

Ice Attack

CALGARY RACERS GET PUMPED CROSSING FROZEN RIVERS IN A CANOE

BY INGRID SAPONA



Barney McIlhargey

IF CROSSING AN ice-jammed river in the frozen winter is your idea of a winter wonderland workout, ice canoe racing might be right up your creek. For a few hundred adventurous men and women, autumn is when they ramp-up training for racing on the frozen St. Lawrence River in Québec. From January to March the icy river attracts five-person teams of all ages and athletic ability, from as far away as France, Chicago, and Calgary.

Though many rowers have the strength to deal with tide and current, propelling a canoe through the ice-filled St. Lawrence

takes a special kind of athlete. Last year a record 49 teams took part in the high-profile Québec City Winter Carnival race.

Barney McIlhargey, 56-year-old captain of the Calgary ice canoe team, enjoys the challenge of the sport, but also "the whole atmosphere at the races and getting connected up with folks in Quebec." "For me the biggest draw is going to Québec every year. It's just fun," says McIlhargey, who

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has been on the team for 20 years.

"I haven't found any other sport that is as challenging," says Stéfanie Drouin, captain of the Auberge Saint-Antoine team. Drouin, a 45-year-old mother of two, has also been racing for 20 years. "The river is never the same. In most sports, the field, or hill, or terrain doesn't change. In ice canoeing the conditions and the river change

from minute-to-minute and that's very exciting," she says.

Because rowing is not the only, or even primary, means of moving the canoe, every team member is responsible for communicating what is up ahead and immediately around them. Depending on whether the ice is slushy, floating sheets, or large or small chunks on the surface or just below, at any given moment racers may quickly stow their oars and hop out, "scootering" the canoe with one or two legs out of the boat, pushing rather than rowing.

"Ice geographies created by the meeting of the down flowing river and the upstream tide is what we play on," says Eric Fraser, a 10-year veteran on the Château Frontenac team, perennial winner in the Men's Elite class. Rowing through slush slows them down and big, flowing chunks can ram the boats, changing the steering angle and direction. Scootering, on the other hand, is by far the fastest and safest way of moving the canoe. The most dangerous is where moving ice meets static ice, according to Fraser. "These transitional lines are body crushers and canoe swallowers," he says.

Surprisingly, the ice, tide, current, and

sub-zero temperatures are not the biggest challenges for the teams. "It's rare that the water's open enough for you to go in a straight line," explains McIlhargey. "The canoe is like a pinball, ricocheting off the ice."

Communicating over the noise of the ice against the boats and oars is a major challenge. "One of the big surprises the first time you're out on the frozen water is how noisy it is. The guy in the back can be yelling at the top of his lungs and he can't be heard in the front," McIlhargey says. "You learn pretty quickly that you've got to communicate non-verbally. So, for example, because the guys in the front can better see what's up ahead, they point in the direction we should head. The tricky part is that using signals only works if the other team members are looking up. It took us a while to get that."

"The guys in the middle are the powerhouse. If they're scootering full-out and their heads are down and they miss a sig-

nal, they could end up pushing the boat in a bad spot. That could cost you 30 seconds or so, which might not sound like much, but if that happens four or five times during a race," says McIlhargey, "you're toast."



Trevor Longstaff, Jon Stuart, Kevin Zazula, Russ Kueber and Barney McIlhargey crew the Calgary ice canoe across the icy St. Lawrence River.

The sport requires a unique combination of strength, speed, agility, fearlessness, and finely honed teamwork. Members of the Calgary team stay in shape off-season by participating in various sports. McIlhargey, for example, is an avid cyclist and bikes about 40 kilometres a day, year

round. Ideally, starting in October the team rows twice a week in the Calgary Canoe Club's rowing tank and once a week on the Bow River. When the local reservoir is frozen they also practice scootering.

They head to Québec City about 10 days before the Winter Carnival race and hold their final practices on the St. Lawrence. While the physical challenges of the sport and the competition clearly motivate the racers – there's no doubt that conquering the icy river's ever-changing landscape is the main attraction. "My team and I live for the chaos of the fields of ice — plates, boulders, and chunks interspersed with tiny slushy streams of water," say Fraser. "We love the ice so much that we feel a tinge of sadness when we have to go race someplace else when we know that back home the ice is splendidly difficult."

When you hear that, you have to believe it's all about the ice. ■

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