

TRYING TO GO **FAST**

NANTAHALA GAMES DOWNRIVER RACING IN A WILDWATER KAYAK

A COMPETITOR'S TALE BY PAUL SCRUTTON



During Week of Rivers, the NOC ran an event called the Nantahala Games. A freestyle/slalom was held on Saturday, and a downriver race was held Sunday. Downriver is a timed event with a start and finish line (in this case the Forest Service put-in above Pattons Run, and the finish under the leading edge of the pedestrian bridge at the NOC, respectively). There aren't many other requirements, other than to help other racers in distress. This particular downriver race is called the SouthEastern Downriver Championships, and is held once each year. The race is historic and features prizes (\$100ish) for anyone skilled enough to beat current records.

I've been attending this race on and off for the last few years, usually paddling a Pyranha Speeder, a 14'6" narrow speedy boat that looks like a hybrid between a sea kayak and a

downriver race boat. It is pretty easy to paddle, and I can secure a time of about 1h 2m for the 8 mile run — putting me right at the bottom of the fast-boat division.

This year, I decided to step up my game. I dusted off a wildwater race boat that I'd purchased used from Chris Hipgrave a few years ago. I'd had this boat out once in the Chapel Hill

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pool. As I recall, it was a little nervous handling, but after an hour in it, I was feeling sort of comfy. “What’s the worst that could happen?” I said to myself.

For those that don't know what a wildwater boat is, it's a composite (in my case a carbon-kevlar) boat that is extremely skinny, long (14'6"), and

has two wings that extend out behind the cockpit, which may provide some secondary stability when the boat is on edge, but seem to only be there to satisfy a minimum width requirement. The wings are not in the water when the boat is upright.

The racers started to get into the familiar eddy which would serve as the start line. I put the boat in the water, got into it, and got some help from a kind stranger with putting my skirt on around the tiny cockpit. Now, I was free floating, I discovered how tippy the boat was. I was unable to balance the boat without relying upon a low brace. This could still go all right, I said to myself, the boat develops stability when it picks up speed — as I recall from paddling it in the pool.

As the horn went off to signal the start of the race, about 30 racers started spinning paddles. There was a flurry of water and most of them

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were gone. I made it gingerly out of the eddy into moving water, using my hips to keep the boat upright. I started paddling the boat, while using many low braces. Before I could get a real feel for paddling the boat, I was on Patton's Run. I went through the meat of this monster class II, and before I had time to react, the boat and I were upside down, well except that the boat was really laying on its side, but I was upside down. This wasn't a familiar position to roll up, so I bailed and was glad to quickly get out of the boat given its tiny cockpit and unfamiliarity with the whole experience. Woody O'Brian was just in front of me, and helped gather my boat and paddle and handed them off to bystanders standing at the Patton's Run trail. Thanks Woody! I made it into the eddy, got up on land, and tried to process what had just happened. I sat on the bank for about 10 minutes and contemplated if I should continue or hike back to the car at the put-in. All racers were downstream now, and it would be just me and the river. A 'helpful bystander' said that there's plenty more of this to come downstream (yeah ... thanks buddy). After some thought, I decided I would get into the boat on dry land, put the skirt on, and see if I could push myself into the river (not really what you want to do with a composite boat, but it's easier than trying to put the skirt on while trying to balance on the water. This went well and I was back in the race.

The next 15 minutes or so, I started to develop a feel for the boat through smaller rapids. I determined that rapids were best handled with a low brace through the entire rapid, and paddling the boat at a slow steady pace worked well on flat-water. This strategy served me well for the remainder of the run.

At about the two mile mark, I was taking an easier line, hit an eddy line at the tail end of the rapid. Instant flip. Rather than try to roll this time, I bailed and swam, I had the choice

of getting the boat into an eddy or grabbing my paddle. I chose the former, and the paddle took a nice line down the rapid. I got the boat up on dry land on the railroad side of the river, and looked downstream. The paddle was gone. I emptied the boat and hiked down the side of the river to see if I could find the paddle. It wasn't anywhere to be seen, and progress along the bank was challenging as there were lots of obstacles and plants.

I sat by my boat and took stock of the situation. A group came by and



Photo by Gary Kyle

Although fellow CCCers Elizabeth Kyle (front), Barry Schmidt (left), and Oren Abeles weren't competing for time they earned a few points for the club.

offered me a set of hand paddles — I thanked them and politely declined (I couldn't see that going well given the balance requirements of the boat). I asked them to look for my paddle downstream. A few more groups came by, no-one had a breakdown paddle. About 20 minutes had gone by at this time, and I was still on the opposite side of the river from the road, with no real prospects of getting a rescue/ride. I had to be more pro-active. The next group to come by was a raft-group with a seasoned guide. He saw me on the side of the bank and gave me the 'are you OK' sign - I motioned him towards me. After a brief explanation, I stashed my boat and asked for a ride across the river to the road, where I planned to hitch a ride to the take out — where my keys were. They

brought me over to the other side. Seconds later, I heard a cry "I have your paddle!" On the other side of the river was one of the kayakers (Barry Schmidt — a fellow CCCer) that had come down after me, had found my paddle, and had hiked back up the tracks to get it back to me. Wow, what a guy! A different raft then pulled into the eddy and offered me a ride back across. Appreciate it guys!

Now reunited with my paddle, I hiked back up the tracks and found the boat. Barry had offered to allow me to paddle with his group, and I gratefully accepted.

The rest of the trip was pretty uneventful. I offered to let people in our group paddle my boat for a while — they laughed. My boat handling skills did get better towards the end of the run, but fatigue and better judgement crept in. I took the boat out above the Nantahala Falls, and walked it back to meet the others at the Eddy Pub. My unofficial finish time was 2h 45m. Glad to finish in one piece with all of my equipment. To get an official time you have to make it down in 1h 45m.

John Pinyerd was the fastest racer in a C1 composite wildwater boat and pulled off a 56 minute run, Chris Hipgrave came in in 2nd place overall with a 57 minute run — in a plastic boat.

Official CCC member times were as follows:

K1	Tom Womble	1:01:34
K1	Jim Wei	1:02:29
K1	Woody O'Brian	1:15:19
K1W	Donna Murphy	1:12:34
C1	John Long	1:12:56
OC-1	Peter Blanc	1:10:52
OC-2	Chris Bean/Michael Drake	1:11:11

After the race, Jim Wei mentioned to me that he'd chatted with Chris asking him how he managed to pull out a 6 minute faster time than him, using the same model boat. Chris said "It's not the boat, it's the engine." Sage words.