

Spreading the Gospel

Last Updated Saturday, 19 May 2007

So for the past 10 years, I've been learning about canoe racing, the canoe business, and the people who inhabit this 'fringe sport'. Yeah, I know - we all take it fairly seriously, but in the grand scheme of things, canoe racing is pretty small. In South Africa, the 'big' races will draw 1000+ participants for a monstrous downriver marathon featuring class 3 drops, and lots of spectators. In the US, Des Plaines, which is one of the very largest events in the country, occasionally approaches 1000 boats. We're in the fringe category.

Why? Lots of reasons. We mostly practice on hidden rivers, far from the maddening crowd, and by golly, it's a hard sport. Not too many sports take 5 years to learn well enough to be competitive (assuming you are already in good shape). Fewer sports require such a mastery of equipment, and even fewer have equipment that require such cat-like balance, coordination, and stamina - and that's just to get in the boat!

I suspect canoe racing may have hit its zenith in the 70s, if not before. Now don't get me wrong, there are still a lot of high quality events, sponsored by everyone from resorts, municipalities, First Nations, to companies and civic organizations. But the heyday of a race somewhere within a 100miles of wherever you might be in Minnesota seem to have passed. Many of these have been replaced by other activities, and some have just faded as costs and numbers decline.

One of the areas of growth has been kayak racing. Unlike regions like Seattle, Charleston, and Atlanta, we don't have a flatwater sprint community here, which offer easy spectator access, and *short races*. More of the races are either on Superior, or in conjunction with other events. That hasn't stopped people from becoming interested, particularly as kayaking has become more popular. And frankly, there are places and conditions that are a hoot in a kayak or surfski that would sink most racing canoes. There are currently three very well organized and attended kayak races on Lake Superior, and more to come. These draw 50-100 entrants, on distances ranging from 5-20 miles, and in conditions ranging from nearly flat water to pretty good surf. There are also kayak classes at many of the inland canoe events like Mora, Muscoda and Hoigaards. By next year, hopefully there will be a race on the St Croix, Mille Lacs, and Lake Pepin.

One of the breeding grounds for the 'new' merchants of speed has traditionally been triathlon. With approximately 10 'canoe triathlons' in the region, I've noticed an "arms race" over the last couple of years. More and more, the solo paddlers are using boats like the Stratus, ICF K-1s, surf skis, and unlimited kayaks instead of solo canoes. Why? Because there are only about 6 guys in the region who can paddle a C1 at 6.5 - 7.0mph, and darn few of them can hit 8.0 in a sprint. But any hack who spends 20 hours learning to paddle a fast kayak can hit 7 for long stretches, and 8.5 in a full sprint! Boats like the Stratus can easily cruise thru whitecaps and leave all but the best paddled pro canoes behind. While the Stratus is too heavy for most people to look forward to portaging it, it's pretty well suited to open water events, or events like the Kickapoo where maneuvering is at a premium.

Marsh