Multisporter PFD:

The Rasdex PFD has the largest variety of colours available including Black, Pink, Blue, Orange, Fluro Yellow and the Coast to Coast-branded Gold option. With this range of colours you can match to your kayak, your helmet, your bike, your racing kit or your mate's hub-caps (if she/he agrees to support crew for you). Stripped back, with the foam drinks block removed and carrying no extra luggage such as hydration tubes, bladder or survival blanket, the PFD is low-enough profile to be short-race-focussed. But long races are where this PFD excels and the impressive thing about this PFD is how tidy it remains even with all these extras on-board. This is where Rasdex have put a lot of time into providing well thought-out, practical and cleverly designed solutions for our needs during the long races. Ironically, with the many colour options available, we think this PFD looks particularly good in black.

Day Two Multisport Vest:

You also have a good range of colour options for the Day Two vest which comes in Red, orange, yellow and pink. This vest isn't quite as feature-rich as the Rasdex vest so, unloaded it appears nicely minimalist if that's your preference.

Hiko Stamina:

The Stamina is very nicely styled. I first pulled this vest out in the company of my wife and Father-in-Law and they both commented "wow, that's a great looking vest". Currently in NZ we have just one colour option of Lime Green/Black. The front pockets, all in neoprene and main one with zipper, look very neat and tidy. The curved stitching and reflective tabs on the rear also look good. Being the only PFD in this review to feature size options (as opposed to an adjustable one-size-fits-most approach) it benefits from fewer messy tails from adjustment straps.

Hydration Management

Safety requirements aside, it seems that hydration management has become the most important function for a Multisport PFD, particularly in longer races. As such, this may be a key consideration for you when purchasing a PFD.

Rasdex Mutisporter PFD:

The Rasdex PFD has very good hydration features and in my experience copes very well with all the separate drink system options that many of us will use in even the longest races. For short races there is a neoprene pocket on the front which will easily take a 500ml bladder or small drink bottle with a tube. In training you can just run the tubing and mouthpiece up through the bungee loops to save having to feed them through the foam block. When racing

you can use the foam block to position the mouthpieces nicely in front of your mouth for hands-free drinking. The Rasdex foam block does not have slits in it, so the tube needs to be fed through the hole into place which in some cases will involve removing the connection or mouthpiece from one end. Having no slits keeps the tube tighter to resist slippage, but it is fiddlier when changing your tubes around before or after a race. These days I leave the whole lot set-up permanently in a dedicated foam block and clean it out and leave it all in the freezer together when not in use.

For medium-length training sessions or races of one to two hours there is a good-sized bladder pocket on the rear of the PFD. Rasdex have included a very useful exit hole at the bottom of the pocket, on the right side (away from the buckles), to run the tube around the waist and straight up to the mouthpiece. This is much better than an over-the-shoulder set-up which necessitates an awkward bend to redirect the tube upwards, taking up valuable frontal real-estate and risking a kink in the tube.

For a third bladder, inside the boat, your drink tube to a connection in front of the cockpit is managed nicely via a small hole supplied in the bottom of the middle-front pocket. If your connection is behind the cockpit then you're best to run the tubing around the right side of your torso to avoid the vest's opening on the left side, but this can leave you with a longer tube if your connection is already fitted to the left side of the kayak.

Rasdex have further improved tube management with mid-height elastic loops on the front panel of the vest, which stops the tubes from making their own mind up on where they sit. This is particularly useful for the tube to the rear-pocket of the vest and for the tube to the in-boat connection.

Day Two Multisport Vest:

The Day Two vest is also well equipped for on-the-go hydration management. It comes with a foam block which has slits to allow easy loading/unloading of tubes. I don't find that either 6mm or 8mm tubes slip in this block, so with the added ease of loading/unloading I believe this system is great.

Again, paddlers can use the smaller front pocket for a small bladder during shorter paddles, or a potent blend of rocket fuel during a long race, combined with the larger rear pocket which comfortably holds 1-2 litres of water or sports drink. The rear pocket does not have an exit hole at the bottom, so the tube must be routed over the shoulder. When using a fresh-water uptake or in-boat hydration system a plastic ring on the lower-front of the vest is handy for managing the tube to a connection in front of the cockpit, or because this is an over-the-head vest you can run tubing around either side of your torso to a rear connection.

Hiko Stamina:

Like the other two PFDs, the Stamina includes two good on-body hydration storage options – a small pocket on the front for small bladders or bottles and a larger pocket on the back for 1-2 litres (all these rear pockets will hold more at a push, but this starts getting heavy and uncomfortable). The rear pocket does not have an exit hole at the bottom, so the tube must be routed over the shoulder.

Hiko have kept the elastic loops on the upper chest as seen in their older vests and added a hose clip for an over-the-shoulder option. In my experience these are good for training or Adventure Racing but not adequate for Multisport racing. I have found that in race situations, if hydrating requires the athlete to stop paddling, it doesn't get used and the paddler gets dehydrated. For that reason, for long races I would either be modifying the front elastic loops to hold a foam block or fuddling around with wire and tape so that I could set the mouthpieces in front of my mouth for easy use while paddling.

Other Useful Features

It's easy enough to go online and see the full lists of features for these PFD's so my focus in this review is to list the few that we find very useful.

Rasdex Multisporter PFD:

I would argue that no other manufacturer keeps a closer eye on our sport to meet our changing needs than Rasdex and this constant vigilance is very apparent in their PFD offering. An attachment clip for a whistle and a rear cuddy pocket for a survival bag are great examples of Rasdex features that make life a bit easier when preparing for Coast to Coast. Padding on the shoulder straps is nice when you're carrying your boat more than the length of your driveway.

Day Two Multisport Vest:

Day Two also supply a handy clip for the compulsory whistle (I suspect these are supposed to be for keys) and something I really like about the Day Two vest, especially when training with no spray skirt, are the continuous neoprene sides which stop cold water from splashing my kidneys. Long reflective strips on the front and back are very effective in the dark which is becoming an important feature this time of year.

Hiko Stamina:

Good reflective strips on the shoulder straps work well in the dark. The zip pocket is good for holding a personal locator beacon or something else of value that you don't want to get damaged or lost.

Summary

All three PFDs are very well constructed, sufficiently buoyant, provide good options for storage spaces, plenty of other handy features and are comfortable enough for prolonged use. Therefore, we can rightly conclude that we're spoilt for choice. Any of these PFDs will keep you safe and meet minimum requirements for events so when choosing a PFD, we each need to focus on which additional features we need most.

If you need hands-free hydration management, you are best to choose either the Day Two or Rasdex vest for their ready-to-use foam block set-ups. The Rasdex PFD offers slightly better tube management with the mid-height elastic loops on the front and the exit hole at the bottom of the rear pocket.

Not everyone needs hands-free hydration management. Maybe you're an Adventure Racer and the excuse to rest the arms for 5 seconds is quite welcomed. Maybe you're entering events that aren't long enough to require hydration. Maybe you're paddling in a tandem kayak and can easily store a drink bottle under a bungee cord and are happy to stop paddling for a few seconds to grab your mouthpiece for a drink. In any of these situations you will be more than happy with the Stamina and you'll benefit from the extra comfort that this PFD offers.

The Day Two and Hiko vests are both over-the-head style vests, while the Rasdex is a side-opening vest. I personally find the over-the-head style a bit less fiddly with regards to putting it on in a hurry. None of the options has any zips to worry about jamming up.

The Rasdex PFD is the most expensive but offers the most features and if you are doing plenty of long events I think its worthwhile spending the extra money. The Day Two is the cheapest of the three and does the job just fine, making it great value if you don't mind making-do on a couple of points. The Stamina is priced mid-pack and is a beautiful vest for general use but you'll be fuddling around to organise your hydration system if you want it for long races.

Notes on this review:

Some of the features that I have commented on can be enhanced through simple modifications. For example, Rasdex leave their foam blocks uncut to give customers the option of whether to cut slits in them or not. I have purposefully avoided addressing modifications for the sake of brevity and the challenge of knowing where to stop. If anyone would like advice on modifying their existing or new PFD then they should talk to the manufacturer or retailer.

Southern Multisport NZ offers local stock, advice and discount to Southland and Otago Multisport or kayak club members. We use the gear we sell and aim to help local athletes to be the best they can be through the best equipment and knowledge. This review is the first in a series of equipment reviews available in time on

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If you would like us to do a review of any specific products, please get in touch at Rikki.griffin@gmail.com