

Down Under Dogs. Yukon River Quest 2012

The View from Seat Five....



The Yukon River Quest, or "The Race to the Midnight Sun".

The Yukon River Quest is the longest annual “ultra marathon” canoe race in the world. The course runs for 715 kilometres down the Yukon River, from Whitehorse to Dawson City, in Canada.

It is called the Race to The Midnight Sun, as it is run on the longest day of the year, where the sun barely sets and the light during the “night” is like twilight, dull but still clear.

In the 14th annual Yukon River Quest, 2012, there were 68 teams entered, made up of 187 paddlers from 13 countries around the world. Only 54 of these teams finished with 14 teams being scratched or pulling out along the race.



The “Down Under Dogs”

Bodo Lenitschek competed in the Yukon River Quest in 2008, winning his division in a mixed two-man canoe. He was convinced that a team of outriggers could be very competitive in the event so set out to put a 6 man crew together to paddle the event in a Voyager Canoe. The “Down Under Dogs” were a group of fine outrigger paddlers from Cairns, hand picked by Bodo Lenitschek for the Quest. Well the truth is, these were the only suckers that Bodo could coerce into joining him in such an event.

The team was from left to right:

- Ralph Seed;** seat 1
- Bodo Lenitschek;** seat 6 (steerer)
- Keith Vis;** seat 2
- Geoff Wright;** seat 5
- Caleb Wiles;** seat 4
- Grant Davis;** seat 3

It was a young crew, with the average age only 52 years. Fortunately, to balance their youth, they had a good number of years of outrigger paddling experience under their belts.



The Canoe

Bodo's dream of winning the quest in a Voyager began in 2010, with his acquiring the use of a competitive carbon fibre Voyager Canoe, called "Breaking Wind", which is the same canoe type that holds the race record. The use of this canoe did not come cheaply. The cost of just getting the canoe to the river in Whitehorse was: £1000 English pounds rental for the owners, \$CAD200.00 to the Canoe Shop in Whitehorse for transport and storage, plus \$CAD 400.00 deposit in case of damage. It was, for all this expense, a light fast and competitive canoe.



Setting it up

After Bodo negotiated the rental of the canoe he put his energy into forming a crew. He concentrated on selecting paddlers from the local Cairns area, so team training could be easily coordinated. He started contacting people late in 2010, had a lot of interest, but not much commitment. It was not until October of 2011 that he had full commitment from a crew of 5 other paddlers. With the commitment came the first of many chunks of money, which was used to complete nomination and payment for the rental of the canoe. Once these hurdles were overcome, it was time to start training.

The Training

Ralph offered his home at Tinaroo dam for Yukon training camps. He borrowed an old "classic" outrigger canoe from the Dam Outriggers, which was berthed at his property, and used for all our training camps. This venue proved invaluable, as we could combine training, team meetings, audiovisual discussions, as well as dietary input into every camp. At every camp, we would paddle about 50-80 kilometres around the dam. At the first camp our goals, both team and personal were set, with the main theme of personal goals, to loose weight and gain fitness. Morning outrigger trainings during the week were ramped up, doing 2 x 20 kilometre paddles as a crew every week, along with another 20-30 kilometres per week in club crews or individually. Ralph instigated most of the specific training, which focused on the stroke. He was adamant that our stroke had to be extremely efficient, in both energy input and forward thrust, so that it could be maintained for the many hours needed to complete the race. Our training really focused on "Ralph's" stroke. There is no doubt that the efforts in getting the crew to use this stroke paid off. The longest training paddle we did was a "full Moon" overnight paddle in April 2012, from Ette Bay to Ellis Beach, about 115 kilometres, 6.00pm to 6.00am. The crew did loads more one off training, such as running, climbing hills, and heaps of gym weight training, thanks to our personal trainer Malcolm. The final special training we undertook was in a Dragon boat, which was a close as we could get to the seating width of the Voyager. The few short runs in the dragon boat showed us there would be a steep learning curve for balance and absolute precision in our changes.



Nutrition and Hydration

Nutrition during the race was a high priority. We received recommendations from nutritionists, but the best advice came from Mike Le Roux, a local Cairns extreme athlete. On his advise we aimed to take in 350 kilojoules of energy every hour, and if possible breaking this down to 150kj intake, every 20 minutes. Lots of different products were trialled by the crew, and in the end most opted to use Optimiser Endura, along with gels, bars and wraps. Some of the mixing methods were a success, while others proved time consuming and difficult. For hydration we carried sufficient town water to last from Whitehorse to mid way through Lake LaBarge, at which distance there was little chance of consuming polluted water, and from then on rely on river water. This worked well, that is until we lost drinking cups!

Blisters

We were all prepared for multiple blisters, but remarkably got very few. This is most likely to our constant pre-race applications of Gurney Goo, which was a Teflon based cream, which basically “waterproofed” our hands, preventing moisture entering under the skin. Whatever; it worked!

Seating in the Canoe

We could only work from photos of the canoe, to try and visualize the seats in the canoe. We worked out seats 2, 3, 4 and 5 were about 1 metre wide, which would mean sliding a long way from side to side every change. Lots of ideas were thrown around, but in the end it was Grant’s solution that was adopted. He designed a 3mm thick piece of plastic sheet to fit over the fabric seat, and then with a heat gun, formed the leading edge of the plastic under the seat. He then padded the underside higher in the centre to make it slightly convex. This gave a smooth surface on which to slide, but one that kept you tight against the side, and not sliding to the centre of the seat. Cushioning was inserted into our pants, which worked reasonably well. Only problem was when it moved it was a bugger to get it back in place. (Also we found to our discomfort, 20mm of cushioning is not much after sliding about 5 kilometres sideways on your bum!



Paddles

Ralph did the math’s, and worked out if we used our Xylo paddles instead of the Zaveral lightweight paddles we would be lifting an additional 20 tonnes of weight over the length of the race. It didn’t take much to convince us all, so Zaveral paddles were ordered and used.

Final Pre-Canada Things

We had a last minute rush of getting maps loaded onto GPS’s, getting Bodo’s hard copy maps laminated, acquiring a “machine that goes beep” as a timer for our changes, or “hucks”, bailers, then the lightest possible compulsory items such as tents, cooking gear, food, warm clothes, sleeping bags and life jackets. It went from months to go, to weeks, and days in a flash. The crew were well prepared physically, kitted as best we could without ever seeing the canoe, and ready for the Yukon.

Whitehorse, Yukon

Most of the crew arrived from Vancouver into Whitehorse on the same plane, on Thursday, a week before the race, after flying all different routes to get to Vancouver. Bodo, Kiki and Adler were already there and met us in a bus, which would be our transport for the next week. We were transported to our accommodation, the Versleuce Meadows Bed and Breakfast, where we met Roseanna, our host. Bodo had already collected the Voyager, and we were all keen to get it in the river and give it a try, but we were missing Caleb.... Caleb had been in Whitehorse for a few days prior to our arrival, but had not caught up with Bodo. We tried phoning and emailing him, to no avail. He was missing “before” action. Friday morning as we get into breakfast, we are informed by our hostess, Roseanna that Caleb had called her at 1.30am asking for a pickup to the B&B. The answer he received was unprintable. He finally arrived at 8.00am on Friday hungry and possibly hung-over, or at least that’s how he looked! Anyway, it was good to have the crew together, so we shoved some food down Caleb’s throat and loaded the bus for our first paddle in the Yukon.

The First Paddle

Team bonding was not on a big high this morning, Grant was grumpy, Bodo pissed off we didn’t paddle the day before, Caleb was still digesting breakfast, Ralph tinkering with his heart rate monitor, it was lucky that Keith and I were there to quieten things down... We offloaded the canoe into the Yukon, passed the bus keys to Kiki and Susan, and prepared for our first run down the river. Not the best of starts... less than 20 metres down the river, on the first huck call, we were upside down. Caleb abused Grant, Grant abused Caleb, Bodo spat the dummy, Ralph tinkered with his heart rate monitor, Keith enjoyed a dip, and I was stunned into silence by the sound of Susan and Kiki’s laughter... this was the most humiliating part. Unfortunately a reporter from the Yukon Star newspaper was there, so the Ozzie team started to get a reputation for swimming. In retrospect, it was the best thing we could have done. It showed us just how unstable the canoe was, and how important smooth changes would be.



The Last Week Before the Race

We very quickly came to respect our canoe’s ability to dump us in the water, if we did not offer her the utmost attention. She was fast, light, but murder to change sides in, and Bodo found that steering was going to be a challenge. During the week we tinkered with the seating arrangements, added and changed the locations of buckets and holders, added and changed almost everything, packed and tested the load distribution, balanced and reloaded the canoe till we could do it in our sleep. Meanwhile Ralph still tinkered with his heart rate monitor. We took the canoe down the river fully loaded, empty and in various states a number of times, then finally did a fully loaded run into Lake Laberge for about 60 kilometres. By the end of the week we had most of the seating changes sorted, gear locations working, Caleb’s music machine playing, food and hydration methods in place and pretty well everything sorted, well except for Ralph’s heart rate monitor.... We had lots of serious discussions over coffee, and then the last thing to do was put on the signage.



Signage

Exit “Passing Wind” and enter “Down Under Dogs”! We were all really impressed with the signage. Our canoe looked the part, now it was up to us!



Tuesday afternoon saw us adding a few last minute changes to seats, holders and anything else, then while Ralph’s tinkered with his heart rate monitor, we loaded the canoe on the bus for the last time. We were ready for the start, and not before time, as tempers had flared a few times during the preparations and frankly everyone could not wait to get on the water!



The Support Crew

The finest support crew a team could ask for. From the left:

Helen Seed
Stephanie Seed
Kiki Paull
Sue Vis
Susan Markwell

These magnificent women worked under extremely stressful conditions, putting up with the our crews infighting, indecisions, change of plans, constant requests, and ensured whatever we needed was available, under control, and done with a smile. They prepared absolutely beautiful meals for everyone, cleaned, cleared and were



always upbeat. If any crew contemplates doing this race you should carefully study our support crews operation manual, if it could be put into print. They were great.

Sign In Day

The day before the race was sign in day. We had to have all our gear checked by the officials, to ensure we had everything that was mandatory for the crew to carry in the canoe. Our gear was checked and given the OK, our race bib's were signed, and then a team photo of the dogs, in the Yukon Quest shirts, with the Yukon river in the background. There was then a race briefing in the afternoon, where we were given a run down on the race, and how to reset our SPOT devices.... We also found out how focused the Californian crew was.... These fellows would be our main opposition throughout the race.



Geoff Wright; Grant Davis; Keith Vis, Caleb Wiles; Ralph Seed, Bodo Lenitschek

Race Day

Breakfast on race morning, Ralph finally stopped tinkering with his heart rate monitor, it just didn't work, unfortunately it didn't stop him talking about it... We had cut out most fibre from our diet for the last few days, to stop us being "regular" and hoped we would all be mildly constipated for the race. We did not want to stop the canoe for toilet breaks! Quickly we packed all our bags in the RV, cleaned the rooms of the guesthouse and drove down to the race start. Our canoe was offloaded with all our gear, and prior to loading in the canoe, another official gear check, to ensure we had not ditched tents or gear to lighten the canoe! The canoe was packed with gear for the race, and then there was time for a final coffee and of course another toilet break. We then spent some time clearing a path down from the bank to our canoe so we did not get caught up with the other crews running along the rivers edge at the start.



Our Goal

It had been our goal coming into this event, that it was not just to finish, but finish first and break the race record. A 6-man Voyager team “Kisseynew” set the race record in 2008, which is 39 hours and 32 minutes. Our crew had decided to set the bar high and really if you are going to do it, why not go all the way!

The Start

11.30am Wednesday the 27th of June 2012, had us in our full race gear, lined up under the start banner waiting for speeches and the race start. A brief rain shower passed over us, letting us know just how cold the rain is in the Yukon. Rain in the tropics is just wet, rain in the Yukon is colder than snow! The crew was still worried about Caleb’s ability to run following a nasty accident in an OC6 a few months before the event.



12.00pm, the race started and 187 paddlers ran the 500 metres from the start line to their respective canoes. When the start gun fired, Caleb proved his legs were fine, he sprinted from the start and beat the entire crew down to the canoe. Our track from the bank proved good, and all the crew were able to get down and into the canoe without a problem. We were trying to be fast, but not stupid. Kiki held the canoe for us in deeper water, and once we were all in and settled we started. There would have been about 20 craft ahead of us, one was the Californian Voyager canoe crew, “Such a Blast”. Their canoe was almost identical to ours. The photo below was taken a few minutes into the race; the Californians are nearer the right hand bank, a canoe length ahead of us.



The Race was ON

15 minutes into the race we had adopted Bodo's favourite race strategy, **“get in front and stay in front”**. All canoes behind us, was a great feeling. We had paddled this section of water a few times and knew the waters well. Two hours and fifteen minutes later we passed Policeman's Point, which was the last checkpoint before Lake Laberge. We were 4 minutes ahead of “Such a Blast” and better than that, 7 minutes ahead of the race record! We entered lake Laberge and our canoe speed slowed to about 11.5 km/hour. The Lake was very wide and there was zero current to assist us. The Lake was about 80 kilometres long, so it was head down and paddle strong. We were all feeling strong, and quickly fell into the Ralph paddle stroke routine. During the paddle, we allowed ourselves a 1-minute break every hour. Bodo would call us out, starting at No.1, and working down through the canoe. In this minute you could change clothing, take a piss, eat some food, stretch or just have a drink. A 1-minute break every hour... doesn't sound like much time, but generally it turned out to be sufficient. We were paddling at a stroke rate of 60 per minute, one, which Ralph maintained perfectly all race. Our hucks were initially controlled by the beep machine, with a change every 45-50 seconds. We were all feeling good, and over the lake we found ourselves gradually pulling away from the Californians.

The Californian's

Team “Such a Blast” were a group of outriggers from California. Their personal profiles read like a who's who of outriggering. They were all at least 10-15 years younger than us, there was an ex-Olympian kayaker in the crew, and most had done numerous Molokai crossings. They even looked the part, all tall trim and “Californian”!



Above is them leaving Carmack's (unfortunately before us) on the second day!

Exit Lake Laberge

We exited Lake Laberge and entered the river system again at 18.44, and had been paddling for 6 hours, 44 minutes. As we left Bodo looked over his shoulder and told us the Californians are just a dot, we are a kilometre ahead. That felt great! The race records showed we were 9 minutes ahead of the Californian's at that point and 12 minutes ahead of the race record. We were paddling strongly, with our canoe speed going from 14 to 22 kilometres per hour, depending on where we were in the current. However the temperature was dropping quickly. The night was going to prove colder than most. The rain had held off, but as the sun set at about 11.00pm the temperature plummeted. One by one we added layers of clothing and beanies, well except for Keith who by this time had only pulled a long sleeve shirt over his singlet. We were going along strongly, the sun was behind the hills, it was dull, but the twilight was still bright enough for things to be clear.

Piss Stops

Most of the crew were able to take a leak in their one-minute break. We used our drinking cups to pee in, then rinsed them and used them to drink from. No big deal, but it became harder and harder to pee after 6-8 hours paddling, as your body shuts down processing food. Ralph and Keith had difficulties with cups, so had opted to use a catheter type of system. Unfortunately they also had difficulties with this and were struggling. If you didn't piss, your body would really suffer, so it was very important. Near sunset things were not going well for them, so they called to Bodo to stop on the bank so they could take a piss. Bodo demanded they try and pee in their cups, they tried, but no joy. Cursing and swearing, Bodo bought the canoe into land, but even after three or more tries, we were unable to stop at a bit of bank where we could get out. We were losing valuable time, but finally found a place to stop so they could relieve themselves. The rest of the crew used this opportunity as well, and also to add clothes. We were back in and paddling again fairly quickly.

First Flip

It was about 2.00am, we were all paddling strongly, it was cold, but we were well covered and not too cold as we were paddling hard. We were told later that the outside temperature during the night was 1 degree, (and there was a nice little breeze) and the water temperature 3 degrees. We were paddling close to the riverbank, when we rounded a bend and encountered a boil and whirlpool. From the back I saw nothing, nor did Bodo, just an "Oh Shit" from the front of the canoe as we dropped into a whirlpool about a metre deep. Our canoe was flipped in seconds, and we found ourselves upside down, and heading downstream in the dusk. To right a Voyager, you really have to get to the bank and lift it clear of the water. It was a fast section of water, and I guess we were drifting at 10 km/hr. Everyone surfaced and was OK after the flip. Caleb grabbed the stern rope and swam towards the bank to try and secure the canoe so it would swing in. We were all swimming with it trying to push it to the bank as well. Caleb had a lot of difficulty and it was quite a while before he could get the rope secured and pull the canoe into an eddy area. It is difficult to say how long we were in the water, it felt like 15 minutes, but I cannot be sure. I do know that when we made the bank we were totally saturated. The bank we made was quite steep, so it was all we could do just to lift, drain and refloat the canoe. Just as we had it right way up, past paddled the Californian team. They called to check we were OK before they charged off downstream. With no room to do anything, we decided to get back in and paddle hard to warm up. It was then we started to see the cost of the flip. Bodo had lost his maps, the GPS Bodo was using was water resistant, not proof, so it died. The beep machine stopped beeping, and we had lost drinking cups, loose food, and some containers. BUT we were all safe and off chasing the Californians again.

Hypothermia

We kept paddling, and it was cold! It was a cold that only wet clothes with a wind, in 1-degree temperatures can produce. It gets right into your bones, and in fact finds bones you didn't even know you had. It is painful! We had been paddling for about 30 minutes when Keith missed a change and suddenly slumped in his seat. Grant and Ralph called out that he was in a bad way and we needed to stop immediately. The river would not help, and it was nearly 10 more minutes before we could get into an eddy on the bank where we could get out. Keith had the least amount of clothing on when we flipped and the water/wind and temperature was enough to make him hypothermic. Barely able to stand, Grant and Ralph stripped his wet clothes, and we dressed him in dry clothing, put on his rain pants, jacket, beanie etc, then wrapped him in a space blanket. Caleb has a thermos of warm soup, and Keith was able to have a few mouthfuls. We lifted him into seat one, and gave him a paddle to slump forward onto. We all pulled on our rain gear, which prevented the wind cutting into us as much, got back into the canoe and headed off. Did I mention it was COLD! It was COLD!

Little Salmon Checkpoint

Five minutes downstream we heard lots of shouting from the bank, as we passed the “Little Salmon” checkpoint. What a bugger, if we had known it was so close, we could have pulled in there and being able to warm Keith up properly, but as we had lost our maps, we were not to know. We unfortunately did not hear the people at the checkpoint calling for us to reset our SPOT device. When the canoe tipped, the spot device got wet, then when righted the wind and water “froze” the system. This is why the “On-Line” internet tracking system showed us dropping from first to 12th place, stuck on the river at our last SPOT signal point. It was not till we reached Carmack’s that we were told, and the spot device was re-set. Our time past Little Salmon logged 29 minutes behind the Californians, and unfortunately 48 minutes behind the race record. Our stops for toilet, flipping and ‘saving’ Keith had cost us well over 60 minutes of time. Keith slowly warmed, and every now and then started to paddle again in an attempt to warm up, and also because the man just never gives up. It was another three hours of paddling from Little Salmon to Carmack’s, the 7 hour mandatory stop. Basically there were only five of us paddling for this period. We were cold, and our spirits were down. I felt sorry for Ralph, he had to come back to seat two, and did not have the padding in his pants that we had. His seat in one did not require him to slide, so he padded his seat not his pants. Those three hours would have hurt his arse like hell. The picture blow shows us coming into Carmack’s. Very cold and rugged up in wet clothes!



It was 7:17 am on Thursday morning; we had been paddling for 19 hours and 17 minutes.

Carmack’s

Carmack’s checkpoint was the end of the first leg. Every canoe HAD to stop for 7 hours at this checkpoint, and it was the only point really accessible by road along the river. You were clocked in and could not leave until 7 hours were up.

We arrived into Carmack’s at 7:17am, having lost another 7 minutes on the race record, but amazingly only 18 minutes behind the Californian’s. We had caught up 11 minutes even with a paddler down! We all felt like shit, but the ladies in the support crew were pumped up and full of energy! We didn’t find out till later just how much stress they had been in when our SPOT device failed and we were apparently stranded mid stream.

It was a real struggle to even get out of the canoe at Carmack's. Your legs didn't work, were like jelly, and did I mention it was cold? We were all helped up by the women to our RV and handed a beautiful warm bowl of soup. Even the second was just as nice. There were only two hot showers in the van park, and as the Californian's had gone to a hotel, we were first in and made the most of it in case the hot water ran out! Three dollars bought us three minutes of luxurious HOT water. That shower was the best feeling ever! My problem was that the room would not stay still, and my legs didn't want to hold my body up. It was a bad case of sea legs. The support crew was just fantastic. They helped us into our warm clothes, and pointed us towards food and bed! I shared a bed with Ralph, and even though he farted and snored, nothing would stop me sleeping solidly for 4 hours.

While we were sleeping the ladies washed and dried all our wet gear, went from RV to RV to beg and borrow cups and gear to replace what we lost in our flip, cleaned out our canoe, and had everything ready for us when we woke. They woke us in plenty of time to get ready, prepared us more warm soup, some bread and after that we made good use of the toilets. Ralph took Keith to the medical aid station to get their OK for him to continue. I heard Keith mutter as he left, if the doctor says I cannot go on, I will have to get a second opinion! With hypothermia, after you have completely warmed up, you are normally good to go again. Keith had a good hot shower and warm sleep, so was back to normal. Our gear had to be checked by the race officials again, to make sure all safety issues were correct, and then we loaded the canoe in preparation for the start. The Californian crew had been cleared to leave, but for some reason they stuffed around, losing another 9 minutes of race time, before they finally got away. We were pumped; from being 18 minutes behind "Such a Blast", we had gained another 9 minutes without any effort!



It was Thursday afternoon, 2:17pm, we were in our canoe, leaving right on time, it was warm, we felt strong, were all in high spirits and ready to run the Californians down!

Five Finger Rapids



About 2 ½ hours paddling downstream from Carmack’s was the “infamous” Five Finger Rapids. We were told to take the right hand channel, shown in the photo on the right. This channel has a fairly clear V down the centre, with shoulder waves coming out from the island and the right bank. The plan was to enter the channel, then leave the V by crossing to the left, where there were gentler rounded shoulder waves. Unfortunately things did not go to plan, and we followed the V to the end, ending up in some sharp high standing waves. This was “unnecessarily exciting”, with the canoe leaping out of the water, nose diving and then gently rolling upside down to the left, again putting the Dogs under water again. The shots below show how gracefully we performed our flip.



And there we were, the Down Under Dogs floating downstream yet again. Unlike the flip the night before the daytime temperature was in double figures, and thanks to a support boat at the rapids, we were able to get into the shore and get the canoe drained, upright and ready to go in about 30 minutes. Meanwhile Bodo was swearing and cursing to the world, how could we flip, we were just about through the rapids, what went wrong, how could this happen, and then to top it off his maps were lost again!



We had three sets of maps, for the three sections of river. The maps in use were held on a map platform in front of Bodo, secured down by elastic bungee cords. The force of the flip just tore them off the table. Not only were the maps lost but we also lost caps, some drinking mugs, loose food and

some containers. There was not time for stuffing around, the Californians were pulling away, so we were back in and paddling! The boys had used the river time for a good piss, it was warm and in no time we had dried out and felt great.

We received a fantastic cheer from the support crew as we passed them at a vantage point a couple of kilometres downstream from the rapids. They had watched us flip, and a race co-ordinator told them that they would probably have to pull us out of the race at this point, and to get down to the river as soon as possible. They got down there, and told us later, to see us back in and powering past was a fantastic highlight!

Without maps, Bodo had to make a lot of judgement calls. The river would often split past many small islands, and not knowing if the river swung to the left or right, could mean putting an extra kilometre onto the route if the wrong path was taken. The canoe speed was varying from 14 to 22 kilometres per hour, depending on the current we were in. Ralph or Grant would call the canoe speed from their GPS's to Bodo, and suggest a faster course. It was always a tough choice, cut the corners taking a shorter route, (possibly 500 metres shorter), at a slower speed, or stay out in the faster current and go an extra 500 metres. It would have been good to have longer preparation time to practice these areas, to be able to judge more accurately which was the best choice. Another problem was the lost articles in the 5 finger flip. Caleb had lost his drinking cup, so asked Grant if he could borrow his cup. Grant replied very loudly, "You're not pissing in it are you!" No said Caleb, just drinking. So he borrowed his cup, dipped it in the river and it slipped out of his hand and disappeared under water. I could see Caleb's concern, a few moments passed, then Caleb said, "Ummm Grant, I hope you were not too attached to your cup" ... Grant stopped paddling turned around and the look he gave Caleb melted the rear of the canoe. Keith heard the steam coming out of Grant, so quickly gave him his cup, saying; "Its OK mate, I haven't pissed in this cup, have mine and I will share with Ralph". We dodged a certain fatality.

It was about 7 hours after leaving Carmack's that we finally sighted the Californian crew. It was a bit of a let down, as they had pulled off into the bank. We would have loved to chase and paddle past them! Apparently they were having issues with their urination condom catheters, and had stopped for a "manual" piss break. Let down or not, we now had the lead back again and were not going to give it back without a fight! We soon passed through the Fort Selkirk checkpoint on Thursday at 21:31, only 4 minutes ahead of team Such a Blast. We were treated this night with a fantastic sunset. We were all paddling strongly, but getting sore and tired, This is when we reverted to drugs!

Drugs

No, not the performance enhancing type, just those packed for us by Susan. We each had a little bag of pills, in small packets marked, Pain; Bad Pain, Upset Stomach, Drowsy, and Anti-inflammatory. I was taking an anti-inflammatory tablet every 6 hours, as a precaution, but then needed a "bad pain" tablet when my hands started cramping up. Only near the end of our legs, after 12 or so hours, did I use a No Doze tablet to stay alert.

Kirkman Creek

The trip into Kirkman Creek was fairly uneventful; it was just constant paddling, and constant discussions on route choice. The biggest problem was that we really did not know where we were or when we would arrive, thanks to the lack of maps. Ralph's GPS gave



us an estimation which was the only information we had. We arrived in at 4.22am on Friday morning, having paddled for 14 hours and 8 minutes from Carmack's. Kirkman Creek is a small settlement on the side of the Yukon, with a bakery only accessible by river. We were the first canoe

in, but unfortunately during the day, and the flip at Five Finger, we were an additional 39 minutes behind the record time, which by my calculations on our time through Fort Selkirk was 25 minutes lost in the flip and another 14 minutes down due to course choices made with no maps. This meant we were now 106 minutes in total behind the race record. The best part was that we were 30 minutes ahead of the Californian crew, pulling ahead a whopping 26 minutes since the Fort Selkirk checkpoint.

At Kirkman Creek we had a mandatory 3-hour layover. The race officials had arranged for the bakery to provide a bowl of soup, a sandwich, cake and tea/coffee. The soup was great, and sandwich filling, but Keith, being gluten intolerant, could only have the soup. They could only sell him a second bowl, and luckily I had a \$10 note stuck in my pill bag, so Keith was able to get some more food. They had a great "Hot" house, which was closed in with a potbelly stove in it. We spent a fair while in there till we were warm. We then tried to get a bit of sleep, unpacking our dry clothes and sleeping bags from the canoe, only to find in the last flip a lot of these got wet. It didn't matter that much, Ralph shared lots of his dry clothes around and really we could have slept anywhere! We put our lifejackets with our race numbers at the foot of our sleeping bags, so we could be woken up in time to get moving in the morning. The toilet was the big drop, and breakfast was a scratch and cup of coffee. I did manage to fill my dive boots with some hot water before I put them on which was great because if I hadn't mentioned this before, it was COLD!

We were due to leave at 7.22am Friday morning, and in true fashion all the Dogs were packed and in our canoe, paddles at the ready when we were given the flag to go.

All that was left was the last 150 kilometre sprint home... just another 8 ½ hour paddle! Right from the word go, Caleb was drumming into us the thought for the day... STAY DRY! This was a very good idea, one we all tried very hard to maintain.

Zen

There were lots of pains and stress on body parts starting to show, the 1 minute breaks were now becoming 1 minute stretches, with the rear crew sharing those beautiful moments when No.1 & 2 applied Zen. ZEN is an herbal anti-inflammatory, pain relieving spray, which gives almost immediate relief to muscles and joints. It worked really well. But this magnificent spray, when applied at the front of the canoe, drifted back quickly into our eye's, noses, mouths etc... Zen can really bring tears to your eyes... But after so many hours of sniffing it, I think the whole crew is addicted to the smell of ZEN...



60 Mile River

This was the last checkpoint before Dawson City. We paddled through it at 11:49am Friday morning. Only 5 hours to go! I must admit, those five hours seemed longer than the 12 the day before. We were still paddling strongly, but suffering from pain; more pills.

An hour or so after this checkpoint we paddled past the back of an island, which was in front of a small hunting shack on the bank, and heard lots of shouts and screaming. This was real "Banjo" territory so we kept going. A few minutes later up come two charter boats packed with our women support crew! They had met someone who hired these boats to take them upstream and meet us on the way down. It was a great lift to our spirits and from then on we just powered home.



Dawson City, Yukon

A shot of Dawson city, looking upstream, taken from the hills behind.



Coming into Dawson City!



The Finish

We paddled into Dawson city in 1st place crossing the finish line on Friday at 3:51 pm, having paddled for 1 day, 17 hours and 51 minutes. We did not break the race record, but we did achieve **FIRST** place, 54 minutes ahead of the Californian team "Such a Blast"



First Winning Crew



The "Down Under Dogs" with the Support Crew



It Was Over

The race was one of the hardest things I have put my body through in my life. The cold was extreme, the pain very bad, working without sleep was difficult, but we all found the inner strength to push our bodies well past the point where we should have given up. To finish, and to finish in first place was a magnificent feeling. Would I do it again? The jury is still out...



My Thanks and Appreciation

It was an honour to paddle this race with such a motivated, and positive minded group of fellows. We had fun, trained very hard, tested each other, and in the end formed a special bond, you can only get through sharing and conquering an extreme event, very few people get to experience. Thanks to all the crew for helping me though this quest. Thanks must go to the support crew for their tireless efforts, from the day we landed at Whitehorse till we finished in Dawson City, they were always there. I must thank my darling wife, Iva, who supported my race preparation every inch of the way, but was unable to come with us because of her training commitments for the World Outrigger sprint titles. Finally a big thank you to my son Malcolm Wright who was the crews personal trainer at the gym for 4 months leading up to the race.

Personal Achievements

I started training seriously in January 2012, weighing 92 kilograms, and thought I was pretty fit. Iva and I stopped drinking alcohol, and really toughened up on our diet, cutting out sugars in coffee and tea and reducing our meal portion size. I stepped up my running, and started gym weight sessions with Malcolm. I had a body scan done in February; weight: 87.7kg, muscle mass; 37.8kg, 24.1% body fat. Every month I returned for the scans till the last one in May; weight: 82.1kg, muscle mass; 42.5kg, 11.0 % body fat. I was very happy with the improvement. I was lighter and fitter than I had been for decades! I weighed myself 10 days after finishing the race and came in at 78.2 kg. A lot of weight must have been lost on the race!