The Other Speed Run

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It was the start of the new year when my phone rang. It was Mary, a co-worker and friend. Her son Seth, a member of the US Men's Whitewater rafting team, was in a bind. For the past year, along with his team, he had been planning an attempt at the Canyon speed record. The record has gained huge attention since Kevin Fedarko's *The Emerald Mile* hit the bestseller lists.

The US Men's Team team was determined to use their skills as international racers, along with a custom built, 48-foot cataraft, to complete all 277 miles of the Canyon in under 34 hours. They had some pretty amazing support from Chaco in making this dream a reality. Several other adventure companies, including Jack's Plastic, NRS, Cataract Oars, Yeti, and Black Diamond took an interest in the project and chipped in gear and expertise along the way. Only one snag: just three weeks before their permit, the team's veteran Grand Canyon boatman dropped out. That boatman was going to support them with critical navigational knowledge of the river so they could run big-boat lines without scouting, especially at night.

In the months prior to the fateful phone call from Mary, I had received updates on the team's progress from Seth's dad, Lindsey. I became particularly interested in the effort after hearing about their boat: a very unique craft, one of which the Canyon had never seen before, and may never see again. This boat, which is 10 feet longer than any Canyon motor rig, required a crew of eight: six oarsmen, one man on each oar and three to a side, one person manning a rear-mounted sweep oar, and one rotating through a rest position. A "motor" rig with six human motors.The boat was constructed around an aluminum and carbon/composite frame and ran on two 48' long Jack's Plastic Cat tubes that Jack repurposed from another project and generously donated for the team's use. The guys affixed six, rear-facing, sliding seats to two parallel aluminum rails that ran the length of the frame. Each seat could be locked out for improved bracing in big whitewater. Twelve foot long carbon oars, straight off a racing shell, propelled the boat downstream. A solar panel, a 100-pound battery, and a bank of LED lights provided much needed illumination of river features at night. High tech GPS devices would help the team track their speed and allow the support crew to monitor progress.

In the months leading up to their January permit, the team was able to test the raft's performance on the Moab Daily, Westwater Canyon, and then from Diamond Creek to Pearce Ferry. A round of design modifications followed each test and the craft continued to evolve until, at last, they felt it was Canyon-ready. Their plan, after nine months of training, boat design, and logistics, was to maintain a pace of 8.4 mph, which would put them at Pearce Ferry in under 34 hours.

When Mary was done sharing that the team had lost their Canyon veteran, I butted into the phone conversation and told her that I knew a couple of young bucks with lots of experience that might be a good fit. Silence blared from the other end of the conversation.

“They were hoping you might be interested,” Mary shared.

“Ooooo” I said. ”I need to talk with Julie on this one.”

“You might want to call Seth too,” she added.

A couple of days later, commitments were made on both ends and I became a member of the team. Why not? Sounds fun in a demented way that only a boatman might understand. Six days before the launch, I drove up to Vail to meet the team in person for the first time. We considered that a better option than introductions on the Lee’s Ferry ramp. It kind of felt like I was pirating a private trip setup over the internet. One outstanding concern expressed by the team was that our schedule had us running Lava at night. No problem, I thought. Use the easy setup markers on the right, make the cut and straighten her out, Lava does the rest. As long as the lighting systems worked close to what I had come to understand, I figured we were good to go.

I missed the rigging of the boat at Lee’s Ferry, which the rangers gave us permission to do a day early, (thanks to both the riggers and the rangers for that) but arrived in time to get an afternoon of upstream practice before our launch at 11 p.m., January, Friday 13. During our practice session, dodging and cutting around the buoys at the Ferry, my confidence wavered. I couldn’t get the team’s pre-determined commands down and struggled to move the boat in the way I had envisioned. I felt a little intimidated being the odd man in. This was going to be more challenging than I originally thought.

Not much sleep, but some rest greeted us at Marble Canyon Lodge. As much rest as we could get, anyway, with numerous law enforcement personnel armed with assault weapons stealthily shadowing an unbalanced tourist that had been called in during our quiet, pre-launch winter evening. Classic. A nice somber sendoff followed, with a small group of friends and family waving us off from the beach in a steady drizzle of rain.

We were hoping to meet daylight around Unkar, while catching and following a 20,000 CFS flow to Lava. Hance and the beginning of the gorge in the dark was not an option we were interested in entertaining. My plan was to avoid calling for correction strokes, to keep our “mo” going and not disrupt the flow of the machine-like oarsmen, steering with just the sweep instead. I soon found out this was not a viable option. Because of the strength of the oarsmen, turning with the sweep alone was not effective and the boat didn’t respond anything like a motor rig, which tends to pivot on its nose. The night was still young and I knew I could not keep putting out so much effort fighting with the sweep oar for 277 miles. I started using more commands to maneuver the boat, finding mixed results.

Our first big test was of course, House Rock Rapid. In a motor rig I work to get the biggest rides available in Marble Canyon. For the speed run, we wanted to be fast and smooth--stay in the current and stay right of the massive wave train running down the left side. Pegging our choice

line would have been easy in a motor rig, except this was definitely not a motor rig. We got our angle but lost our “mo”. Off we went into the big boys, not teed up, but dead-sideways. We high-sided and stayed upright, but just barely! We needed to regroup, adjust and come up with a new plan. We decided the two back oarsmen, would turn around and face forward in the big whitewater, giving us more eyes downstream and a couple of oars to help steer. My role changed to more of a narrator, providing blow-by-blow descriptions of obstacles, markers, channels, and route options as we descended on them. It worked. We found our A-Team setup. With my river knowledge to help him pick his lines former Grand Canyon guide Matt Norfleet manned the sweep for the difficult drops. Soon, our confidence and speed increased and we started clicking off the miles and rapids. We reached Hance at daybreak, ahead of schedule. We aced everything in the gorge. Everything up to Crystal, anyway, where an early entry, right hand run found us straddling a shallow rock that slammed down the middle of the boat, breaking most of the lower crossbars of our frame. We kept running and repaired two of the most severely damaged crossbars with cam straps, fiberglass tape, and a couple of spare paddles we brought along, all while navigating the Jewels at top speed. With the miles and rapids falling by the wayside, we were feeling good. We lost daylight below Havasu, but we were still on our pace.

Nighttime navigation started up again. We had barely missed a stroke for 178 miles, in less than 20 hours, and were ahead of schedule to break the record. The team fell into silence, each man lost in his own thoughts, as we prepared for a night run of Lava. Nerves were up, and we weren’t sure what to expect. Then, illuminated starkly by the LED light bank, there was the horizon line, racing toward us. Nailing the entry to Lava, we hit the “V” wave perfectly, which lined us up for the big Kahuna. When we hit that last wave, the forward twelve feet of boat pierced the green water and the forward section of each tube began to rise, trying to float to the surface and straining against two aluminum extensions that ran forward from each corner of the frame. All while the remaining 36 feet of boat, still sliding down the back of the wave behind, kept driving them deeper underwater. As we crested the wave, our elation and shouts of success were punctured by the explosive *crack* and sound of rushing air. One of the frame extensions couldn’t bear the stress, broke, and put a 4 inch tear in our right tube. We limped to Tequila Beach with a sixth of our boat submerged in the river along with a couple members of our team. There we worked on patching the hole, the boat still in the water, fully rigged. Wind and sand were blowing, the eddy surged against the boat, and the rain continued falling. The whole scene was illuminated by the eerie glow of the LED lights.

We had a hard time getting the patch to hold and lost close to 3 hours on that beach. Knowing it was impossible to break the record at that point, our energy levels and some of our motivation dropped. Sleep deprivation set in with full force. By then, most of us had been awake for 30+ hours. Guys were falling asleep on oars, waking up only when an oar crabbed or a stumble nearly resulted in a swim. We rowed on through the night and into the early afternoon hours of Sunday, fighting the wind, pushing a limp tube with gallons of water in it, and fighting the desperate urge to sleep. We nosed up on the beach at Pearce Ferry, exhausted, but not defeated. Total time elapsed for our run: 39 hours and 24 minutes.

Spending time in the Canyon for me is often a spiritual journey into my life and its interrelationships with the world, something to take my time with. So I was left wondering why I had such a rewarding time, trying to get through the Canyon as fast as we could? I have come to the conclusion that, to be able to do what we did, on some level we must have been completely in sync with the “Canyon.” I like to think so, anyway. Maybe it was just a lot of fun. The trip was a one-of-a kind experience. I entered this adventure the odd man in and left feeling completely welcomed and privileged to be a part of the challenge. Plato said, “You can learn more about a person in an hour of play, than in a year of conversation.” I got to play with these guys for close to 40 nonstop hours and loved every second of it. That adds up to a lot of learning. Thanks Seth, Ian, John Mark, Matt (Norf), Jeremiah, Kurt and Robbie. It was one Canyon trip I will never forget.

-Marty Borges

Marty Borges has worked in the Grand Canyon as guide for over 30 years. He lives with girlfriend, Julie, in Pagosa Springs, Colorado where he is the director of an alternative high school program. His program uses the outdoors as a medium to help teach academics, teamwork, leadership skills and the value of putting forth an honest effort. He is also a bit of a freak when it comes to the Grand Canyon. He loves boating in it, climbing it, hiking it, talking about it, living it, and sharing it.