

# A Rude Awakening on the Yukon River

..... Rod Price

I estimated Dawson City, the finish line in the *Yukon River Quest*, was less than two hours away. It was Saturday morning on Day Three of the race. I had been fighting the sleep monsters for several hours. I was out of Five Hour Energy shots, and a can of Red Bull seemed to just upset my stomach. Around 5am I had a close call when I nodded off and my hand hit the cold water of the *Yukon River*. That jolted me awake, and scared me at the same time. I thought that incident would be enough to keep me awake until the finish.



About thirty minutes later, I awoke as



I flipped my solo canoe in the river. My worst fear, short of a grizzly attack, had now been realized. It is amazing how fast you can go from utter exhaustion to a full-blown adrenaline

rush. The water was cold, but not take-your-breath-away freezing. I had time to save myself.

The *Yukon River Quest* had been on my "to do" list for several years. **Marty Sullivan**, one of my workout partners in Central Florida, did the *Quest* in 2006. I probably would have done the race in 2009, but **Peter Coates** – a Scottish gentleman living in Whitehorse – dreamed up the *Yukon 1000*. A 1000 mile canoe race! If it is crazy to paddle a 460 mile race, let's move the lever to certifiably insane for a one-thousand miler. Actually, my first thought was about the shirt. **Marty** has his *YRQ* shirt, and I've been around other paddlers wearing their *Missouri 340* and *Texas Water Safari* (260 miles) attire. I wanted that *Yukon 1000* race jersey.

I was fortunate to find an equally dis-

*Rod Price tows his canoe to the pre-race gear inspection in Whitehorse.*



*Above – the starting line up and then the Le Mans start as racers dash for the shore and their boats.*

## *A Rude Awakening on the Yukon River: Rod Price's Yukon River Quest*

turbed individual from north Georgia who shared my taste for mind-blowing physical pursuits. **Ardie Olson**, 47, was captain of *Mighty Dog*, the 2006 national champion adventure racing team. *Mighty Dog* completed the grueling *Primal Quest Adventure Race* in ten days. In 2008, Mr **Olson** came in second in the 2700 mile *Great Divide Bicycle Race* which starts in Canada and ends in Mexico.

**Ardie** and I paddled together and apart for hundreds of hours in the eight months preceding the race. In March 2009, we entered the *Everglades Challenge* - a 300 mile, small boat race from Tampa Bay to Key Largo, Florida. We battled headwinds for most of three days. Our speed in the wooden, triple kayak we paddled was reduced to two knots at times. **Ardie** and I persevered and easily won the paddling division in a time of 3 days, 12 hours. That race and a couple of paddling weekends on the *Suwannee River* in the intense Florida heat helped to prepare us for the rigors of the *Yukon 1000*. The race went well, and **Ardie** and I became the first canoe team to win the world's longest canoe race. As for the details - I hear an excellent book has been written about the weeklong adventure.

### *Yukon River Quest 2010*

Doing a multi-day paddling race in a solo canoe or kayak is a tough task. Doing it unsupported when a support crew is allowed and encouraged is foolish. Yet, this is the situation I found myself in when I arrived in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory - Canada for the 12th annual *Yukon River Quest*. I spent the two days before the race making sure I had all the required gear and doing a couple of practice runs in the solo canoe I had rented. The solo canoes used in the *YRQ* are much different from the C1 racing canoes I am accustomed to paddling. These canoes are like a kayak with an elevated seat. They have an enclosed deck with a



*A wet crowd of supporters and spectators at the shoreline see the teams off at the start.*

spray skirt and a rudder. The canoe tracked well, and I preferred to paddle it without the rudder.

I had arranged for Kanoe People Outfitters to transport my canoe to the race start on Wednesday morning. I loaded my gear into a cab at my hotel, and was dropped off at Rotary Park on the *Yukon River*. The weather was coolish and a steady drizzle was falling. I located my canoe and moved it to the proper area, and awaited my gear inspection before loading the canoe. The race inspectors have a clipboard with a 25 item checklist. It took a minute to find my water purification kit, but I passed inspection and started preparing my canoe.

I was very impressed by the number of racers at the *Quest*. When you

consider the length of the race and the costs of travel, lodging and support crew expenses, it is remarkable that 184 people from seven countries were ready to take on the *Yukon River*. The racers ranged in age from 20 to 71 years old, and journeyed from as far away as England, Austria, South Africa and Australia.

Shortly before noon, we all lined-up on a grassy field in Rotary Park for the prerace introductions. Even with the steady rain, you could feel the excitement in the air. The *Quest* features a Le Mans style start, where racers run or walk about a quarter-mile to their boats positioned on the shoreline. I had identified my main competition to be a tall, lanky Canadian named **Gaetan Plourde**. I was sure his



*Closest to camera: Gaetan Plourde.*

## *A Rude Awakening on the Yukon River: Rod Price's Yukon River Quest*

36-year-old legs were faster than my 50-year-old ones, but it was not a long run. At noon, the announcer gave the start signal, and we were off. When I reached the shoreline, **Gaetan** was already in his canoe and preparing to be pushed-off into the river by his support guy. I quickly pulled my canoe into deeper water, climbed in and gave chase. The start was very chaotic. I was weaving my way through tandem canoes and kayaks as well as a few eight-person voyageur canoes. I spotted **Gaetan's** red canoe and closed in. I soon drew even and passed him. I kept up a strong pace for about ten minutes, and when I looked behind me – I didn't see a solo red canoe.

The first checkpoint in the YRQ is about 20 miles downstream at Policeman's Point. From looking at past competitors' times in the solo canoe, I wanted to arrive here in around three hours. My actual time was 2:50. I was pleased with that, and still didn't see any other solo canoes behind me.

The next task was crossing the 30-mile-long *Lake Laberge*. We had been told in the pre-race briefing that the lake should be calm. In the *Yukon 1000*, **Ardie** and I ran with three-foot waves in warmer and dryer conditions.

I could tell the winds were increasing as I entered the lake, and decided to secure my spray skirt. Soon the waves were building, and I flipped my rudder down for more control. Like the year before, I was soon surfing with two to three foot waves. I was happy the waves were not coming in the opposite direction. All of the racers were instructed to paddle within about two hundred yards of the right shoreline. There were three checkpoints along the lakeshore. I reached the first one at about the five-hour mark, and shouted out my number as I passed. I happened to catch a glimpse of a red canoe behind me, and looking around again – I could see it was **Gaetan**. For the next hour **Gaetan** seemed to be



*The scene at Whitehorse at the start of the Yukon River Quest: a river full of canoes and kayaks.*

content to stay about 20 yards behind me. *Lake Laberge's* waves were now running three to five feet. I passed by a tandem canoe team that had flipped, and was being helped to shore by several other teams. Ten minutes later, I was able to signal a safety boat with a wave of my paddle and directed them to the canoe's location.

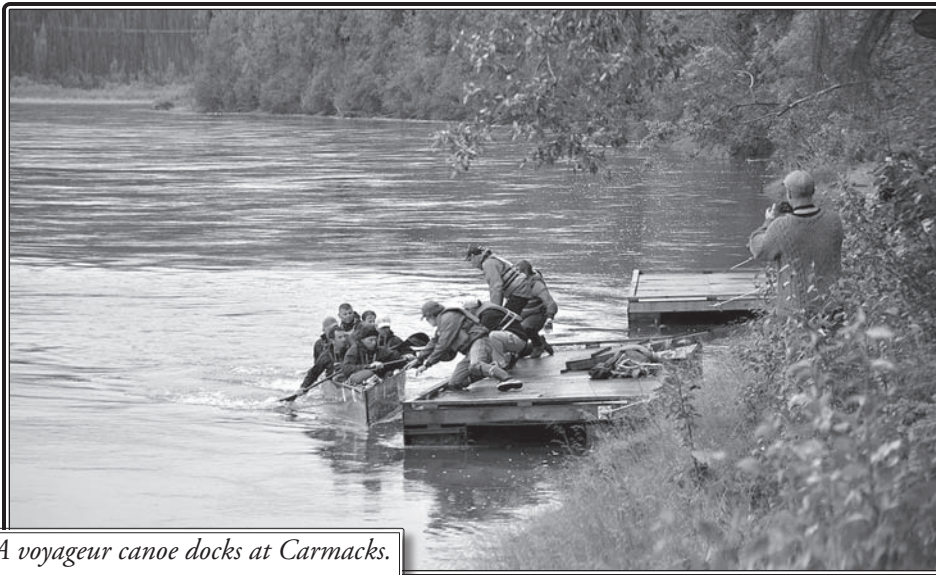
Although my canoe was handling the waves well, I was growing increasingly uncomfortable. My seat pad needed adjusting and I could not seem to find my electrolytes container. I still had at least two more hours to battle *Lake Laberge's* waves. When I started getting twinges in my forearms, I knew it was time to head for shore. I found a calm little cove and quickly beached

my canoe. I took a couple of electrolyte tablets, ate a banana, stretched my legs, repositioned the seat pad and headed back out into the lake. **Gaetan** now had at least a five minute lead on me. In a multi-day event, your first goal is to complete the race. You do this by racing within your limitations. If you keep pushing hard, and ignoring what seem to be little problems – those problems will eventually knock you out of the race.

*Lake Laberge* was taking its toll on the paddlers. We were told to watch for a single-propeller airplane rocking its wings back and forth as it flew over the lake. This was a signal for all racers to head for shore. For the first time in YRQ history, the race director

*Team 72 ("Halifax Explosion" – Wally Woodbury and Jodi Isenor) ride the big waves as they cross Lake Laberge. They came fifth overall in 50:25 and second tandem kayak, out of first place tandem kayak by just 26 minutes.*





*A voyageur canoe docks at Carmacks.*

was considering sending the plane out. About 20 teams didn't make it across the lake. Some of the tandem canoes had spray skirt problems and were taking on too much water. Some kayaks had broken rudders. And in some cases the cold, wet and windy conditions just zapped the remaining energy from racers.

I knew a calm river with a fast current awaited me at the end of the lake, and that was enough to keep me moving forward. After finally getting across the lake, I took a few minutes to eat another banana and a snack bar. I was soon underway again, hoping to catch sight of Gaetan as I rounded each bend.

At the ten-hour mark, I had settled into a good pace and was following a couple of tandem kayaks that seemed to know where the fastest current was on the widening *Yukon River*. In the *Yukon 1000*, on the first day we paddled 12 hours before being required to camp around 11 pm. Our team was monitored by Spot trackers, and once we stopped to camp, we could not move again for six hours. This insured that everyone was getting equal downtime. The *Quest* is a totally different race. Serious racers do not stop until they reach the little town of Carmacks, 190 miles into the race. Once you cross the line at Carmacks, your time

is recorded and a seven-hour mandatory break starts.

I can't say I raced through the night, because it never gets entirely dark in the summertime this far north. About 3am it was a dusky-grey, and about 5am the skies were brightening. I was eating something every hour and was feeling reasonably well. As I closed in on a tandem canoe, I realized that **Jean-François Latour** – the president of the *YRQ* organization – was in the stern (with **Terry Ramin** in bow). They had a fast pace, and I ran with them into Carmacks. I clocked in at 25 hours, and was ready for some rest. This is when I made a big mistake.

As some volunteers carried my canoe up the hill, I asked one of them where I should set up my tent. I saw some tents to the right of the staging area, and one of the volunteers said I could go there. I had remembered that there was supposed to be a "quiet zone" for racers to rest, but I did not ask about it. Instead I tried to sleep amidst the constant noise of dogs barking and support crews cheering for incoming teams. After four hours of not sleeping, I decided to get up and prepare for my restart. I ate a hotdog and a milkshake at the campground restaurant. I dried out my wet clothes in the laundry room. A nice lady named

Tina gave me a ride to the local convenience store, where I bought some more bananas and some yogurt covered raisins. Unfortunately, they were out of Five Hour Energy shots. Tina told me that there was indeed a quiet area for racers away from the staging area. By this time, I was only an hour away from restarting, and sleep was not an option.

Once again, the equipment inspectors checked off my required gear. I learned that Gaetan was over 40 minutes ahead of me. I would keep up a steady pace and not worry about it. Jean-François' team started about a minute ahead of me. I kept them in sight for a few hours, letting them show me where to find the "fast water." Twenty miles after Carmacks, I reached Five Finger Rapids. The rapids get their name from the five massive Basalt boulders that are spread across the river. It is made very clear to all of the paddlers that the best way through these rapids is to go between the first and second boulders on the right. This is how Ardie and I ran it in the *Yukon 1000*, and I saw no reason to do anything different. I made it through the rough water easily, and waved my paddle to the cameraman filming me. It was nice to see a safety boat waiting to rescue any team that flipped over in the rapids.

While *Lake Laberge* was the story on the first day, the second day was all about gusting headwinds. The winds were strong enough to practically stop your canoe in the five knot current. Instead of choosing the fastest course around islands and through delta areas, paddlers now had to look for the most sheltered route. As the *YRQ* progresses, the gaps between teams continue to grow. I did not see another team for about five hours at one point. I seemed to be on a solitary journey as I paddled by colorful Basalt bluffs and spotted the occasional beaver near the shore. My new goal was to reach *Kirkman Creek*,



*Ingrid Wilcox (in the solo kayak center right), 62 years old, had as her goal "to improve my time". She set and broke her record a number of times - but not this year. This was her tenth Yukon River Quest.*

the last mandatory stop of three hours. I caught up to a mixed-tandem kayak team as I neared *Kirkman Creek*. As instructed, we both turned right by an island with a sign on it. We both expected to see the farm at Kirkman very soon. After about thirty minutes of paddling, I was concerned that we had missed it. I thought I saw a fisherman on the shore up ahead. It turned out to be a large brown bear! The bear charged off into the woods before I could ask for directions. We finally reached *Kirkman Creek* about a mile later.

As I got out of my canoe, my condition could best be described as zombie-like. I had two priorities – food and sleep. A volunteer promised to wake me thirty minutes before my restart. The family at the isolated *Kirkman Creek* farm had contracted with the YRQ organizers to provide soup and sandwiches to the racers. I grabbed a ham sandwich and stumbled towards the canopied sleep area. I had eaten about half of my sandwich when I fell asleep. I slept through a rain storm that many poor racers had to paddle through. I awoke about an hour and a half later with my sandwich still clutched in my hand. All of my joints were stiff and my muscles

ached. I finished my sandwich, made a trip to the outhouse (a real outhouse) and walked back to the river.

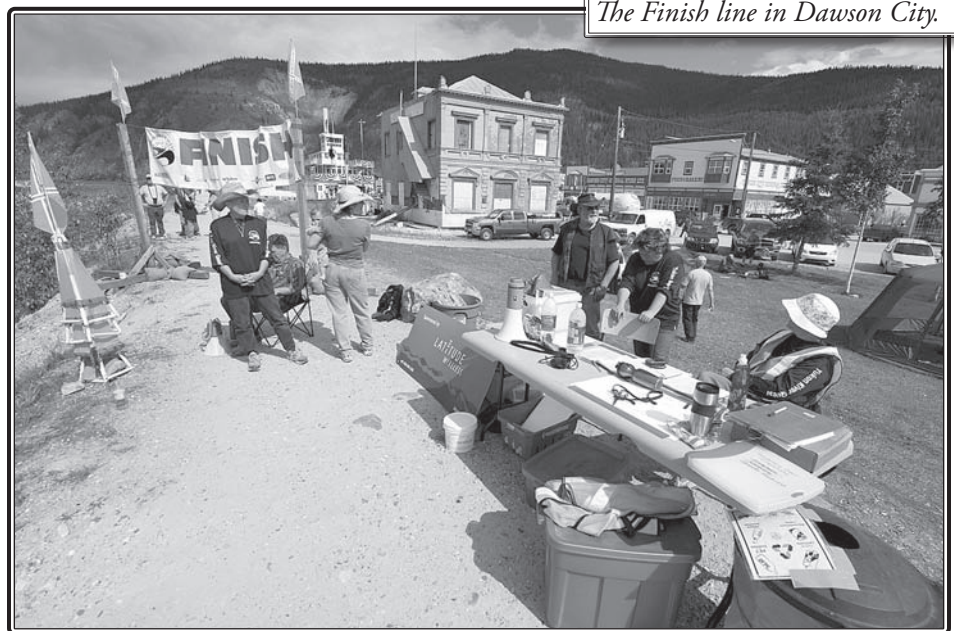
I borrowed a sponge to get the rain water out of my canoe. Gaetan had over a two-hour lead on me, and the solo canoe in third place had still not come in. I took a couple of Advil, some electrolytes and ate another banana. Soon it was time for me to start the final leg.

It is less than 100 miles to the finish from *Kirkman Creek*. To this point, I had not looked at my map book. Having the eyes of a fifty year old, I

did not want to bother with fumbling for my reading glasses. I was doing fine following others and making educated choices on picking the right channel. As I approached one of the delta areas where the *Sixty Mile River* merges into the *Yukon*, I went charging straight ahead. I soon noticed the tandem kayak that was near me went to the left. When the channel I was on merged back into the main river, I was all alone again. About 2am I was passed by a team of British soldiers in a voyageur canoe. After serving in Afghanistan, I imagine this race was a welcome break.

And a few hours later I was suddenly in the river...

I quickly emerged from my spray skirt and held onto the canoe. I was about 50 yards from shore. I did not know how deep it was by the rocky banks. I thought my best option was to try and get back in the canoe. I flipped the canoe back over, and saw that there was not much water in it. I positioned myself by the canoe, and hoisted myself on top of it. I slowly tried to straddle it, and almost had my leg up and over the canoe when it flipped again. That had taken a lot of energy. Meanwhile, my canoe and I continued to drift downriver in the fast current.



*The Finish line in Dawson City.*

## *Rude Awakening on the Yukon*

I realized I had to make it to shore. I grabbed the towline on the canoe and shoved it towards the riverbank. I would swim for a few strokes and shove the canoe. Swim and shove. After about ten minutes I reached the shore, and was able to stand in about four feet of water. I quickly put on some warm clothes from my dry bag. I was starting to shiver as I bailed out the canoe. I got back in and paddled hard for thirty minutes to elevate my body temperature. I soon stabilized, and I was now definitely wide awake. I enjoyed the remaining hour-plus paddle into Dawson City. I spotted Moosehide Slide on the mountain overlooking Dawson and knew I was getting close. I crossed the finish line to the sound of a boat siren, and made my way to the take-out area. My total paddling time, which does not include the mandatory stops, was 57 hours, 25 minutes. It had been a tough race, made tougher by some bad decisions on my part. The 2010 edition of the *Yukon River Quest* had the highest drop-out rate. Of the 78 teams entered, 24 teams did not finish the race.

There are many inspirational stories from the 2010 *Yukon River Quest*. *Paddlers Abreast* from Whitehorse, a female voyageur team comprised of cancer survivors, completed their tenth YRQ. They inspired *Yukon Buddies*, a nine-woman voyageur team of cancer survivors from Australia.

**John Ders** and **Mary Houck** had to drop out of the *Yukon 1000* in 2009, when **John** was experiencing heart problems. They returned for the Quest and were the fastest overall tandem canoe team.

And then there was **Ingrid Wilcox**, who looks like your grandmother. At the age of 62, she finished her tenth *Yukon River Quest* in a solo kayak. These are the types of stories that keep me coming back for more.

I think next Summer I'll put on my safari hat and head for Texas.

## *The Great River Rumble*

### *Great River Rumble*

### **– It's Addicting!**

..... *Lori Roling*

Towards the end of July in 2009, I did an online search looking for *Mississippi River* paddling trips. I wanted to expand the areas that I was paddling, but did not want to venture out in strange waters alone. My search took me to the *Great River Rumble* web site: [www.riverrumble.org](http://www.riverrumble.org). I learned the annual trip was leaving Dubuque, IA on the upcoming Saturday to head for LaCrosse, WI: that year's starting location. They would be ending in Dubuque, IA seven days after they started.

Three days later, I pulled into the staging area in Dubuque, IA. I loaded all my gear into a cargo trailer and my kayak onto a boat hauler that had about 100 canoes and kayaks strapped onto it. I was very excited as I walked around the parking lot and saw cars with license plates from states as far away as California, Texas, Washington, and so many places in between. That was when I realized this event must be a pretty big deal if it could attract people from across the country. Chartered buses took us from Dubuque, IA to our starting town of LaCrosse, WI. The three hour bus ride was a great opportunity to listen to paddling stories about rumbles past. Some people had been on several *Great River Rumbles* since it was first started in 1995.

I wasn't sure how I was going to like group paddling, but it was fun. I love meeting people and finding out about different areas of the county and this was a great opportunity to do just that. While paddling, people would just pull up along side me, paddle and talk for a while. We already had some thing in common, we love to paddle, and so it was easy to start a conversation knowing all shared that interest.

There were a variety of people ranging in age from 14 to 90. (Really, 90 years old!)

Before this trip I had never locked through at a dam. I did know enough not to tie the rope to my kayak. I wasn't sure what to expect or if it would be scary. It wasn't scary. It was pretty easy. There were four locks to go through on that trip.

Part of our registration fees included showers every night. Not necessarily a hot shower, but a shower nonetheless. At the stops where there were no shower facilities, we had an opportunity to take a "rumble shower." A rumble shower is a stand with a shower head mounted on it, with a garden hose attached to it. You would shower in your swimsuit. I stayed in just long enough to get any loose sand or mud rinsed off. I was so glad the rumble shower was the exception and not the rule. I only had to take one rumble shower along the route.

I met a lot of people on this trip. I have a lot of new paddling friends that I would not have gotten to meet if I had not taken this trip.

I was so impressed with my first experience with the *Great River Rumble*, I made sure I was part of the 2010 trip. The 2010 *Great River Rumble* was also on the *Mississippi* river. We paddled from Dubuque, Iowa to Muscatine, Iowa. Now, I am eagerly looking forward to finding out the route for the 2011 trip. I am planning on getting together with my new paddling buddies and exploring rivers or parts of rivers I probably would not have paddled on my own.

*Lori Roling resides with her husband, Terry. They live a few miles from the Mississippi River in among the rolling hills of eastern Iowa. Lori is a long time canoer.*

*She took up kayaking about 3 years ago. She loves both.*

Book Review

Racing to the Yukon:

*A Lifetime of Adventure Racing from the Everglades to the Amazon to the World's Longest Canoe Race*



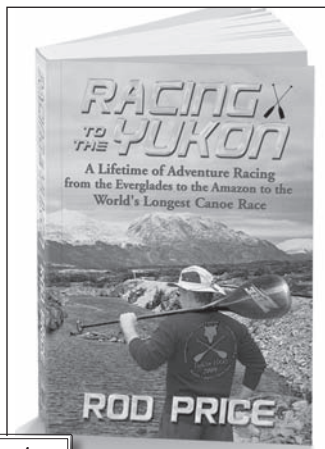
by Rod Price

Review by Gareth Stevens

Rod Price's enthusiasm for life and adventure is infectious. I couldn't help being drawn into this account of his full-tilt charges at a collection of the longer races in the world of paddling, culminating, as he approached the end of his fifth decade on the planet, with the *Yukon 1000*, "The World's Longest Canoe Race". (Let's not quibble, it's certainly the world's longest annual canoe & kayak race even if that race down the *Mississippi* was a tad longer – and there's that 1200-mile item in Florida, too.)



Rod had been an active and successful canoe racer in Florida before the 1990s, but the 90s themselves were a physically inactive decade for him (distractions included starting a business, marriage, family, divorce, near bankruptcy). By the turn of the century Rod had determined to get back in shape and do the next decade differently. He has. He



started with the *USCA Nationals* in Georgia in 2001, and then went in for longer ... and longer ... and longer races – they include *Everglades Challenges*, *Adirondack Classics*, a 132-mile raft race on the *Amazon* (which involved – as part of the race – building your own raft on the spot), culminating with the inaugural *Yukon 1000*, in which he won the tandem canoe division with partner *Ardie Olson*.

The *Yukon 1000* adventure is the focus of a good one third of the book, culminating in a colorful photographic epilog. (Rod's 2010 *Yukon River Quest* is the subject of the previous few pages of this issue of *Canoe News*.)

Rod's book is essentially about his return to fitness and padding – and his decade of high adventure.

At 184 pages, and as a "quality paperback" with many photos, it's an enjoyable read. I like (maybe it's my educational publishing background) that he peppers the book with "Rod's Traveling Trivia" – historical info about the races or whatever else takes his fancy.

He has an easy writing style and tells his stories well, and your time with this book will be well repaid, not only for the ride, but also for the great information he provides about each of the races.

At \$19.95 (for the price of 2 1/2 six-packs) you can join Rod on some great adventures right from your couch – and be inspired to get off it. For the price of 3 1/2, you can relax, finish the book slowly, and sip on a few. I definitely recommend the book (with a bottle or two of New Glarus).

You can order directly from Rod's web site [www.rodpriceadventure.com](http://www.rodpriceadventure.com) at a 20% discount: \$15.95 (+\$5 shipping).

Book Review

Building a Strip Canoe, 2nd Ed, by Gil Gilpatrick



.. Review by Steve Rosenau



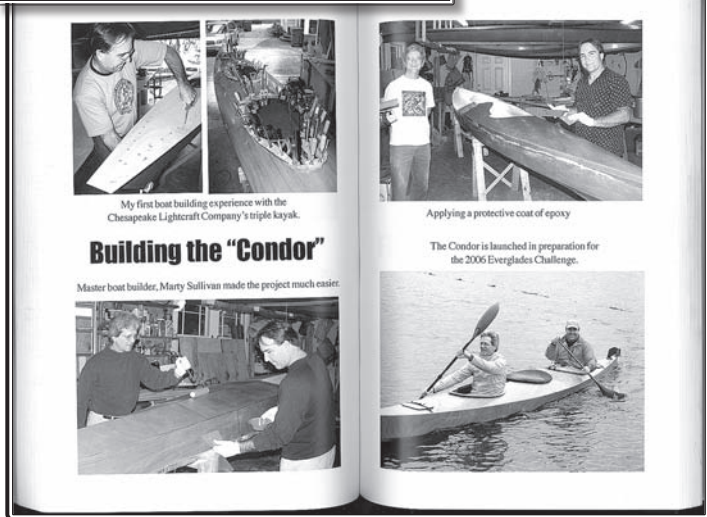
I opened the hefty canoe building book with enthusiasm. Robust, color photos on nearly every page, with a sealed, thick envelope inside the back cover containing eight full-sized plans. I couldn't wait to go through it, having read the author's credentials of building 500+ cedar strip boats over 30 years.

I've built eight strippers, two of them 18' kayaks. After my first one in 1996 for which I modified the plans to narrow the bow like an arrow to increase speed, I learned that accuracy and precision in all aspects of stripper building are important. That first boat was light and fast, but it had a quirk: the faster you paddled, the more it would turn to the right. At full speed, it was 10 strokes on the right and only 2 on the left to go straight. That's hard to keep up for long. The boat was not true – it bulged outward on the left and right sides in different places.

When I got to the section on making the stations and looked at the plans, I was disappointed. While the plans are full size, each is only 1/2 of the hull station. The text does not address how to do a mirror image for the other side of the hull accurately. I thought maybe the pattern could be traced from the back side of the paper, but was stymied – it is heavy, gloss paper so you would need a light box to trace it, and not be confused by the plans for the different boat on the reverse side.

A method I've used on half-plans is to copy one side, carefully trace on the back side of the copy, tape together, and have a copy shop reproduce enough copies for all the full-sized stations. This takes precision, careful marking of the centerline on paper, taping together, and marking the centerline on the wood stations once traced out.

Below: In "real life" these photos are in full color, as are many in the book.



My first boat building experience with the Chesapeake Lightcraft Company's triple kayak.

Building the "Condor"

Master boat builder, Marty Sullivan made the project much easier.



Applying a protective coat of epoxy

The Condor is launched in preparation for the 2006 Everglades Challenge.

