



Stern Lessons

Learning to respect whitewater at Canada's premier paddling academy

story by
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We'd trained in rapids more difficult than this one all week.

While powerful, it was short and unambiguous, a deep-blue V driven between a granite outcrop on the bank and a small island in the middle of the river. To the right near the top, a large rock. To the left, midway down, a frothing "hole". At the bottom, a big standing wave. But the obstacles would be easily avoided by running clean down the middle then paddling hard and punching through the wave. For the past four days, the Madawaska Kanu Centre had been preparing us. It had been intense, as it is every week during the summer for the canoeists and kayakers who attend one of the finest whitewater schools in North America.

For four days, our group of three tandem boats and a solo canoeist had practiced drawing and cross-drawing, sweeping and reverse-sweeping, prying and bracing on a long stretch of rapids just below a hydro dam on the Madawaska River. We had learned to read eddy lines,



catch the current and use its powerful flow, and dart into the quiet water behind rocks to plot our next nimble move. Our crowning achievement was the successful navigation of a long, bouncy series of ledges and pools called "Staircase" that qualify as minor Class IV rapids.

Now, on our fifth day, we were ready. We knew our stuff. We had been awarded our MKC novice certificates and

were tripping down a seven-kilometre stretch of the Madawaska further south, ready for new rapids, paddling without fear.

Getting synched

Unfortunately, in my boat, we were also paddling without synchronization. In a tandem open canoe, the critical skill, beyond the sweep, draw, pry and brace, is to think and act in tandem. Hence, the

name. But it's a little like piloting a car with two steering wheels, on an expressway, at top speed, with stalled cars in your path. Both paddlers must see what lies ahead and silently, instantly, intuitively agree on how to either avoid it or use it.

That was our problem. As we dropped down into the gullet of the deep V, Stephanie and I had favourably centred

ourselves between the rock-right and hole-left. But as we headed for the big snarling standing wave at the bottom, our brains diverged. She, in the bow, still fearing the sucking hole-left suddenly reached out to the right and executed a strong draw stroke, yanking the front end of the boat hard in that direction. I, in the stern, executed an equally strong and woefully premature pry to turn us toward a safe eddy on river right. So rather than hit the wave on the perpendicular and slice through it like a knife, Stephanie and I hit it sideways, like a snack tray, instantly tilting upriver. "When you tilt upriver," our instructor Andrea Dorfman had told us on the first day, "the river tries to get into your boat." It was in ours instantly. Then we were in it. Snacks.

The river is immutable. This is the cardinal lesson at MKC. And where the immutable river meets immovable rocks the effect is called "whitewater". It's a form of hydraulic anger. To successfully navigate these two quarreling forces



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is called "fun". To get caught in between them is the opposite. A friend of a friend had that very experience a few years ago, I'd heard. "It was on some huge northern river," I was told. "His canoe had to be peeled from the rock like a fish skin."

It is with that image I travel to MKC with Stephanie, my headstrong girlfriend. She has been in whitewater a few times. I am an innocent. It doesn't help that at our last turnoff into the backcountry southeast of Algonquin Park we pass a little white Baptist church with a big sign that reads: "Prepare to meet thy God!"

But to explore, you need technique. To explore Canada, you need river technique. And there is no better

place to learn than Madawaska Kanu Centre. Founded 26 years ago by former Canadian champions Hermann and Christa Kerckhoff, MKC is located on the "middle Madawaska" just downriver from a hydro dam that provides ideal flow control for whitewater teaching. "It is

probably the best stretch of teaching river in the world," says Claudia Kerckhoff-van Wijk, the Kerckhoffs' daughter and now the owner of the school with her husband Dirk van Wijk. "You have everything here from Class I to Class IV rapids. And you are always floating into something easier. There are fantastic eddies with really clear eddy lines and nice holes for surfing. The water is clean, and because the dam is a surface-release dam, it's also warm. That's important. Really cold water can inhibit people trying new moves."

Claudia grew up on the Madawaska and received her training from some of the world's best instructors. A serious kayaker from the age of eleven and the Canadian women's champion at 13, she repeated the title for ten consecutive years then missed a gold medal by a hair at the 1981 Olympics. She left competition to manage MKC. Dirk manages a second business, Owl Rafting, not far away, on the Ottawa River.



MKC owners Dirk and Claudia Kerckhoff-van Wijk with their daughters Katrina (left) and Stefani. Claudia was the Canadian women's slalom kayaking champion at 13.

More than 100 instructors apply

During each week of the summer, 45 students of varying ability come to MKC and stay either in the guest lodge or in their own tents. They are split about equally between kayakers and canoeists, although more canoeists tend to come near the beginning of the summer as they prepare for river trips in late July and August.

With more than 100 instructors applying for positions each year, Claudia and her staff can be selective. MKC draws some exceptional talent. In our week, there were instructors from

Holland, Germany, The U.S., and a French champion who was there to teach a girl's high school kayak team from Calgary. Those who get jobs are chosen as much for their accommodating personalities as

their skill in a boat.

Classes are based on experience. Along with Stephanie and I, our novice group consists of Amanda and Chris, a

couple fresh out of university in Ottawa; Jim, a young lawyer from Sudbury; and Christine, from Sheshatshiu, an Innu community near Goose Bay, Labrador. Andrea, our instructor, is assisted by Michael Herman, from Thunder Bay, who is being evaluated for the possibility of more work at MKC.

Technique is everything.

On Day One, during the morning, Andrea and Michael appraise our skills on a wide flat-water section of the river, then, in the afternoon, introduce us to some fairly gentle rapids.

We get accustomed to our virtually indestructible ABS

canoes, our float coats and helmets, and the thigh straps that secure us to the floor of the boat. We learn the fundamental strokes. We pretend to be whitewater canoeists.

Whitewater paddling is not a leisure activity. The strokes are more muscular and abrupt than flat-water strokes because the boat often has to move quickly and at weird



Sweep. Brace. Pry. Learn the strokes and confidence follows.

angles. The forward stroke is short, hard and repetitive, with the power coming not so much from the arms but a strong twist of the torso. The draw, usually executed in the bow, is a hard yank of the paddle at a 90-degree angle toward the boat that pulls it immediately in the direction of the paddle. The pry, a hard lever action in the stern, uses the gunwale as a fulcrum to wrench the back end of the boat. The sweep and reverse-sweep are broad rounded strokes that push the front of the boat hard away from the paddle. And the brace is a radical beaver-tail slap on the surface of the water, mostly used to prevent the canoe from tipping.

"It's not about strength," says Andrea, who weighs about 115 pounds. "Much of it's finesse. It's about understanding the river's morphology and the dynamics of the boat."

On Day Two, we are in real whitewater. There are frothy holes, jagged rocks that have to be avoided, and eddies that must be entered or you float like a twirling leaf

downriver into the unknown. We are also introduced to the critical concepts of power, angle and tilt. Power. Angle. Tilt. This is the mantra of the whitewater novice. As aggressive as they are, the strokes of whitewater canoeing are nothing without power, angle and tilt.

Power gets you in and out of the current with some authority. Tilt makes the boat respond more nimbly. And angle slices the current, either reducing or inviting its immutable force.

Eating dirt

This is also a day of eating dirt, or at least humble pie. Jim, in a solo canoe, seems to be in the water more than the boat.

Stephanie and I capsize spectacularly. Chris and Amanda begin bickering and are wisely separated by Andrea into different canoes.

Learning tandem open canoeing with your spouse or romantic partner has been half-jokingly called a "relationship mutilator". But there is truth to the term. A couple I know who adore whitewater canoeing and tackle

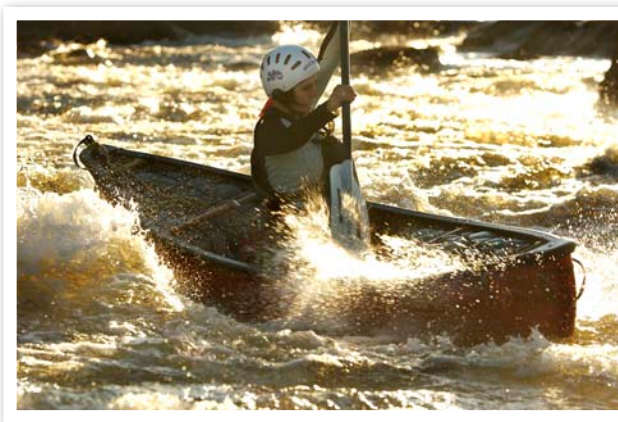
several strong western Canadian rivers every year grow strangely silent when "fighting and verbal harassment" are mentioned, as if reliving past trauma. On land, a failure to agree can mean nothing more than disagreement. On whitewater, it can mean missing eddies and being sucked backward into hissing rapids. Or capsizing. Stephanie and I discovered that two strong wills, one at either end of a

canoe in whitewater, is like a comedy team in a horror movie. The dialogue is often terse and impolite. "Okay. Pry. Pry. Pry. Pry! Pry!! Pry godammit!!!! Pry!! O shit! Brace! Brace!"

"There is no blame."

Andrea and Michael, our instructors, have seen this often.

And they have lucid advice. "There is no blame." Stephanie and I nod mutely. But we don't believe it. We are filled with the bile of mutual accusation. I am frustrated with her indecision and refusal to paddle more aggressively. She is fed up with my loud directives booming from the stern like a bullhorn at a boot camp. We are not in tandem.



We start to click

By Day Three the class has learned C-turns and O-turns and we've all "ferried" across the rushing river, defying the current with strong strokes and a tight angle, to perch thrillingly on the crest of a standing wave and "surf" awhile. It's all heady stuff. And we are beginning to click. Jim is soloing rapids that would have thrown him only yesterday. The rest of us are tilting smoothly into C-turns and S-Turns, riding the current, then turning cleanly into the intended eddies, astonished with our new-found river skills.

MKC is a compressed experience where, in five days, or even in one of their weekend clinics, you learn the fundamentals you need for river tripping. Greater confidence comes as you learn to read the river's subtle clues. Successful whitewater strategy is largely about knowing what's underwater by deciphering the ripples and creases and colours on the surface. The deceptively named

"pillows," for example, are rounded rocks just under the surface; behind every big rock you can count on the refuge of an eddy; and generally the darker the water, the friendlier the path.



Look for pillows. They are not your friends. Eddy is your friend.

"There's nothing better than coming to a rapid for the first time," says Michael. "There's no track. Things are moving and changing. The anticipation of scouting is half the thrill. And you paddle the same stretch after a rainfall and it will have new characteristics, new faces."

Proper scouting and basic rescue techniques are an important part

of the training at MKC because whitewater is usually intolerant of stupidity. But there are exceptions.

One day as our group paused exhausted in an eddy, bundled and hunkered like astronauts in our protective helmets and flotation-loaded boats, we witnessed one of life's sporting injustices: a pair of vacationers - geeks - hooting and bumping down the rapids in a thin-gauge Kevlar canoe with aluminum struts

and no flotation, no helmets, no life-jackets, full of stupidity and yet maddeningly upright and dry, as if propelled by the Deity of Nerds.

River idiots

"River idiots," said Andrea under her breath. "Ignore them."

Apparently, they are everywhere. Stephanie's brother once wrapped his Coleman canoe around a mid-river rock and became entangled in the painter line. For awhile, until he kicked free, he was only able to raise his head above the rushing water for gasps of air. Once on the Spanish River in northern Ontario, our instructor Michael managed to stop a group of 15 boy scouts who were floating blithely into a slavering Class IV drop. "If we hadn't stopped them," he says, shaking his head, "they would have gone right into that hole. They couldn't even recognize the sound of major moving water."

MKC is an antidote to river idiocy. There has been no serious accident in the history of the school, or for that



The rapids at MKC look quite tame, until you're in them.

matter many accidents of any kind, a remarkable achievement considering the vast flow of novices who are paddling whitewater for the first time.

On Day Four, Andrea feels we are ready for staircase, a

rolling stretch of stepped ledges pocked with boulders and containing precious few eddies of any decent size. Because of its unrelenting series of staggered rapids, Staircase is referred to as a "minor Class IV". That's probably overstating things a little. But from the top, as our five boats drift in anticipation of the descent, it looks and sounds more fearsome than anything we've yet been on.

Andrea leads off. She picks her way along in her solo boat, dropping over several small ledges, paddling hard across the river, more ledges, and a quick maneuver into what looks like a very small eddy. Stephanie and I are next. We follow her path almost exactly, a little surprised as we tip off the ledges. We paddle to traverse the river, then down again and a C-

turn into the eddy. Just. We're in! Christine and Chris set out, but they cut across river, their angle is too flat and the current sweeps them over a ledge sideways. Suddenly, they're out of the boat and bouncing down Staircase amid the foam and roar. Chris is able to swim to shore. Christine floats downriver, shoes up in the position of safety, warding off rocks as they loom.

Moments later, she's rescued by Michael and Amanda, and kayakers retrieve the errant boat.

Whitewater canoeing is exhausting. Learning it is doubly exhausting. But it's the kind of fatigue that comes with a reward - technique. And food. It greatly helps that the food at MKC is superb. After trudging up the hill from the river at the conclusion of each day to the MKC compound, you are invariably greeted by large platters of freshly baked chocolate



cake or oatmeal cookies. Lunches and dinners are buffet-style and plentiful -- wiener schnitzel, barbecued chicken, steaks, roasted and herbed potatoes, beef and barley soup, zucchini parmesan. And before dinner, a sauna and hot shower. MKC is a place that alternates challenge with comfort, making the challenges all the more palatable the following day.



The final test

Day Five is the proving ground, a trip down the Lower Madawaska or a leg of the more dramatic Ottawa River, depending on its volume of flow. We drive to the Lower Madawaska, unload the boats, and begin a leisurely paddle down a stretch of the river that has predominantly been dedicated to parkland. Rocky and fringed with pine forests, it's almost devoid of cottages and dotted with spacious campsites, a number

of them on small islands in the middle of the river.

It is alongside one of these little islands that Stephanie and I suffer the ignominy of capsizing - made all the more ignominious by the fact that Andrea has agreed to use my camera to photograph our triumphant descent. We are captured, in motor-drive sequence, side-slamming the wave and rolling like two lumberjacks vainly trying to stay atop a spinning log.

After a few more minor rapids, the day is coming to a close, as is our week at MKC. There is one more rapid of consequence, known as "Can Opener".

Chastened by our dump, Stephanie and I want redemption. We want to show it had been a fluke, that we really have learned our lessons well, that we can negotiate Can Opener with the aplomb we showed on Staircase.



The layout is clear. It requires some dodging and weaving in a preliminary series of small step rapids, then a powerful push over a bigger ledge and through yet another standing wave. Beyond the wave to the left is the menacing Can Opener itself, a boat-ripping rock that could be

trouble for river idiots. But not for us. This time we'll show our colleagues we're not duffers. Our paddling will be in immaculate sync.

"Who's going first?" asked Michael. "We will," I say, striding toward the canoe like someone going someplace on business.

And sure enough, our approach unfolds according to plan. The dodges and

weaves align us perfectly for the ledge. We paddle hard and together. Not a word is spoken. We know exactly how to hit this wave. The boat tips slightly over the ledge then dips its nose into the churning wave, and.....

There is no blame. ★



The best learning happens with immersion • MKC is blessed to be on a stretch of the Madawaska River that lies just below a large hydro dam, so levels are controlled, temperatures are decently warm (it's a top-release dam) and the rapids and pools are consistent, which is good for learning. The "obstacles" are also nicely mixed, from confidence-boosting Class Two bumps that novices can handle to the almost-Class-Four "Staircase," that drops you down a sequence of thrilling ledges with eddies on either side for a quick escape if need be. Getting wet is part of the experience. That too is fun.



A beautiful corner of the natural world • Located near Barry's Bay, Ontario, MKC is housed in a graceful wooden lodge surrounded by forest and close enough to the river that you can hear the rapids. Five-day courses and weekend clinics are offered from early May until Labour Day. The basic fee includes camping, breakfast, lunches, and one dinner, plus instruction and transportation to various parts of the Madawaska or Ottawa rivers. Boats and gear are rented for a nominal cost. For those who prefer not to camp, a modest additional fee covers accommodation in a private room or dorm. The washhouse has hot showers and laundry machines. MKC has maintained quality by limiting each week to 45 students with 10 to 12 instructors -- all talented freelancers (including many luminaries of paddling) who rotate throughout the summer.