

YUKON RIVER QUEST – A SEARCH FROM WITHIN

And so it all began, with cabin fever setting in along about late February, and the endless mountains of snow starting to block the view from our living room windows on the West Road in Bowdoin, Maine. Whitewater canoe racing season was on the horizon as we began gearing up for the short, but much anticipated, annual spring time event. The traditional reunion with our paddling friends on the St. George and Passy Rivers continued as the Rite of Passage into Spring, and the next few months were typically mapped out for similar outings. But something was different this year, something was missing. Little did we know, while surfing the web one evening for upcoming race dates, that the missing element would be yet another canoe race. However, as time would prove otherwise, “The Yukon River Quest-A Race to the Midnight Sun” was far from just another canoe race. It would become an experience of a lifetime.

With the decision made to enter the 11th running of the YRQ, planning and preparation began in hope to be ready when the horn sounded at noon, June 24th. The course, winding its way from Whitehorse to Dawson in the Yukon Territory, Canada, offered countless majestic views of nature’s grandeur but mountains of details lie in the way. Registration, boat rental, required gear, transportation, accommodations, passports, insurance, the list seemed endless as the project board filled up fast with post-its. Phone calls and emails were the order of business at the end of each workday, with physical training, home maintenance, and dinner worked in as the days and hours passed. With the initial entry deadline of April 15th come and gone, the countdown began.

As the weeks passed, order arose from chaos as the project board came together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The vision of racing the Yukon River began to take on a sense of reality. Our first major hurdle was how to get a canoe to Whitehorse in one piece and on time. With no other New England teams driving to the Yukon, the logistics of transporting a personal craft was unrealistic. Fortunately, the Yukon River Marathon Paddling Association (YRMPA) had ten worthy canoes in their fleet and we were lucky enough to get one of the last ones available. The remainder of our gear we chose to ship by air with a great deal of faith in the airline industry for on-time and safe delivery.

Thirty days to the horn and much behind us, our focus began to shift toward race strategy. How would we fare best on a course we had never seen, racing through the night with little or no sleep, competing against some of the world’s finest paddlers. Weeks of discussion followed, hoping to identify the best approach to a world of unknowns. For us, eight hours of paddling on the Susquehanna’s “General Clinton 70” seemed an eternity, far from the twenty to twenty-five it would take to get to Carmacks - the first mandatory stop 200 miles downriver from Whitehorse and yet less than halfway to Dawson and the finish line. The Yukon River, with its sea of channels encompassing the miles of islands that dotted the maps, would require an acute awareness that seemed quite contrary to where we imagined our mental state would be thirty to forty hours from the start. And what of those paddlers converging on Whitehorse from all directions for a chance to showcase their talent at this year’s YRQ. What were their goals and to what degree were they willing to go to accomplish them? Time would tell as the clock continued to tick.

One last check on transportation proved critical as we soon realized the post-race shuttle from Dawson opted out without warning. Along with eight others abandoned at the last minute, we scrambled to find an alternative. With a barrage of e-mails and a bit of lady luck, we were back in business thanks to the services of a tour company out of Fairbanks, Alaska.

Last minute changes in race attire were prompted by updates in weather reports. Lighter polypropylene undergarments would suffice with the temperatures starting to climb. Quality rain gear would be worth its weight in gold, as the threat of rain was ever present. Unaware of the availability of these items on arrival, we were forced to pack and ship or the price for being ill-prepared would be too high.

With the checklist complete, tickets in hand, and the car packed to the hilt, we struck off for the Jetport early Saturday morning. Not even the lengthy layovers in Seattle and Vancouver could dampen our spirits at this point. The excitement was building, compounded by the recent interest stirring among our friends, family, and co-workers as they connected online to monitor our every move.

Arriving in Whitehorse early Saturday morning, we settled in at the Westmark for some much-needed R&R before embarking on our first Canadian trek. Checking out the river, thereafter, was our plan for the day as we wandered through the city attempting to get our bearings. Quick water with an aqua tint, the Yukon River was a beautiful sight as it made its way around the bend by Rotary Park and past the local outfitters where we hoped to find our race boat. Little doubt remained as to which one it was, being the only bright yellow canoe on the YRMPA trailer. Good, bad, or otherwise, our progress would be easy to assess this time around as the contrast in colors was striking. A couple of signatures and we were on our way for a test run down to the Takhini River. The short stint proved valuable in assessing the craft and some competition that we, coincidentally, met along the way.

The next few days were hectic as we organized our supplies, attended the "Meet & Greet" and pre-race briefs, completed the registration process, and survived the onslaught of mandatory gear inspections. As the flurry of activities wound to a close, we stopped for a moment to reflect and realize the effort that it took to get to this point. It was time to sleep.

Now with the first light from a sun that barely set, race day was upon us! Early to rise, we opted for a full breakfast with a light lunch to follow if time permit. Next stop was Rotary Park to the pre-race staging area for mandatory gear inspections and last-minute equipment modification. As our boat number was called to align with other crafts at river's edge, we quietly discussed our plan for a quick but safe start. With paddlers assembling behind the start line, the field was announced, and with no time to spare the horn went off at exactly noon, the 24th day of June.

From there it seemed a blur as we jockeyed for position and before we knew it we were on Lake Laberge, scouting the field as it lay before us. As anticipated, the Mixed team from Whitehorse were tandem frontrunners setting the pace for those that followed. Our plan was to identify those we could match up with, in hope to establish a mutually beneficial pack. The top two women's teams were strong candidates and proved every bit as good as we imagined beforehand. So the bond was formed, with both teams strong, consistent, and highly skilled at reading the river. With time and miles passing, we

had the good fortune to become acquainted with each...their likes and dislikes, their interests and passions. Through the night we paddled into late morning, and with Carmacks in sight, the race was on for the dock and some much-needed rest, setting the stage for the second leg to Kirkman Creek later that day. A quick look at the leader board had us nestled between the top two women's teams and third in the Mixed Tandem. The excitement was short lived, however, when we learned our supply bag from Whitehorse was missing. Fortunately, with the assistance of several support personnel, the highly coveted bag and food supplies turned up and the quest for sleep became our primary concern for the race was still on. Despite the fatigue factor, sleep never came, nonetheless, as the temperature climbed rapidly inside the humble nylon abode. In the near background, the sounds of the cheerful recognition that came with each arriving boat, was soon sending us on our way down the river once again.

Thirty hours in, we made our way under the bridge and around the bend leaving the Coal Mine Campground and the prospect of sleep behind. Five Finger Rapids, infamous for its silent but powerful wave trains, had our attention hours before the turn. As the prominent columns of stone appeared, our hearts raced with anticipation. Often the case, pictures did not do it justice, as the bow of the boat rose and plunged time and again. We had missed the line but, safe all the same, we chalked that one up to experience and picked up the pace.

As the night moved on, the fair skies diminished with the sky darkening around us. The mountains were swallowed up by a sea of clouds, eliminating the formations as navigational aids. Within moments, the heavens erupted as we struggled to don our rain gear. Cold driving pellets brought pain with our progress. With visibility near nil, our spirits were dropping as quickly as the temperature. Deprived of sleep for nearly two days, we struggled to focus on the task at hand. Our eyes laden from toil, we closed them but for a moment or two. Simple acts turned difficult and our patience grew thin. The harsh realization of our situation fell upon us. We were alone and our skills would surely be tested this night. Minutes turned to hours as the waypoints passed slowly. Then through the fog, we caught a glimpse of another team crossing from afar. The joy of companionship brought overwhelming relief, but the union was brief for the cold night had taken its toll on the men's team as they opted to stop for dry clothes and a fire. Our minds filled with doubt, we checked the maps time and again. When Fort Selkirk appeared, our bearings were set and we knew 300 miles would soon be near. An air of confidence embraced us but the fear of the unknown kept us aware of the dangers about. And so it went to Kirkman Creek, with the promise of hospitality, a flat spot to lay our head, and the hope of closure 100 miles out that kept us in the game.

The final leg began with our goal in sight. Dawson by midnight rang loud and clear. But the race was not over and many had fallen these two days past. The river had grown with a myriad of channels to pick and choose. With time running short and real estate a premium, we took a shot to close the gap on our competition. It was not in the cards this day, as the move through the cut cost valuable time and energy. But all was not lost for we closed that day with our fastest leg over 47 miles, crossing the line 51 seconds past midnight and our goal of 50 hours. As had been the case from our first day in Whitehorse, we were greeted by the finest people we could imagine. Congratulations and offers for assistance were abound. As they lifted us gently and wrapped us in blankets, we thanked them for their support and words of praise for these strangers were now friends and Dawson was home.

Humbled by the experience, we collected ourselves and our gear and thought long through the night of the River Quest and its meaning. For some it was truly a race, for others a thing of beauty and for us it was a search for identity and an opportunity to live out our dreams in a place called "The Yukon".

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