

Paddle Like a Girl Women of the Marathon by Margery Guest

They call it the toughest spectator sport on any river. And that's just for spectators

It's the AuSable River Canoe Marathon, held every summer for the past 54 years. It began in Grayling as a local event. All men, few rules, just get in your canoe and paddle like a son-of-a-gun till you reach Oscoda, 120 miles downstream, where the warm, pebbly-brown river empties into the cold blue waves of Lake Huron.

Over the years, the race has evolved so much that early marathon racers might not recognize it. Now, entrants in this race train all year long. The racers are no longer just local. They come from Quebec, Alaska, Texas, Massachusetts and California. And, they are no longer just men. Today, this grueling event includes many women.

The race actually begins two days before the start with timed sprints. Teams race down river for a half mile, turn at a buoy, then paddle upriver the same distance. Sprint time determines position in the street for the start of the race.

On the evening of the official start, competitors stand in their assigned positions in the street, waiting. At exactly 9:00 PM, a gun is fired. They hoist their canoes onto their shoulders and run to the river four blocks away. Once they enter the river, they will continue non-stop through the night until the next afternoon. The first canoe finishes in somewhere around 15 hours, depending on how high or low the river is.

Spectators must choose between two equally heart-stopping beginnings: in the street or at the river. The crowds are too big, it's too chaotic and the racers are too fast to allow both.

The AuSable is wide as it moves toward Oscoda, but in Grayling, it's less than 20 feet across. Sixty canoes and 120 paddlers must enter the river, jockey for position and try not to hurt or get hurt in one of the most dangerous race beginnings anywhere. They then paddle 70 to 80 strokes per minute with six portages over dams with steep embankments. They must eat and drink while paddling and they take no bathroom breaks. Exhaustion, hypothermia and illness are real risks during the long night. This is challenge for the toughest men.

There is no separate women's division. The women race under exactly the same conditions as the men. And because this race depends greatly on upper body strength, they have almost no chance of winning it, and little chance of even placing in the top ten.

Who are these women who choose to put themselves in the path of such torture?

The first women's team

As Donna Buckley tells it, "There was a line on the entry form that read, Men only." She and her partner, Truda Gilbert, were athletes, members of the Michigan Canoe Racing Association. They were strong and ready for a new challenge. It was 1973, the height of the Women's Movement, but Donna says, "Our focus wasn't liberation. We just wanted to do the marathon."

Their application forced a meeting of race officials. The ruling against women participants was dropped. “Most racers probably thought we were a joke,” laughs Buckley. “We were certainly no threat to the winners. In fact, we finished last, as others were preparing for the banquet. But we had lots of support, people cheering, and we had media there, of course, because we’d broken a barrier.” Did they think of quitting during that long night? “Not at all,” she says. “We were very determined to finish.” The two women never raced the marathon again, but throughout Buckley’s life, the 1973 canoe marathon has served as an inspiring memory. “Preparing and participating and accomplishing the race helps you face other difficult things that come along in life. You say to yourself, I can do this. After all, I did that!”

The 2001 Marathon

Carrie Montgomery and Mandy Trudgeon, aunt and niece, formed the single women’s team this year. Ten mixed teams registered. Montgomery is a veteran, having participated in 10 previous races. Her niece is just 20 years old, and entered this year for the first time.

Even before the sprints, one woman paddler from New Hampshire was forced to withdraw from the race due to a family emergency. Another woman dropped because she no longer had a partner. On the day before the sprints, she was listed on the website as seeking a new one. He or she would need to have a canoe.

“Don’t assume you’ll finish this race.”

Lisa Salvini and Abby Kingman have been friends for eight years now. They’re both from Massachusetts. They heard about the AuSable Marathon while participating in other, less difficult races in the East.

They raced their very first AuSable race together just two years ago. Since then, they’ve been recruiting other racers from New York, Connecticut, New Hampshire and Vermont. In that first race, everything went like clockwork, resulting in a 40th place finish out of 46 canoes. This is highly respectable for a women’s team paddling the marathon for the first time and more importantly, not being familiar with the river.

The following summer, they signed up early, excited to improve their time, dreaming of moving up maybe 20 places. But 2000 was a different year. Within a few minutes of entering the river, they heard a thud and came to a dead stop. Maybe a railroad tie, they thought. An awful lot of water was coming into the boat, so they opened the bailer. Closed the bailer, then opened it again. As darkness quickly arrived, it was hard to hit the foot-operated bailer straight. The pedal flew off, leaving the bailer stuck open for the rest of the race.

They discussed dropping out (“Hey! It’s early. We can watch the race with our friends!”) but decided against it. They figured no water could come in as long as they were moving, so they just kept paddling.

There were more problems. A lost flashlight, a broken paddle and numerous battles with duct tape trying to patch the now-visible, 18-inch gash in the bottom of the boat. They came in 42nd. Their apology to their sponsors impressed the officials. “What endurance, what humility,” commented one.

As Kingman put it: “So much can go wrong over that many hours and at night, no one should assume they’ll even finish this race.”

For the 2001 race, Kingman and Salvini entered in mixed teams. Kingman signed on with Neal Sand, a Vermonter who’d raced the marathon once before and Salvini with Doug Howard, also of Vermont, a first-time marathoner. In a mixed team, each woman might finish somewhere in the twenties or even teens.

“With a female partner,” Kingman says, “you need to realize you will not be with the main pack. Strategically, you don’t have the big power bursts that a men’s or mixed team has for turns and shallows. You can do well, but you need to rely more on being consistent and smart.”

The evening of the race, Salvini wore a gray T-shirt. On the back were the words: Paddle like a girl.

“We could die out here”

“No way,” Kathy Manizza recalls telling Lynne Witte when Witte first invited her to paddle the marathon with her five years ago. “I don’t want to paddle all night!” Witte persisted. There was a women’s bonus that year \$500 for the first women’s team to finish. “It wasn’t for the money. Sure, it pays your expenses, but I decided to do it because, for the first time, they were going to recognize the women. It’s been a pretty male-dominated sport. Even now, you see the results in the press and they list only the top three boats. They don’t list the first women’s boat or even the first mixed boat.”

Although Manizza was an accomplished athlete, she was surprised at how difficult that first race was. There were things she wasn’t prepared for. For example, she hadn’t known how much to eat, so she followed Witte’s example, which made her sick to her stomach.

“Lynne eats a lot during the race and it works fine for her.” All through that long night, she would ask Witte, “How much longer?” Witte, at that time a veteran of 17 prior marathons, never changed her reply: “We’re getting there.”

“I was ready to punch her,” says Manizza. But they won the \$500. In the 2001 race, Manizza paddled with Joe Shaw, with whom she has won the mixed division. The relationship between two team members is crucial, according to Manizza. “We totally trust each other. We know if anything went wrong, we would take care of each other before we’d worry about the race. “There are things you go through during the night. The first year Joe and I raced together, it was really cold and we’d flipped over just after Mio (about a third of the total distance of the race). It got down to 40 degrees. Cold. And dark. I was scared. And we’d been in the water a long time. I really wanted to quit. The reality hit me. Joe, I said We could die out here.” Shaw agreed they could quit, but not in the middle of nowhere in the dark. They’d have to keep paddling until they saw their pit crew. “Once I saw them,” Manizza says, “I started feeling better. I said to Joe, C’mon! Let’s pick it up!”

Scared to death

Chris Kucharek has raced the marathon three times. There’s been a rumor going around that he’s engaged to his marathon partner, Marlana Hopewell. “We’re not engaged yet,” Kucharek clarified, then added: “But it’s going to happen.” Hopewell got into racing with

Chris after they met at Kirtland Community College in Grayling. They've raced a lot together over the past three years, but this is her first marathon and she's young only 22. "We decided to try it and so far we've done really well," Hopewell said. "We finished 34th in Spike's. (Spike's Challenge is a race held one week prior to the marathon.) Hopewell was a cross-country runner in high school in West Branch, Michigan. She and Mandy Trudgeon, one half of the lone women's team, are friends. This would be the first marathon for both of them. "I think it'll go fine," she said as she awaited her team's turn to sprint. "The only time I think I'll have a problem is the next day." Kucharek had given her simple advice for the start in the street: watch what you're doing and make sure you don't hurt anyone or yourself." She admitted the chaotic shotgun start had her worried. "But once we get in the water, everything will be okay." Their goal was simply to finish, after all. She thought for a moment, then looked up and smiled. "Actually I'm scared to death."

Father and daughter

Amy Solak grew up hearing tales of the AuSable race. She'd met most of her dad, Frank Smutek's old racing buddies. Smutek paddled for the first time in 1952 with Gerry Curley, and they did well, finishing eighth. That next spring, they trained hard and thought they might even win. Paddling wasn't the big issue for them, it was making good time on the portages. One evening, Gerry took a chance, going out into Lake Huron with another partner when the lake was rough, planning to turn in on a run, hit shore and race up a steep embankment with the canoe. When the boat tipped over in the waves, his partner managed to swim to shore, but Gerry didn't make it back. He was 16 years old. That was almost fifty years ago, but Smutek still remembers his friend with fondness and sorrow.

Smutek entered the marathon for the first time since Curley's death in 1998 with his son, Ted. He was reluctant until Ted made a little sketch of what a father-and-son T-shirt might look like: Smutek and Smutek. They finished in 22nd place. After the race, Smutek told his son to look for a younger, tougher partner and prepared to retire again. But there was Solak saying, "Hey! What about me?" Solak grew up in Mio and was a self-described jock. But despite her athletic abilities, she never considered paddling the race. Her reason to finally do so was to do be with her dad. She considers his decision to race with her a gift. He is not a large man, he's 67 years old, and his health isn't perfect.

Still, they began training together in 1999 and in 2000, paddled their first marathon together. This is only their second year, but the fans are already smitten with this father-daughter team. When they were introduced, Solak and Smutek received a huge round of applause accompanied by screams. They were also asked to carry the American flag in this year's procession.

Smutek doesn't hide his admiration for his daughter as a competitor. "She's strong," he says. "She does the bow. Not many women do the bow." (The stronger person usually is in the bow, as it's easier to pull than to push.)

At Foote Dam, the last and most difficult portage, Solak moved quickly. Smutek walked gingerly down the hill, looking weary. Solak glanced back at her father, but did not look worried. They'd paddled together all night, encouraging each other. By this time, they knew they were almost home. Solak called over her shoulder: "Come on, Poppy, let's go."

Teacher and role model

As the woman with the most finishes and the holder of many marathon records, Lynne Witte is highly respected by both men and women paddlers. At 47, Witte was the oldest woman in this year's race. She likes to joke that Al Widing, the oldest marathoner at 76 and a favorite of racing fans, thinks the two of them are the same age.

Because this race depends so much on pacing and endurance (both mental and physical), age is often an asset, up to a point. Jeff Kolka and Serge Corbin, the winning team for six years in a row, are each in their forties. Many teams perform well into their fifties and older. Still, Witte is concerned that more young racers get involved to ensure the marathon's continuation. It is a personal goal of hers to encourage young women and men to enter. "Not only are there not enough females in the race, but there are also not enough young people," she says. "But I think back to when I was 22, what would I have been doing?"

Growing up on the shores of Lake Huron in Lexington, Michigan, Witte paddled, but only as family recreation. She began canoe racing two years after Gilbert and Buckley broke into the race, and entered the marathon for the first time in 1980. "People said to me, you can't do that," so I guess at first it was to prove a point." Now the motivation for Witte is simple enjoyment and the fact that every year brings something different. This year Witte raced with a young man, Dave Sabin. He's 22, born the year she paddled her first marathon. She wasn't sure what his expectations would be (paddling with a woman partner), but she gave him a lot of credit for being mature enough to race with her.

In spite of her many records and her reputation as a strong competitor, Witte says there are male paddlers who would never consider her for a partner. "Some guys just will not race with a female. They're honest about it, too. They'll come over and ask for help putting a canoe cover on or something, but you know darn well they'd never race with you. And yet it's a proven fact that the women can do it." Witte has recently become involved in dog-sled racing. When she's not paddling or pursuing this new challenge, she's teaching. Would some of her second-grade students from St. Peter Lutheran School in Mt. Clemens be cheering at the finish line? "Oh, sure," she said. "They show up every year."

We wish to express our appreciation to Margery Guest for granting us permission to post her article on our website.