

It was luck, not skill that got me in the boat with a superb Voyageur team paddling in the 8th annual Yukon River Quest. I knew one team member (the brother of the team captain), and had some previous wilderness experience and one previous adventure race under my belt, but could definitely be considered a rookie. When the team was short one paddler three weeks before the race, I signed on seeking adventure. My marathon stroke had lots of room for improvement, and throughout the long race, I had plenty of time for practice. Below is an account of the 2006 Yukon River Quest (YRQ) from my spot in the boat.

The Yukon River Quest, a 740-kilometer wilderness adventure-paddling marathon is held annually on the Yukon River from Whitehorse to Dawson City in Canada's Yukon Territory. It is the longest annual canoe and kayak race in the world. This year there were 99-Canucks, 44-Americans, 21 Brits, two from Austria, and one paddler from Australia. The race tests the mettle of wilderness adventure race enthusiasts and includes paddlers from around the world. Since the airing of a BBC documentary in 2003, many UK residents have made their way to the Yukon for the YRQ and this year's race saw a record number of 12 UK teams compete. There are several classes of vessel in the race that include: solo kayak, tandem kayak, tandem canoe, and Voyageur canoe (8 person plus). There is no class distinction between professional and recreational paddlers – the classes are strictly by mode of travel.

Last year, the course record of 42 hours and 51 minutes was set by two strong tandem kayak teams that crossed the finish line at the same time. In the same year, the record for the Voyageur Class was set at approximately 55 hours and 50 minutes by the RCMP team (Scarlet Fever) who placed 22nd overall. In all years prior to 2006, a Voyageur has never finished before the top canoes or kayaks.

Martin Bernardin of Saskatoon put together the team on which I was lucky enough to be a part. Martin owns a canoe company called Kiskeynew Canoe Co. Ltd. that custom builds canoes and offers guided canoe trips in Saskatchewan. Their web site is www.kiskeynewcanoecompany.com. Martin built the beautiful cedar strip Voyageur canoe that was used in this year's race. His canoe was the talk of the race. Four members from the team had used it in a 15-day 1000 km staged race called the Saskatchewan Centennial Canoe Quest in northern Saskatchewan last year.

Our team (#84) was called Kiskeynew Denesuline Dalutweh. Kiskeynew is the name of a Lake in Manitoba on which brothers Martin and Michael Bernardin spent their youth paddling. Kiskeynew is also a Cree word for "Old Man". Denesuline Dalutweh is the name of the First Nation to which three of our Dene First Nation paddlers belong. Gordon, Chris and Paul are from Lac Brochet, Northern Manitoba. Lac Brochet is accessible only by air or water, and my Dene teammates have countless days of paddling experience, as it is part of their way of life. The team is shown on the following page at the start line.

YUKON RIVER QUEST 2006 – Kisseynew DeneSuline Daloutweh

By Ryan Martin

2 of 5



From back left: Ryan Martin (Whitehorse YT), Brent Clark (Saskatoon Sk), Chris Denechezhe (Lac Brochet Mn), Ken Wallis (D'Arcy Sk), Martin Bernardin (Saskatoon), and Michael Bernardin (Edmonton Ab). In Front at left: Paul Tssessaze (Lac Brochet), and Gordon Moise (Lac Brochet). The boat and the captain are from Saskatoon, so our team was known as the "Voyageur team from Saskatchewan", however, we had team members from 3 provinces and one Territory.

The race starts with a short run down Whitehorse's Main Street.



After the run to our waiting boats at the Yukon River shore, the teams paddle around-the-clock under the midnight sun, stopping for just two mandatory rests at Carmacks/Coal Mine Campground (7 hours) and Kirkman Creek (3 hours). Team Kisseynew Denesuline Dalutweh was off to an early lead in the photo below:



In the Team Kiskeynew Voyageur, Gordon was the bowman and proved to be a dedicated and relentless pace setter; Ken, a tough Saskatchewanian farmer was second from front. Ryan (the rookie Yukoner) and Brent (the Numbers Guy) are third from front. Brent counted out strokes and called switches for the entire race. Michael (our Albertan paddler) and Chris (the Young gun – 21 year old Dene paddler) are next. Paul, the assistant captain was second from back, and Captain Martin was steering and navigating in the stern. Steven Mooney, a solo Kayaker can be seen in the photo above at top right.

In the Kiskeynew Voyageur, each person would switch sides of the boat on every switch call (approximately every 50 strokes). The guys in double seats would also switch sides of the boat every 50 strokes, staggered approximately 3 strokes behind the main switch. This was not an easy switch, as one guy had to stand, grab the other gunnel, and tiptoe across the boat while the other would slide across the seat behind the first. A switch mistake could result in an overturned boat, especially on the swell of Lake Laberge. Eight paddled almost all the time, and at least 7 paddled at all times. In our boat there was no sleeping, little rest, and the boat stopped for nothing (almost).

The weather this year was incredibly variable. The race started in a downpour with little to no winds, raining very hard by Yukon standards. By Lake Laberge, the wind had begun blowing, which resulted in 3 to 4 foot swell, and a south tail wind across the lake. Of the more than 70 teams who started the race by Thursday evening, 14 had scratched. After a full 24 hours of rain, many of the teams pulled out due to hypothermia. Some also scratched due to trouble with the wind and swell on Lake Laberge. Later in the race, teams dealt with dense fog, extreme heat, a few rapids, and high head winds. Five more teams scratched later in the race.

Team Kiskeynew lost the early lead when they went left around a sand bar in a channel that had slower moving water. When they returned to the main channel, about 6 teams had passed. In the ensuing hours above Lake Laberge, Team Kiskeynew chased down and passed one Voyageur, and several canoes and Kayaks. When crossing Lake Laberge there was one tandem kayak that was just ahead of team Kiskeynew, and another tandem kayak was becoming a smaller and smaller dot on the horizon. Brandon Nelson and David Kelly of Washington and California were setting the pace and did not stop. Nelson who held the record for tandem Kayak, and Kelly who held the YRQ record for solo kayak decided to team up this year to take a stab at the overall record.

YUKON RIVER QUEST 2006 – Kiskeynew DeneSuline Daloutweh

By Ryan Martin

4 of 5

Team Kiskeynew had several teams including solo kayak Carter Johnston of California, and a British Army team riding their wake for several hours across Laberge. Eventually these teams could not keep pace with Kiskeynew who took sole possession of second place when they left Lake Laberge to resume river travel down the Yukon River.

The weather did not relent. The remainder of the night saw thunderstorms with gusts of wind and heavy rains and temperatures dropped to just above freezing. Several teams made the mistake of choosing to switch to dry gear too early, and when the rain resumed, the new clothes soon got soaked and left no options for getting warm later in the night. Team Kiskeynew and many other teams dealt with the wet & cold by continuing to paddle hard through it.

The early morning hours are especially difficult, and after more than 16 hours of paddling, teams struggle to keep motivated as they meander through the dense fog towards Carmacks. At approximately 8 AM, almost twenty hours into the race, Team Kiskeynew arrived in Carmacks. Martin and Michael's father Ron Bernardin was our support crew. Ron had set up tents and prepared a stew over the fire. Racers had time to take showers, eat some stew, and try to catch some sleep. Some team members got no sleep due to adrenaline and the noise of other arriving teams. After a 7-hour rest, team Kiskeynew left Carmacks with approximately a 25-minute lead on solo Kayaker Carter, and were approximately an hour and 45 minutes behind the lead tandem Kayak.

For the next 24 hours of racing, Team Kiskeynew never saw another racer on the river. The "Saskatchewan Voyageur Team" passed without trouble through the Five Finger Rapids, Rink Rapids and meandered their way through the scenic rock walled areas of Minto and Fort Selkirk. Never were they in sight of the fast lead boat, and never again was the solo Kayak sighted behind the lead Voyageur.

The Kiskeynew paddlers would stop to eat or drink for only short times, and would never have more than one paddler without their paddle in the water. You had time to pull some food from your personal food bucket, put a piece in your mouth, and get ready to change sides of the boat again. If two stopped at once, you would get a reminder from someone else in the boat that we were in a race. The longest rests came at pee breaks, which were for the most part were completed in the boat to save time and stay in the current. For obvious reasons, other members although they continued to paddle, did not switch sides of the boat during a pee break. Other than at the 2 mandatory stops, team Kiskeynew went ashore only 3 times during the race to allow the bow paddler - who did not have room to take care of business in the boat - to spend a less than 2 minute break on shore. The rest of the time was "paddle, paddle, paddle, switch".

When Team Kiskeynew arrived in Kirkman Creek, the second mandatory stop of the race, team members were exhausted. The best way to describe the type of exhaustion is a drunken feeling of dizziness and slight confusion. Every muscle ached - even leg muscles. Walking on land was difficult, and many "paddle drunk" race participants required assistance with standing once they reached shore. Kirkman Creek is not accessible by road, so ground crews did not meet the race teams at this mandatory stop. Race volunteers provided food and shelter. The food never tasted so good, and the cold ground never felt so warm and comfortable. When you wake from a 2-hour sleep at Kirkman, you feel strangely revived and re-energized. At the same time, when you awake, your sore stiff - muscles suggest that you may have been involved in a serious accident. Nobody has trouble sleeping at Kirkman.

The final stretch into Dawson took teams anywhere from 8.5 hours to 16 hours. Team Kiskeynew saw the buildings in Dawson after about 8 hours of paddling on the third day

YUKON RIVER QUEST 2006 – Kiskeynew DeneSuline Daloutweh

By Ryan Martin

5 of 5

of their race. Gordon showed the team a new gear that they had not yet used. Kiskeynew raced towards shore at a rapid pace to the cheer of onlookers. Team Kiskeynew arrived in Dawson at 5:26 PM on Friday with a paddling time of 42:56:13 in second place overall. Nelson and Kelly, had arrived 2 hours and 20 minutes earlier than Kiskeynew to take the overall course record by approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes. Team Kiskeynew was just 5 minutes slower than the previous overall course record and set a new Voyageur record by shaving off an amazing 13 hours. Team members were interviewed by media interested in discussing: the new voyageur record, Martin Bernardin's fast cedar strip canoe, our Dene paddlers, and to my surprise, the first Yukoner across the finish line.

During the race, we switched sides of the boat approximately 3000 times (my vantage point was always changing), and took over 140,000 strokes each. Our average speed was approximately 17 kph, and we reached highs of about 23 kph. Sometimes we laughed and joked, and sometimes we paddled silently for hours on end.

The success of Team Kiskeynew can be attributed to a fast, well designed boat, a high river, teamwork, non-stop paddling, good navigation, a solid strategy, some wilderness skills, and a little bit of luck. The team lead by Martin Bernardin and Gordon Moise made history in the YRQ by showing that Voyageurs could compete with tandem kayaks and canoes. For me, the race was an amazing adventure. Highlights were:

- I got to see a beautiful part of Yukon from a different vantage – the River.
- I learned fascinating things about the Dene language and culture.
- With instruction from my team, I improved my marathon paddling stroke technique (when not exhausted I can almost do it properly now).
- I learned what a human body is capable of. Some people on my team never once complained of pain, hunger or discomfort, and these examples by my teammates will forever provide inspiration.
- In Dawson I got to meet legendary paddlers and adventurers.

I admire all those who tried the race. There is no doubt that all who finished the race endured pain and overcame the challenges of Mother Nature and physical and mental exhaustion. Those who were longer on the river faced more weather challenges (strong head winds) and the additional challenge of two more nights on the river.

This is the story of one team, from where I sat in our Voyageur boat. There are many other stories to be told about this adventure race. Records were broken in many classes. Carter Johnson set a new male solo kayak record. Heather Nelson set a new women's solo Kayak record. There were incredible rescues and "Good Samaritan" acts. A marvellous story is that of the Paddlers Abreast team who competed in the Voyageur class for their 5th year. These Yukon breast cancer survivors were filmed during the race for the upcoming National Film Board production, "The River of Life".

Thanks to my team for making this rookie paddler the first Yukoner to cross the line (a prize for which I got 10 Yukon Brewery -Yukon Gold Beer that I shared with my more than deserving team). Special thanks to Ron Bernardin our road crew who not only provided our team with support, shelter and food, but helped several other teams. Ron assisted a team that capsized in the Five Finger Rapids, and provided ground support for a women's team who were without a ground crew (Laurel Archer and Michel Genge). Thanks to the organizers, safety personnel and countless volunteers who made the 2006 YRQ another successful adventure for many paddlers. For more information, check out the Yukon River Quest Web site at www.yukonriverquest.com.