

Up All Night – By Margery Guest

The gun goes off and fans sprint alongside the racers, camera bags and purses flying behind them. But it's obvious that although the racers are carrying canoes on their shoulders, there's no way spectators can keep up. Feeding teams are running too, to their cars. You can tell them by their serious looks and colorful matching T-shirts. Three groups race in this marathon and all of them need to be in good shape to do it right: paddlers, spectators and feeders.

That the paddlers need to be in great shape is obvious. Let's not even talk about them. The spectators, if they're going to go through the night, need to be able to find good viewing spots, run or walk a mile or more to those spots and eat right in order to stay awake until morning.

Then there are the feeders.

Many feeders are women; Wives, sisters, mothers, daughters. One woman recommended that all paddlers in the marathon should feed at one time or another so they can appreciate how tough it is. "Most women racers have fed, but there are very few men racers who have fed," she commented.

One woman racer said she entered the marathon because after feeding a team for a few years, she figured racing couldn't be any more difficult.

What's so hard about being a feeder?

The feeders' job is three-fold. Their first responsibility is to provide nourishment on the fly. That is, prepare and provide the right food and drink at the right times and get these into your team's canoe without violating any rules about touching the boat. The second task is to run errands and give aid to the team when they get into trouble as in: bring duct tape, pick up an extra paddle, find a flashlight, hand over the aspirin. Third, is to encourage and coach their team. To yell things like, "Get that current," and "You're only five minutes behind the next canoe. Go get'em!"

Feeders stay up all night just like racers. They worry about everything that can go wrong, but like husbands watching babies be delivered, they can't really do much to end the misery. They wade out into water they can't see fighting a five-mile-an-hour current in order to hand over supplies to canoes heading toward them in the dark at full speed. They risk poison ivy.

Brian Burrell, is an anomaly. He's a male feeding a female team. A newcomer to Grayling, Burrell learned about the race just a few years ago. "The hair stood up on

the back of my neck the first time I saw the start,” he says. He’s been hooked ever since and in 2001, he fed Carrie Montgomery and Mandy Trudgeon. “You speed to your feeding destination, find your team, dump the food and jump back into your vehicle. Then you sit and wait at the next feeding spot. The middle of the night is a challenge, fighting to stay awake. But I feel honored to be asked by the family to help out.”

Julie Garon fed her husband, Mike, again in 2001. He always carefully writes down his feeding schedule for her ahead of time and she takes it with her. She knows firsthand that there are as many risks for feeders as for racers. Once, her feeding partner was knocked into the river and only later did they realize she was suffering from hypothermia.

She’s seen racers who mistreat their feeders, bossing them around and yelling at them when things aren’t right. But her husband’s not one of those. “He’s very nice and considerate,” she says, then pauses. “But if he weren’t, he knows I wouldn’t be feeding him the next year.”

Rebecca and Samantha Barton are two sisters, 11 and 8 years old, feeding their dad, Bruce Barton, and his teammate, Matt Rimer. In the street, Matt was hit in the back by a canoe and by the second bridge, had to be taken to the hospital with excruciating back pain. So the two Barton girls fed their aunt and uncle, Tom and Connie Cannon, a mixed team. Both girls were up all night. “We have melon cut up and pudding they squeeze right into their mouths,” says Rebecca. “We give them sports drinks, aspirin, whatever they need. The hardest time is at 5:00 in the morning when it’s just getting light,” she says. “I was tired.”

Perhaps the following exchange, overhead at Foote Dam, exemplifies the ideal feeder/competitor relationship: Feeder to racer as she runs alongside the boat: “...oh, and I put a chicken sandwich in there for you.” Racer to feeder as he jumps back into the canoe: “Bless your heart. Bless your heart.”