

My First Experience of the AuSable Canoe Marathon – by Jeff Potter

Background

Every summer in northwoods Michigan there's an "extreme family event" that several up north communities get charged up for. It's called the AuSable Canoe Marathon.

For over 50 years now, in late July canoe teams charge down from the headwaters of the AuSable river in Grayling, the center of the state, for 120 miles east to Oscoda on the shore of Lake Huron, to try to win a share of the \$50,000 purse. On the way, the race passes through Mio and several other towns, but mostly it winds its way through the wilderness and cottages of the AuSable National Forest.

The race, which includes upwards of 70 teams, takes about 20 hours to finish. It starts at 9pm in downtown Grayling with a wild run down a gauntlet of spectators to the narrow, twisty river as it passes through town. The race proceeds all night long through the forest until dawn finds most of the paddlers on the backwaters of several large dams that make up much of the lower half of the course.

It's the longest and toughest of all the canoe marathons in the world. And it's the only one which runs all night long. Only the toughest, craziest pro racers dare to enter this race. It's the pinnacle of any paddling career.

First-timers rarely finish. And any finish is respectable. People take years to get to know the course, to understand what racing through the night involves, to learn how to navigate the vast, unmarked backwaters by compass and map, at full speed. They use bow lights when they have to, but amazingly many prefer to paddle in the dark, detecting the ripples of objects with honed night vision. It's hard for a civilian to even imagine how they do it. It seems perfectly dark out! The moon sometimes helps. The faint glow of the night sky against the treeline, making a dark wall on either side, helps mark the course of the river.

The racers come from all over, some from overseas. But most are locals. The other major areas are French Canada, New England, Wisconsin and Minnesota.

It's also called the world's toughest spectator race. 50,000 people pack Grayling to watch the start. As soon as the racers run, carrying their canoes, the half-mile from town to the river, the spectators start a race of their own. They dash in a wild horde to get a good look at the racers as they blast away, fighting for position in the tight, twisty, shallow waterway wending through the cottages in town. The race-watchers are now fully charged, and for many a long, wild, complicated night begins. The whole herd then turns and runs for their cars. The spectator race is part auto rally and part orienteering as everyone grabs their maps and plans out which bridge or riverbank they'll drive to next to watch the racers...and the big, nightlong party begins.

Upwards of 100,000 people watch the race during its long run down to the Great Lake. Hundred jam the bridges to get a quick, dim look at their heroes. Loud music and bright lights go with the traffic jams. Plenty of police. It's mainly known as a wild, drunk night and there are wrecks to go with it.

So, what have we gotten ourselves into? Where did this race come from? Not many from downstate know about it, but it's the biggest event of the year for the Up North people. It's sponsored by almost every business in the area.

Why Would I Know About It?

I've known about this race for decades, ever since I started sport canoeing. As soon as you start paddling long and hard around this state, someone mentions the Marathon.

And just the mention is enough to give you a thrill and a scare.

I did two 6 hour mountain triathlons. But 20 hours? I have a small idea of what might happen. It's not a pretty picture.

I said I was going up to watch the Marathon quite a few times. Something always got in the way. Maybe the staying up all night part had something to do with it.

Peer Pressure Pays Off!

This year my friend Tim is starting to catch the canoe racing bug. He said C'mon, let's go up and watch! And so I finally did it. We went up and watched. And what a sight we saw!

We brought my old woodstrip C2 racer. On the drive up, we wondered why people were flashing their headlights at us. Kids in minivans were turning in their seats and waving at us. Do they think we're racers? We were hours from Grayling yet the fever was catching us already. We were canoeists, we had a canoe, thus we were kings this weekend!

Race Day!

So here we are. We get off the freeway and start into Grayling. A half hour later, we creep over the river bridge. We see the banners and the hordes already marking out their seating places on the hillside. Campers, beer tents, people everywhere.

We find out that there are Challenge Races during the day for citizen racers. We sign up our old wood pro boat that we'd brought along just for fun, in case. I haven't paddled yet this year, but who couldn't race on a day like today? We've caught the bug.

We watch the parade and buy hats and t-shirts. Big groups are everywhere wearing t-shirts supporting their favorite teams. Lots of people, young and old are wearing them. It's like seeing people in Detroit Red Wings outfits. I've never seen outdoor sports with FANS like this! Little kids came up to us and said "Hey mister, are you a racer?" I wished I was.

We finally did our hour-long Challenge race. It was fun. We didn't totally botch the job. Hundreds of people lined the route down through town, cheering us on and out into the woods. We paddled out then back up into town. We finished where the Marathon would start. We rounded the bend and saw thousands of people in the stands and on the hillside and they all cheered for us! The announcers announced us and there was rock'n'roll music. They treated us like stars.

Pre Race Frenzy & Heroes

I grabbed my favorite sports book: "Experience the Tradition: the First 50 Years of the AuSable Marathon." It's full of amazing race stories and history and tons of wonderful photos from all the years, through all the developments of the canoe—from old fashioned 100-pound canvas boat with a 2-pound beavertail paddle to today's 26-pound carbon fibre wonder craft with 7-ounce paddle. But despite all the changes you can see the common streak running through the paddler—the twinkle in the eye of someone who's big enough for the job. Some show pure fierceness.

It was time to introduce the racers. In one part of the mob near the river I started to see tougher people gathering. The crowd would go nuts every so often as the DJ's introduced another team and the racers would parade down the dock and wave. Over to the side I recognized Serge Corbin, the #1 racer of all time. I took my heritage book over and asked him for his autograph. He was totally calm in the midst of the storm.

Then I saw Solomon Carriere. He's an Indian from Saskatchewan. He often wins with Serge, but he paddles with lots of different people. Sol paddles for his living as hunting guide. He also works in the mines. Sol won one year, with a week's notice. He seems easy going, somewhat plain, no particular muscle to him. It was a thrill to see him hanging out, calm, with his partner, Bruce Barton. I went up to Sol and asked for his autograph. Sure, he said. Then I got a sense of his power. It emanated from his face. His face is smooth and full, but up close you see that it's all muscle, ready for a long haul at high speed. People have their strengths in different areas, but this seemed unusual to me. The capacity you don't see in him in photos, hit me when I met him in person.

I saw old Al Widing, Sr.—at 75, the oldest racer. He's also done it the most—35 times.

Then I saw little Matt Rimer, only 16 years old—his babyfat all chiseled into a wrestler physique, but still looking like a kid. Matt got top 10 last year in his first Marathon with partner Tim Triebold. Tim is a lively, fiesty fellow in his 40's.

All 67 teams were introduced down at the river and the rock music started playing and the paddlers ran back up the street to town. The crowds massed along the road all the way down to the river. The cops cleared the way.

Ready, Set....

I saw a man raise the flag in the distance. All the teams and canoes are lined up in front of the Post Office. Boom! the cannon and the flag dropped, the racers picked up their boats and ran like the devil. The crowd goes nuts. Here they come! Around the corner, the teams keep coming, and they disappear down to the tiny put-in at the river. The crowd turns on its heels and a new phase of the day begins.

Now everyone is running in a mad dash to see how the first few minutes of the start sorts out from various yards through town. Running, almost full-contact, screaming. We get to someone's backyard and stop. Thousands line the waterway, out of breathleaning on their knees. Then in the distance we hear cheering, whistles and bells rolling towards us. Here they come! Flying down the river in their black carbon and golden kevlar boats. Elbow to elbow, paddles clashing, waves leaping. They blast past. They keep coming. It takes about 5 minutes for them all to come on by.

Then we all turn on our heels again and run to our cars. We blast away. Out of town, down a dirt road, but then not to the bridge where everyone else goes, but we follow our friends and take a cut-off and go back into a campground. We hit a trail then go to a what we're told is a nice riverbank. It is. All rooty and dirt and full of people. We find a seat, and wait. It's getting dark.

The World's Toughest Spectating Begins!

Suddenly a quarter mile up the dark river, flash bulbs start popping. Suddenly a roar through the woods, bells, whistles, screaming. And here they come! A dark, blazing shadow. No headlight on yet. Dip-dip-dip, and the lead boat is past. 80 strokes a minute. Wow! What a lead already! It's Corbin-Kolka all right! Then darkness again. Everyone leans forward to see, to hear. Another roar from upstream. Here come two boats tight together! Wow! It's infectious, everyone cheers. Go! go! go! Flashlights shine on the hulls, on the logos, the numbers, the first names under each paddler's side. I see flashing paddles. An arm in the glow. And then they're gone.

I see a boat trying to pass another hit a low stump and turn sideways, then get sorted out. It's really dark! How does anyone see? "Yeah, that's the question, eh?" laugh some of the old hands. You go by the ripples, they say. It seems clear to me that this is one of those things where it works best if you've grown up on this river. They say that most times the lights are more of an annoyance. When a team sees a light ahead of them, it just pulls them down the river, and the team ahead doesn't need to encourage that. Without a light, a team can be fifty feet ahead of you and you don't know they're there. That's why most teams wear black and stay as dark as they can.

What Does a 20-Hour Canoe Race Look Like?

We can already tell that this is going to be memorable. What they say is right: watching this race is going to be a challenge. Tim and I will be driving 150 miles tonight.

It's neat to see how the crowd relates to the drama that's so slowly unfolding. No one treats any racer different from any other. There isn't the winner then the losers. This is a Big Picture race. At the same time, the race historian says that the top 5 sprint times from the day before are 80% accurate predictors of how the race will end up! That makes the race a foregone conclusion,

right? Heck, we already know that Serge and Jeff will likely do very well. Sure, illness or trouble could knock them out or shake things up. But at the top, that doesn't happen so often. So where's the drama? I think it's like a live radio sport. Only in this case, you can participate in keeping up with the action.

Several local radio stations keep up with live on-site reports all night long. And action did happen. Between bridges you could hear reports as the gaps between boats gradually shift. When you get to a bridge, you get to be surprised when one boat shows up ahead of a bunch of others. Also, many of the boats represented unique stories. How would the first mixed-sex team do? The first women's boat? Here comes the oldest paddler! Here come the teenagers! Here comes the father-and-son! The father-and-daughter! They're both first-timers in this next boat...and look how good they're doing! Here come some Frenchies! Some Brits! Hey, these guys have never got the top ten, and here they are in 8th already!

I guess it's also just the idea that all these folks were paddling so smooth, in the dark, like a bat out of hell, all night long, from the center of the state to the big lake. It's a race that you have to be there to appreciate. You get to drive it, eat along with it. It's a race for the woods.

We really notice the quiet except for when there's cheering. We notice how fresh the air smells. The piney spicey northwoods scent. Solitude, purity and frenzy all mixed together.

A Night of Bridges and Junk Food

After dinner we headed back out to the woods, downstream about 30 miles. We didn't quite grasp that the race takes HOURS to pass any point. We felt pressured by the pace of the winners rushing downstream and wanted to see them go by. We hit a few bridges, trying to see different parts of the pack. Soon, it's 1 a.m. We find a good place to stand in the quiet woods by a bridge to wait for the racers. Pretty soon way upstream we see camera flashes way upriver, then gently bobbing lights. The leaders have already been by, but here comes the chase pack! Noise and yelling. Then they're gone.

We didn't need any help in knowing when the young ones came paddling past! Their high school classmates were out in force, staying up all night, screaming and cheering for the local boys.

4 a.m. finds us on a bridge in another county. Trucks drive by with weary pit crews, usually driven by the wives. Teens run by with flashlights, blinkers, reflective vests—all helping out Dad and his pal, carrying food and sipper bottles, wearing waders, headlamps. The scene has a disaster response air to it, with the pitch black humid night, the hustling workers, walkie talkies squawking, squad car lights flashing.

People start coming up to me asking for data! They see I'm keeping a chart. Boats go past. Oh-oh, a top boat no longer appears. Radio word comes along that they've dropped out due to a back injury. A dozen boat numbers are listed as dropped out so far. One lead group, just 20 minutes back from the leaders, has blown apart. The tough old guys who were in it are now firmly ahead.

I have a quiet visit with Forest Haines, an older paddler. He holds some Marathon top results and records. He notes that it's getting a bit light and that he always gets tired after the sun comes up. I wonder if he means when he's spectating or racing...or both! We're all now feeling the distance. He says that the 2nd place boat is doing right well: It took John Sullivan 8 races and he's finally finding his groove. It's his time. Like I said, it's a big picture race.

A Critical Moment

Tim and I take off for a big dam portage. It's just light. Tim is nodding off, head drooping as I drive. We get to the dam and find our friend's vehicles camped out in strategic spots. We park. I wake up an hour later to hubbub. It's a lovely morning. The racers are coming in! We get out our lawnchairs and go sit on the dam, at the take-out. A mile off we see blades flashing over the swamp grass at the edge of the horizon. It's a huge backwater. Here come the leaders across the open water. 80 strokes a minute. Serge and Jeff. They hit the beach kinda stone-faced. Serge almost falls in as he steps into overly deep water. Their crew swaps their feed bottles, gives them splits. They shoulder the boat and run off down the hill, with the crowd cheering, clapping and drinking coffee and eating donuts. More boats come in after about ten minutes.

After an hour of watching boats come in, one glides to the beach. The bow paddler drops his chin, his arms sag. He steps out and falls into the water. People rush down. "Don't touch him or he's DQ'ed!" an official shouts. His partner rushes forward. He's passed out. The hell with the rules. They pull him to the grassy side beach and get the canoe out of the way. He's French. No one can talk to him, not even his partner. He's eventually revived and led away. We hear that he was dehydrated, suffering diabetic shock, hadn't had enough to eat, had high blood pressure, and had too many pills.

An hour later, boats are still coming in. Two hit the beach together. One team bursts forward in a run. The crowd goes nuts. The other leaps to follow and stalls out, a paddler's knee sags, he teeters. The crowd gasps then urges them on. Come on! Just keep moving! One foot in front of the other! But the move has happened. The hanger-on team is dropped. An older guy says "Dang did you see them run! That's my boy! He won't say quit! They're both Marines!" And it's true. They weren't winning this race, but they fought back the cobwebs and got fierce and were outta there like pistol shots. ...After 10 hours of racing?

The Grand Finale

We're getting hungry now. A whole day of junk food, a night of candy bars and Mountain Dew. Ugh. We finally get to Oscoda

...The cheering had already started. The announcers were going nuts. It's noon and here come the winners! We make our way through the finish line crowd. And then there they were, with mics and cameras around them. They looked a bit drawn but just fine. Jeff is as lucid as before the race, talking about race history for the TV.

We went on the bridge over the finishing stretch. The river is wide here. Industrial, with concrete wall banks. The racers had really paddled to the sea. Here comes another! They finish to ear-

splitting cheers and go to the take-out. They flop into the water and lay there. One guy isn't moving much. Someone is talking to him. He gets carried off. His teammate lolls in the water, soaking, splashing his face. Helpers carry the boat away.

Here comes the result of a big painful final sprint. Bruce and Sol had been lagging behind a team for the whole race. But they are now a minute up on their rivals. That's what a big hour-long canoe sprint like they can dish out will do for you. They finish and roll into the water and unweight their bodies, floating, done. Bruce finally leaves. I see Solomon waiting in the water by a seawall. What's he up to, Mr. Quiet Guy. The beaten rivals come in next. Quite a crowd of people are in the water. The teammates are shaking hands, their crew is congratulating them above the din. Things start to clear out a bit. Sol gets up and goes over to one of them, talks into his ear, shakes his hand.

More boats come in. Racers splash each other at the finish, loll in the river, swim around. It's like some kind of church baptism scene. All these people struck by the fact that they finished, just sitting in the river, staring.

We hear that it appears that a total of 17 boats dropped out. Probably most of the first-timers and out-of-towners. Tom says that if you're not from around here, you just can't imagine what will be required.

Here comes the youngsters' boat. You can see them looking big-eyed despite being so wasted. The crowd goes nuts. Go Colin! Go Brad! The announcer is shouting They're home! They're home! Bring em on home! They splash each other with their paddles. Then they go play in the water. They seem more surprised, and relieved, that they're actually here than the other finishers. Kids dive off the bridge and flock into the water to join them.

Seeing the paddlers coming down through town, on that last big waterway. Seeing those kids who tried so hard. Seeing the paddlers wobbly as they get out one last time. Being around their families, neighbors and townspeople, and all the areas in between, all connected together, that was really something. Paddlers of all ages, kings for one peak season of the summer.

Then we drove home. I was tired for a few days. Eyes shutting in the afternoon. No wonder they call it the World's Toughest Spectator Race.

Hindsight

I looked at the details of my race history book again. I started to see more drama in the stats than I had before actually being there.

I noticed that Butch Stockton's rise to a winning career began with his first race at age 20 with a partner named Wayne Stockton, age 33. Then I noticed that Butch's nephew Brett's rise to an even longer streak of wins began at age 15 with a partner named... Wayne Stockton, age 39. Maybe Brett's dad, huh? Anyway, he was taking out the boys and showing them the right way to start. But I don't see much on Wayne other than that.

Then I notice that Rick Joy, ranked #6 of all time, has raced almost 20 times and has never won, not even ever 2nd. He's had 10 thirds and fourths. The racers ahead of him all have multiple wins. Rick just keeps doing well. I wonder if he keeps looking to unlock that riddle. Or does he just paddle? Like Solomon seems to. It seems like lots of paddlers just paddle with who they'd like to, from year to year.

I saw that Big John Baker's career went longer than I could even imagine. Started with a 9th in 1964, then a 4th in 1990! ...And 11th in 1991 before retiring.

I saw that Butch had "DNF" as his last race. Dang. I noticed that Brett's last 3 races were firsts, then he was done. I didn't see either of those old ski bums at this race.

Since the big race, Tim has been training in my old stripper boat with some pals in Ann Arbor, with the help of some top marathon racers. Last week, one of the new guys, Doug, actually bought a carbon fiber race boat that he and Tim are using that presently. They did a race this weekend. They're shooting for the Marathon already! Crazy guys!

Postscript

The day after the race, I told a friend about our experience. My pal told me in turn about a movie he just watched with a teenager, 'American Beauty.' The kid loved it, had seen it 4 times. My pal was dismayed by the cynicism in it, the attempt to show horror as something with a superficial beauty. Sure, it can be alluring to those who relate to the desperation, yet what does it point to for a solution? A teen I know has seen 'Fight Club' 4 times. It seems like both movies are about dissolution. About broken communication between people and families. There's no point, so why not fight. Sure, some things need destroying. But then they need repairing. And you can't do it by way of watching movies over and over. You need to act in life, connected with others, family, neighbors, people of all ages and types. If you can do that, you might be on the right track.

We need celebrations and special events where inspirational, connected values are shown for all to see, are put on center stage, and where anyone who's simply willing and determined can participate. But not for profit, not for entertainment. As a test, an example to see and to show. Things can get pretty far out there, life can get hectic, the test can be extreme...and still be rooted. With the help of friends and family, people can still find their way back home. A canoe race can be as good as way to do it as any.