



The Marc Gillespie and Steve Kolonich team applies lighter fluid to their canoe and sets it aflame—the quickest way to dry their boat and patch a hole. Teams approach Mio Dam, crossing the pond in the dark. Some paddlers turn off their flashlights to beat teams who can no longer see them or hear them.

HUP All Night

Paddlers in the 120-mile AuSable River Canoe Marathon naturally get all the glory, but if you look closely, there in the pitch dark of summer midnight, wading out from the shrubby shore to stand in the river, are legions of feeders, humble folk who keep their teams going with Tylenol-laced bananas, squishy tubes of energy goo and towels to wipe up the vomit in the boat. By Kandace Chapple • Photos by Todd Zawistowski



The only way to begin this story is at the end. It's a Sunday evening in July and there's a line out the door of the little ice cream shop in Oscoda. It is full of men and women with bent backs and pinched shoulders. They have pale faces, limp hair and clothes they've pulled from stuffed duffle bags, wrinkled but clean.

Their hands fall on each other, in respect, relief, with the light touch of one weary competitor to the next. They order chocolate malts, hot fudge sundaes and banana splits. They've earned it.

They've just completed a 120-mile canoe marathon.

But not by boat. They are the bank runners, the feeders, the pit crews. And I am among them.

It's the first time we have all gathered since the starting gun sent our teams running through the spectator-lined streets of Grayling at 9 p.m. the night before. Canoes hoisted on their shoulders, they rushed in a mad sprint to the river to launch and begin paddling the nonstop AuSable River Canoe Marathon.

For the next 14 to 19 hours, we feeders left our regular lives behind and followed the river bends and unmarked back roads to get our team water and food and medicine and new paddles and dry clothes, all in the dead of a Michigan night, often waist-deep in a Michigan river.

And here, at the sundae shop, job done, our teams safely by our side, we gab and laugh and fill the front patio with shrieks of disbelief and shameless pride, tallying one story after another.

The paddlers had spent the night, a grueling plight of some 50,000 paddle strokes each, stealing the show.

The feeders have the floor now.

THE RACE

In 2010, the marathon attracted a record-setting 94 canoe teams from all over the United States and Quebec. This year's 64th annual race from Grayling to Oscoda by river begins July 30.

But it's a marathon with a twist: It starts at night. The paddlers navigate cedar trees that can swipe them from their seats, sneak through narrow river cuts (giving locals an upper hand), and dodge deadfall that keeps changing. They see by flashlights duct-taped to the fronts of their canoes or, when Mother Nature cooperates, the pale of the moonlight.

The two-person teams paddle ultralight carbon fiber canoes weighing in at under 30 lbs., their paddles just eight ounces light. They will portage six dams, the first not until five hours into the race. They will take eight to 12 feeds, more if things aren't going well. They will start with Glide on their hands and Desitin on their bottoms in the hopes of keeping blisters at bay.

The winning team will take home \$5,000; the payout of the entire race is some \$50,000. But the race is not run for money. It's for a finish.

The finish, however, is elusive. Some years, teams drop from bitter overnight temps or disorienting fog on the ponds. In 2010, the weather was nearly perfect, yet a dozen teams failed to finish due to injury, exhaustion, illness or cut-off times. Their feed teams felt the loss as much as the paddlers themselves.

THE JOB

In simple terms, feeders provide food and drink to the paddlers every few hours by wading into the river or meeting them at dam portages. Each boat has at least two feeders, one for each paddler. Often, the feed crew numbers six to eight; there are enough jobs to go around.

In the months leading up to the race, the paddlers experiment with foods and drinks to learn what powers them up and what makes them sick. They'll figure and refigure and finally, with a flourish, hand their lead feeder (invariably a legally bound spouse) a crinkled sheet of yellow lined paper stating how much Hammer gel and how many bananas stuffed with Tylenol they want at which feed locations. The paddler's job is done (except for the paddling, of course).

This is when the feeder magic begins.

Once we've deciphered the handwriting, we pull all the backseats out of our minivans and construct a harrowing tower of containers. There are coolers for fresh water, fruit, chicken, pasta and potatoes. There are plastic tubs holding dry goods like changes of clothes, backup paddles and first-aid kits. And sometimes there is a single pillow, a hope that the feeders may shut their eyes just once in the night. The pillow will go unused, just another thing to dig through when the system disintegrates about two hours in.

THE CROWD

The logistics of the first few feeds of the night involve driving with 350 of our closest friends in their temporarily organized minivans and pickup trucks to the narrowest part of the dirt road along the river, all parking at the same time, all entering the river at the same time—and doing so in the dark and, always, in an orderly fashion.

Simultaneously, 5,000 screaming spectators lean over the railing of the nearest bridge, sending a deafening roar into the night.

This kind of chaos can be, unexplainably so, enchanting.

Once parked where at least one person can exit one side of the vehicle, the team scrambles out to prepare the feed to the exact specs found in the crumpled yellow bible. On our team, there then ensues a scuffle over who has to actually get in the black river, the bottom completely obscured by darkness, and do the feed for my husband, Tim.

Usually my father-in-law, Lauren, and I take turns doing the blind-man's walk, while my mother-in-law, Patte, and Aunt Terri



Watch the Run

The thunder of 180-some men and women pounding down the streets of Grayling with 18-foot canoes held high is unforgettable. Watch near the last corner of the run. You'll miss the initial put-in, but wear your tenny shoes and run with the crowd to the launch, where you can see the teams still in the scramble of staying upright.

provide moral support (read: the appreciation of jokes, the collection of empty drink jugs and, once, the unwanted illumination of a deep woods bathroom run).

Feeders ferret out their team's rank amid the contenders by rushing to Burton's Landing, about 45 minutes after the start. They count boats, hearing before they see the racers, their soft "hups" as the paddlers switch sides in rhythm, their voices breaking the air as quietly as their boats cut the water.

Later, at their first feed, maybe at Stephan Bridge, feeders will start counting boats calmly, waiting patiently for their team to approach. At about boat number five, they will panic, charge into the river with their 350 panicked friends and call out their team's boat number at every duct-taped, bow-mounted flashlight rounding the bend in the dark.

It will take another feed or two before the teams will fall into a pattern, our team finding its pace, its position in the parade. But just when we're sure our team will remain about 25th, they'll show up in 19th place, sending us all back into panic mode until daylight.

Top: Paddlers rifle toward the river, their position determined by speed, agility and luck. "Crazy Mike" Garon portages Alcona Dam. Bottom: Author Kandace Chapple offers husband Tim Chapple fresh food, drink, and the all-important lighter paddle at daybreak.





THE FEED

While it's one thing to be in the water at the time your team arrives, it's quite another to be where they can get to you. When five or six boats come in for a feed at the same time, you've got at least a dozen feeders in the river, all trying to keep from going one step too deep (there's always a drop-off to contend with; if there's not, you're doing something wrong), all while holding food and drinks and trying to pinpoint one black boat out of 93 other black boats. Again: in the dark. This is some of the magic I was talking about.

Some teams wear glowing necklaces or wave lit-up snowmen on poles. Each year teams come up with something that will make them stand out in the dark without stealing the paddlers' night vision.

At best, your team will come to you and leave without swiping any other boats or feeders. At worst, a feeder will take that last step to reach her team, especially in a crowded feed area, and the unthinkable will happen.

She will stumble in the current, reach out to catch herself by reflex, grabbing the boat that is nothing more than a toothpick afloat on the river. The boat will tip, and then, as the whole crowd freezes in agony, the team will disappear ... then surface, cold, confused and ... pissed.

We must have not only the scheduled feed in our hands, but a litany of products and potions on our backs in a nifty nylon waterproof backpack, alphabetized and at the ready.

"If you're going to be a feeder, being half-crazy helps," laments Rod Solak of Traverse City, who is part of the Smutek clan, a name synonymous with the marathon. For decades at least one member of Frank and Peg Smutek's family has been on the river, including all their children and now their grandchildren. Their daughter, Amy, Rod's wife, has paddled 12 marathons. And Rod has learned to expect *nothing to go as planned*.

"I've seen feeders get all the way up to their chest in the dark cold river to give a feed, only to hear 'I didn't want this,' or 'Can I have so-and-so instead?'" he says. "But that's just part of the whole thing. I enjoy feeding but then again I might be more than half crazy."

Last year, Marc Gillespie and Steve Kolonich placed sixth, coming in at under 15 hours. But it wasn't a clean race by any means. They struck a tree limb low in the river and tore a hole in their boat less than an hour into the race.

"In 15 years of making sure the repair kit made it to every feed, I've never once had to use it," says feeder Christen Kolonich of Eaton Rapids. "It's a sickening feeling when something goes wrong. So much goes into one night, and so many things can end it that are out of your control."

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Watch the Launch

The sloping banks facing the Old AuSable Fly Shop in Grayling start to fill with blankets and chairs six hours before the 9 p.m. start. Find your patch and watch the mayhem as 90+ teams enter the river. You'll see falls and heroic recoveries. At least one team will end up with their boat in backward. The fix: Watch for canoes lifted and spun in the air.



This is a feeder's worst nightmare. It is with willpower rarely found in mankind that a feeder must stand her ground and let her team make its way to her, lest the capsizing and resulting ... well, moving on.

Sometimes feeders will miss their team altogether. This makes for a frantic back-roads racket of finding the next nearest river access to meet the team in territory the feeder has never been to and where the team will not be looking for them. More of the magic.

THE THERAPY

Feeders must also serve as nurses, therapists, nutritionists and mind readers. At each feed we are greeted by a number of exciting new variables. There can be vomit or cramps or injury. There can be dead \$30 flashlights, cracked \$100 paddles or leaky \$4,000 boats. (One thing we aren't greeted by is the paddler himself—a nicety set aside in the heat of the feed.)

Clockwise from top left: Team T-shirts offer levity as feeders compete for the best spoof each year. A canoe sits at the start line in the street, filled for takeoff. The crowd is on its feet as John Hazel and Susan Williams take off in their first-ever marathon.

The repair unfolded with a full crowd in attendance. The team applied lighter fluid to the boat and lit it on fire to dry the area around the hole, then applied a patch. When the team reentered the water, a roar burst from the crowd. It's moments like these that make the crowd fall together, the feed teams rush to each other's side and do what they can to help.

Phil Weiler, longtime race volunteer and spokesman, has seen this camaraderie happen every race during his 26 years with the marathon.

"After the race starts, there's only a few teams battling for first. For everyone else, it's about finishing the race," he said. "It's a race against the river. Anyone will help any team at any time. That's really cool to see from a feeder's perspective."

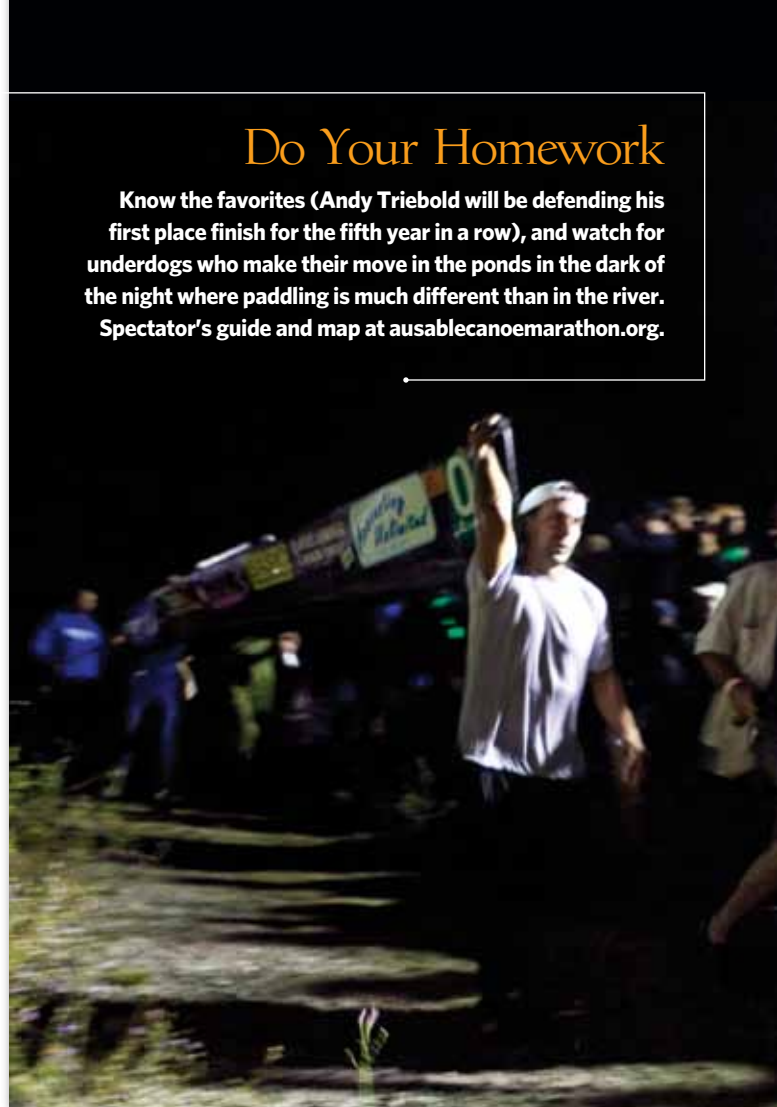
In many cases, the feeders act like a telephone party line from days gone by. As the race wears on, paddlers will start calling out to any feeder when things are going wrong. They know their requests will travel ahead of them, feeder to feeder, the news getting to their crew before they do.

Becky Mead of Traverse City has fed her husband Pete in the past five marathons. She loves the give-and-take that keeps the riverbanks humming. "We have given other teams Vernors for upset stomachs and BioFreeze for sore backs. We have also been on the receiving end of that. We have been given Jell-O (Pete's favorite) when we were out, and that's all he wanted."



Do Your Homework

Know the favorites (Andy Triebold will be defending his first place finish for the fifth year in a row), and watch for underdogs who make their move in the ponds in the dark of the night where paddling is much different than in the river. Spectator's guide and map at ausablecanoeamarathon.org.



Feeders also offer therapy, whether the paddlers like it or not. "My favorite feed I can remember was just last year," Christen Kolonich says. "One of the wives ran with her husband down the portage at Five Channels Dam and very nicely told him with an extra word or two thrown in ... 'You're not tired, you're not in pain, you've worked your butt off all year for this, get your butt in that boat, put your head down and paddle.' I laughed about that all the way to the finish. I told her I was going to steal it for my homestretch pep talk from now on."

But sometimes feeders will lose their heads before the paddlers do. The legend of the "Dirty Banana" was born the first year my father-in-law, Lauren, fed. We were late getting to a feed, and in his haste to get to the river (Tim was *waiting* for us in the canoe; not cool, people, not cool), Lauren slipped and fell down the riverbank. And with him, the all-important banana stuffed with pain pills. When he regained his footing, the banana was covered in mud. What did he do? What could he do?

He tried to lick it clean.

Not only did Tim refuse to eat the banana, no one has *ever* let Lauren live it down.

THE FINISH

In the end, the paddlers and feeders have regained their composure to some degree. The feed teams gather together as the boats close in on the finish line. We begin a preliminary celebration, passing around high fives. If nothing else, they can float across at this point. The tension starts to leak as we settle cross-legged in the grassy shade under the bridge in Oscoda.

The feeders' magic is over now. We can do nothing but wait, no more last-minute changes or dry shirts or pain pills. We will cheer, and they will smile up at us from the river at the end, a sliver of acknowledgment for what we have done. They will slip from their boats, something they've fought all night, and glide into the river for a swim before coming to shore, their feeders the first to greet them.

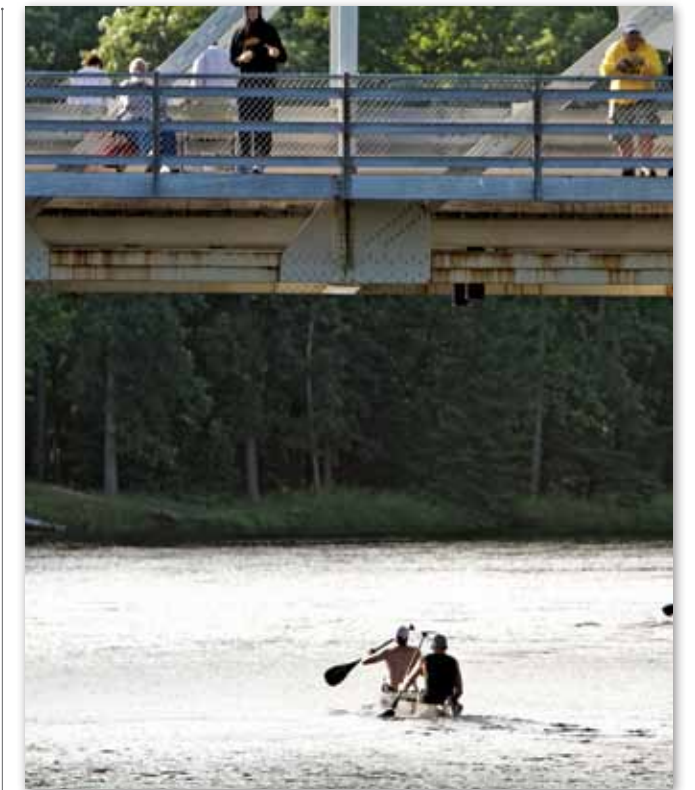
When the hotels welcome the feeders and paddlers at 3 p.m. check-in, we will sleep for the first time in some 30 hours, on hotel beds and hotel floors, catching just a few hours of rest before the awards banquet.

Then, a regular clan will insist they are too tired to go out, even as they make their way down the street on tender feet to the little ice cream shop. Here, we laugh and commiserate and josh and brag.

We will do one last thing. We will gather for a group picture, the feeders and paddlers side-by-side, under the white lattice roof in the yellow light of the shop. It is another warm July night we will never forget. ■

For more info: ausablecanoeamarathon.org. Kandace Chapple is a freelance writer and publisher of Grand Traverse Woman Magazine. kandace@kandacechapple.com

Clockwise from top left: Author Kandace Chapple and Julie Garon help their team into fresh shirts. The long portage at Mio Dam offers spectators the chance to watch for teams sprinting to overcome another team on dry land, or a time-stopping tumble on the rocky sloping path. Team 13 dumps their canoe at Alcona Dam, emptying it of wrappers, empty drinkers and, yes, urine. Feeders gather the trash and wash their hands in the river for the next go-around.



Float Your Boat

AUSABLE RIVER, GRAYLING

Wanna tackle the marathon's epic 120-mile journey? You don't have to do it in one night. Put in at Penrod's in Grayling, and dump out in Lake Huron five to seven days later. Penrod's offers overnight packages with camping along the way. The total trip takes 40 to 50 hours of paddling and, yes, a measure of tenacity. \$180 per canoe. Shorter trips are also available. penrodscanoe.com, 888-GO-RIVER.

PLATTE RIVER, HONOR

If you want to spend the day barely having to steer your canoe, the Lower Platte River is for you. Shallow with a sleepy current, the stretch is perfect for families with small children, who can easily climb out to romp on the occasional sandbar.

But this two-hour paddle is just as much about the end game: The mouth of the river curves around a grassy picnic area complete with low dunes to explore. Further on, take in the miles of Lake Michigan shoreline. \$41 for two in a canoe. Riverside Canoe Trips: canoemichigan.com, 231-325-5622.

MANISTEE RIVER, WELLSTON

Consider an overnighter on the wide but agreeable Manistee River. Wilderness Canoe Trips offers one with a bit of history. The High Rollaway Trip floats you past towering bluffs that are icons of the logging days of the 1800s, when lumbermen rolled harvested timber down the steep banks to the river and the sawmills waiting downstream. Perfect for first-time overnighthers. Baxter Bridge to Livery is nine hours. Call for rates. Wilderness Canoe Trips, wildernesscanoetripsonline.com, 800.873.6379.

