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## A MACHINE WITH TWO PISTONS

Luc Robillard and Jerry Kellogg wearily pounded through 15 hours of steady pain to win the AuSable Canoe Marathon by JIM HARRISON

In their prom formals, Queen Mary of Oscoda and Queen Ann of Grayling are beaming at the crowd across the AuSable River from the porch of Ray's Canoe Livery. It is 10 o'clock at night and the 5,000 people stretched along the bank are oddly silent. The 26 two-man racing teams have been introduced and have left with their canoes on shoulders to get ready for the LeMans-type start that will take place some 400 yards up the street in this northern Michigan village. There's even been a benediction by a local pastor. Now we are waiting for the fire-station whistle to signal the beginning of the AuSable Canoe Marathon, a 240-mile race from Grayling to the mouth of the river in Oscoda, non-stop, with a mere \$1,000 held up as a carrot for the front-runners. The arc lights are attracting a great number of bugs and one gazes idly at the river hoping to spot a brown trout rising.

With the first low trill of the whistle the crowd begins screaming. Thirty seconds later the first team rounds the corner, runs full out down the dock, hurls the canoe in the river and scrambles in. Then at least 10 more teams arrive at once with an amazing show of splashing and shoving for position. Within a minute all the canoes have disappeared into the night—which is to be a night of unmitigated punishment.

I had reached Grayling the day before with a generalized sense of irritation brought on by a summer cold, a virus and a show-me attitude toward the idea of professional canoe racing. Almost everyone canoes at one time or another, and as a trout fisherman I had grown to dread the arrival of those clunking aluminum beasts on the river, scaring hell out of brown trout for half an hour after their passing. The passengers would smile idiotically and wave from a range of five feet as they crossed your line. "Catching any?" Not now.

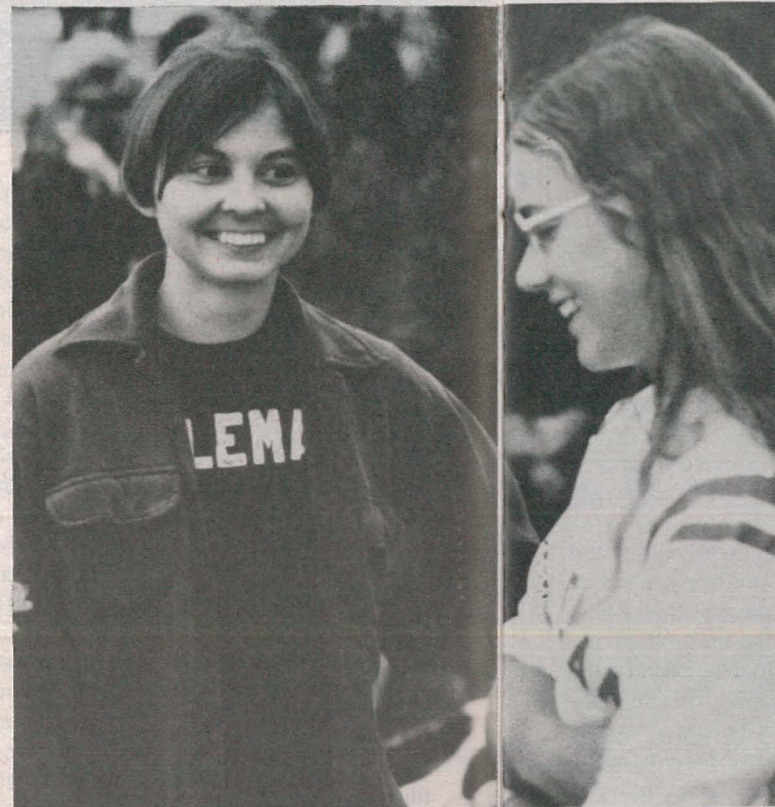
And there was a slight sense of dread and nostalgia over the fact that though I had been born in Grayling I was spend-

ing my first night there in 34 years. The dread came on because I had come to realize that the northern Michigan of my youth with its Hemingway Nick Adams stories is now largely mythical. It seemed to me that every abandoned gravel pit with its green pond from Grand Rapids to the Straits of Mackinac has been developed and renamed Wee Loch o' the Woods or something like that. But this impression was to lose much of its ammunition in the next two days.

Ray's Canoe Livery is in the center of town, and the AuSable, which begins not far from Grayling, is very small here, not gaining the weight of its several branches until farther east. I introduced myself to some strange physical types lounging around the yard. They looked like a mixture of broncobusters, bulldoggers and gymnasts: small waists, slight hips and legs but with massively developed arms and chests, the sloping powerful muscles that one identifies with weight lifters as opposed to the bulges of body builders. These were, of course, canoe racers, not terribly friendly people, though they did gradually warm. Most of them seemed busy psyching themselves up and psyching their competitors out like 180-pound peacocks.

Late in the afternoon two of the racers who had been described to me as contenders, Al Robinson and Jeff Kellogg, asked the photographer and me if we wanted to join them on a short spin. The photographer was staring at the flimsy racing canoe and decided to take an underwater camera to be safe. A racing canoe, although more than 18 feet long, weighs only 40 pounds. It is made of laminated strips of redwood and lightly fiberglassed inside and out. Al Robinson held the canoe steady at the dock, looking mournfully at my cowboy boots. I took them off.

It was like trying to balance on a cork and bore as much relationship to regular canoeing as speed skating does to walking. Despite my awkwardness with the paddle we fairly flew downstream,



**THE BIG WINNERS** were Donna Buckley and Truda Gilbert, first girls ever to finish the race, and Robillard and Kellogg, who broke their own record. Along the way "bank runners" supplied food.



with Robinson in the stern deftly keeping us away from docks and overhanging branches. Racing paddles are outsized and canted for extra power so that the surface of the blade is kept perpendicular to the canoe throughout the sweep of the stroke.

The photographer and Jeff Kellogg disappeared on a trickle of water between two bushes to explore a location called the Spider Cut, a shortcut Al and Jeff thought might be legal this year. We headed into what looked like a small creek. It is known as the Moose Cut and was dug, hacked and dynamited across a long neck of the river years ago by a racer who wanted a secret time advantage. He missed it in the darkness of the race and now nearly all of the racers know about it.

We received some encouragement of the Bobby Riggs variety. Advancing age doesn't seem to be a negative factor among canoe racers. In 1971 Buzz Peterson and his son Steve from Coon Rapids, Minn. set a record for the distance. Buzz Peterson was 51 at the time, though certainly not to be confused with the average man that age. Peterson was the master of the psych, stopping his canoe for a cigarette and waving at his astonished competitors. This year Verlin Kruger, a 50-year-old plumber, is entered again. A few years ago he paddled with a friend from Quebec to Alaska, all 6,500 miles of it. This might strike one as insane but Verlin describes it casually as a "wonderful trip," though they had trouble with ice the first month and, after all, the first half of the voyage was *upstream*. Many top-seeded racers are in their 30s, and the best explanation involves stamina and the ability to withstand the pain that sets in after a few hours of racing. "Young men can't stand the pain" was a statement repeated over and over.

The night before the race I bought three rounds of drinks for a big table of racers at a local bar. The bill came to \$5. Except for the favorites, Luc Robillard and Jerry Kellogg, they were fidgety and

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sipped ginger ale and Coca-Cola. You would have thought they were being sent to Vietnam at midnight. Robillard is a physical-education teacher from Quebec and Kellogg is an ironworker out of Twin Lakes, Mich. I asked Jerry about a fight I had heard about and he spoke modestly about the fact that two years before he and his brother Jeff had mixed it up with half a dozen louts in a bar. The first five weren't bad but the last held a knife, explaining the scar on Jerry's face. Jeff got a collapsed lung from his stabbing but still entered the race a few weeks later. I reflected dully on how outmoded this samurai routine was except for a few backwoods areas of the country.

I asked Jerry and Luc how they managed to win the 1972 race by a half-hour margin. They admitted that they sprinted for the first eight hours until they were sure no one could catch them. Sprinting is anything over 70 strokes a minute. Robillard added with a grin that they were like a "machine with two pistons." In addition to a lot of paddling, Robillard runs up to 60 miles a week to get ready for a race. Good wind is essential. The portages over the six dams are made at a dead run by all the teams.

There was some uneasiness over the idea that for the first time in the history of the race two women, Donna Buckley and Truda Gilbert, who resolutely denied any Women's Lib motivation, had been allowed to enter. I was assured by many that they would never make the finish line, which didn't seem surprising as often fewer than a third of the teams reach Oscoda. Aside from being pretty and well built, they both were in top shape. They readily took the bet for a bottle of champagne when Ed Adams said they would never reach Mio, just short of the halfway point. I tended to agree with Adams, who seemed knowledgeable about endurance, having won in the past a Texas race that took over 60 hours. How does one stay awake that long, let alone paddle?

The bar gradually cleared until the only racer left was Jay Stephan, a fishing guide and construction worker. Jay's father had won the race three times and is a well-known trout guide and builder of boats. On being pushed, Jay said he doubted he had a chance though his close knowledge of the river was an advantage. Jay wears his hair shoulder length in a ponytail, so taking an obvious cue I asked him if any of the racers used drugs for energy, say speed in any of its forms.

He said he had never heard of it. The race is simply too long, at least 15 hours of hard paddling, hardly to be compared with the 60 minutes of action football players have when they might, safely or not, use uppers.

The day of the race proved to be humid and cloudy with the threat of rain. The racers were happy about the weather—rain would raise the river level and make the water faster. I talked at length with Norm Brown and Bill Staples, who are both former competitors and the judges of the race this year. Part of their job is to make sure the racers don't cheat by portaging across some of the thin, elongated bends in the river, a rare though possible tactic. Staples marked on my program the top six finishers and he proved to be accurate. Both Staples and Brown were pessimistic about any increase in the popularity of the sport. It is simply too grueling with the years of competition, training and practice necessary to build a winner. There are no accidental or surprise winners on the pro circuit.

Late in the afternoon Brown and Staples were busy checking the canoes, measuring them to make sure they conform to rigid rules on length and minimum beam. The competitors were making extraordinary efforts to appear relaxed though it was obvious that a single misplaced firecracker could blow the whole race. I talked to a number of wives who were busy preparing the food that resembled that used by the astronauts. Tubes. Plastic containers of nutrient supplement. Hot broth and heavily sugared tea. Gatorade. Bottles of honey, mixed with milk or straight. Everyone was hip to the energy bit. (A few years back ripe olives were declared to be some ultimate energy source and many racers used them.) Long tubes are connected to gallons of Kool-Aid so the racer can suck directly without missing a stroke. The wives or friends who act as "bank runners" have to wade into the river to hand over the food without slowing down the canoe. Later in the race it is thrown into the canoes at the dam portages.

I sought out a favored racer named John Buckley, whose wife Donna is half of the female team. He had been variously described in terms that boiled down to one mean-minded ogre and I wanted to catch the act in person. Surprise. He's a graduate student working on a degree in speech therapy. Maybe a trifle arro-

gant but soft-spoken and absurdly muscled. Whatever his faults might be you perceive that part of the tension is that Buckley is a "college man" among members of the working class, still a viable separation in parts of the country. Until a few weeks before, Buckley had formed a winning combination with Jeff Kellogg. Then they hit a buoy up in Flin Flon, Manitoba and sank. They had an argument while swimming around and that broke up the team. Many wonder why the Kellogg brothers don't race together but the sport is too volatile for the close quarters of a brother combination. Among the top pros, however small the purses, partners are traded back and forth under the pressure of the anger caused by exhaustion. The AuSable Marathon is the Indianapolis 500 of canoe racing and it means no less to these people than the auto race does to the Unser brothers.

All of my doubts about the validity and interest of the sport are being dispelled as the starting time nears with evening. There's a palpable tension and excitement in the air, no doubt caused by the insanity of trying to paddle that far without stopping. And at maximum speed. The racers are now worried about the fog that often hugs the river valley, the worst thing that could happen to the weather. The small lights mounted on the bows can't penetrate fog and a racing canoe is easily stove in by a deadhead or punctured by a branch. Al Robinson has a glazed, pinched look about him as if he had been condemned to the poleax. The women are getting a lot of nervous and not very good-natured ribbing. Luc Robillard and Jerry Kellogg are leaning against a car hood. They admit to dreading the pain and a long lonely stretch of water on the other side of Mio that comes before dawn when their natural body cycles are at their lowest ebb. But they are laughing and joking and their supreme confidence doesn't seem to lessen the nervousness of the others.

Back to the start, so short and violent that the neophyte viewer scarcely has any idea what has happened. The cheering dies and Jerry Chiapetta, an outdoors writer turned television personality, clambers out of the water with a big movie camera. It seemed to me he had been taking his life in his hands. I had been warned to stand well back at portages because the racers in an advanced state of exhaustion don't see well and tend to

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bowl over spectators. We joined several hundred cars following the canoeists downriver to watch from a dozen vantage points. I was tired but figured if Verlin Kruger at 50 could paddle all night, at 35 I could manage to keep my eyes open that long.

The first stop was Burton's Landing, about 40 minutes downstream for the racers. A large crowd was milling about in the dark at the river's edge. It is bad form to shine a flashlight directly at the oncoming canoe because it blinds the paddlers to any logs or obstructions in the water. A small light became visible upstream and the people began cheering. The canoe was quickly broadside to us and flashlights were turned on. Luc and Jerry. You could hear them huffing and then one would yell "hut," which signaled a switch in the side they were paddling on. They were sprinting at 75 strokes a minute, which looked eerie and violent in the beams of dozens of flashlights. John Buckley and Stan Hall appeared in the second canoe four minutes later. A four-minute lead in the first 45 minutes. Al Robinson and Jeff Kellogg were running third. The favorites had established their position.

The night became a jumble of stops at different bridges. Two hours into the race Luc and Jerry had further lengthened their lead and the first six canoes were well ahead of the pack. The crowd kept wondering what had happened to the women but would surge on to the next bridge in order to catch the leaders. Verlin Kruger was running about ninth but I had been advised that Verlin grows stronger as the race progresses and that he was likely to improve his position in the early morning hours.

Alcona Dam, close after dawn. I stood looking out over the reservoir at the cool mist rising from the water. There were several mallards paddling around, and farther out a single loon whose tremulous cry I had heard while trying to doze in the car in a cloud of mosquitoes.

Cars full of stragglers began to arrive, flushing the mallards. Some of the crowd were very drunk and haggard-looking. I talked to Bill Kahn, a realtor who sponsors Luc and Jerry. A sponsor usually guarantees basic expenses in exchange for having his company's name painted on the canoe. Kahn has had a knack over the years for sponsoring the winner. He was busy glassing the far end of the pond, perhaps two miles distant. Harry Curley

approached. Curley has pretty much kept the race going since 1947. He lost his son Gerald, who drowned in 1953 while training for a race in Canada. I asked them if the obvious superiority of Luc and Jerry discouraged the other racers. They said not, that Ralph Sawyer had been on winning teams eight times and that hadn't scared anyone away.

A canoe appeared far down the pond and the flash of paddles seemed ornate with a weak sun glinting off the dawn mist. Luc and Jerry. They hit the bank swerving at full tilt, jumped out, shouldered the canoe and ran down the steep long bank of the dam, the photographer running with them. Luc was grinning crazily and he and the photographer were yelling at each other in French.

"*Eh, Luc. Ca va?*" ("How's it going?")

"*Ca va. Ca va, Guy.*" ("O.K., Guy.")

"*Tu es dérouté?*" ("Are you hurt?")

"*Un peu, un peu.*" ("A little." He is smiling.)

"*Tu veux un coup de rouge?*" ("You want some wine?")

"*Ce soir, mon vieux.*" ("Tonight, old boy," he says laughing.)

They are 9½ hours into the race and the nut is laughing. At the bottom of the dam Jerry's wife throws in some food and they are off at the same manic pace of the night before.

John Buckley and Stan Hall appear, 20 minutes behind the leaders. Buckley slips on the mud at the end of the portage and falls in the river. He stands there in the waist-deep water for half a minute, dazed with fatigue and still six hours from the finish. The next three canoes arrive fairly close together with Cecil Lame and Bill Ayers having taken over third and Jeff Kellogg and Al Robinson right behind them in fourth. Then we have a surprise, though it was predicted: Verlin Kruger and Terry Norris come in not half a minute behind in fifth. Ed Adams and Blaise St. Pierre are in sixth despite having lost precious time patching a hole in their bow.

But the question on everyone's mind as the crowd dispersed with the passing of the leaders was, "Where are the girls?" We learned that Truda was ill several times during the night but insisted on continuing. Someone said that they are two hours behind, which wouldn't be all that bad. Donna had told me with rather ice-cold eyes that they intended to finish if it took 24 hours.

After Alcona there are four more portages before the paddlers reach Oscoda. I began to feel a great deal of pity for the racers though it was dampened somewhat by the idea that no one was "making" them do it.

At Foote Dam, the last portage, Norm Brown advised Jerry and Luc that they had a shot at breaking 15 hours, something not done even when the race was split into two segments over two days. Brown assured me that they would sprint the last hour and a half in order to break this 15-hour block and to improve on the record they set in 1972. At Foote the most popular topic of conversation wasn't the leaders but, again, "Where are the girls?" One sensed that all of the males in the crowd weren't wishing them godspeed.

In Oscoda near the river's mouth I felt slothful and guilty sitting on the gunwale of a cabin cruiser drinking champagne and eating goodies while waiting for the racers to show. I thought of the ubiquitous expression, "I didn't get much sleep last night." Not, to be sure, if you've been paddling 3,600 strokes an hour all night.

Jerry and Luc came in sight and really began pouring it on, partly, I suspect, for the spectators. They won in 14 hours and 56 minutes, looking a bit shell-shocked, but they stood around talking for half an hour until John Buckley and Stan Hall arrived. Then Lame and Ayers came in, closely followed by Robinson and Jeff Kellogg with Verlin Kruger and Terry Norris close behind. Ed Adams and Blaise St. Pierre were a few minutes further back.

Some of the racers' hands resembled raw, bleached hamburger—the water and paddle handles working on torn skin. Their eyes were rheumy and fogged with exhaustion, legs were cramped and there was some bleeding around the waists and knees from the chafing.

It began to rain hard and the crowd disappeared, leaving many finishers to arrive to only small groups of loyal friends. Where were the women? They came in last, 17th of the finishers, but beating out eight male teams that for various reasons never reached Oscoda. The women made the finish in 22 hours, arriving during the race banquet at eight in the evening. They had lost two hours in slow water after a dam had been shut off. A cruel thing, but they were still neck and neck with Luc and Jerry for the triumph of the day.

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