

We who work in penal establishments (in our early days before selection) are often asked "What are your outside interests?" and somewhat later in our careers many of us feel the value (or sometimes the lack) of a hobby taking us right outside the job. Canoeing is part of the job of many physical education instructors; to P. J. Roney of Gaynes Hall it is also a hobby. Here is his account of the 1967 race from Devizes to Westminster. He and his partner, David Bennett, finished 25th overall and ninth in the civilian class. Of 137 crews starting, only 60 finished; the result for them can be described as "first class effort against terrific odds".

Wet Cold or Wet Warm

THE RACE IS FROM Devizes along the Kennet and Avon Canal to the Thames at Reading, a distance of 53½ miles with 57 locks, then down the Thames a further 71½ miles and 20 locks. In good conditions the race calls for strenuous and sustained effort; if the weather is bad it's almost impossible.

It is difficult to pinpoint what really induces crews to enter this event. After a previous failure at the 70 miles mark a couple of years ago, I vowed never again. However, a quiet drink in the local with fellow members of the Viking Kayak Club left me committed for the 1967 race. My partner was to be David Bennett, a very experienced canoeist at home and abroad who, during 1966, won 11 major L/D races. Who was I to turn down the opportunity to race in such good company?

As both of us had had a successful and long racing season behind us we felt that training should be kept to a minimum and we only paddled a total of 100

miles together in preparation. We decided to save our strength for the actual day. A K.2 canoe was loaned to us and several people assisted with special items of kit necessary for the race. Not only must the distance be covered but the canoe must be entirely self-supporting. Therefore, all food and drink is carried, together with a quantity of compulsory equipment (two-man tent, two sleeping bags, a complete change of clothing, cooking and eating utensils, a liquid fuel stove, torch and issued emergency rations). As the 77 locks are all portaged, the canoe and contents very quickly become a weight-lifting competition at each lock.

The race itself is a time trial with senior crews choosing their own starting time, from 08.00 hours on the Good Friday to 10.00 hours on the Easter Saturday. The duration of the race is around the 24 hours mark, depending on the ability of the crew. This means that at least half the race must be



Mr. Roney (rear) and Mr. Bennett emerge from 600 yards of pitch black tunnel where to capsize would mean immediate retirement

negotiated at night. It is general policy to tackle the canal section during the day.

We elected to start at 08.00 hours on the Good Friday and, after having our kit inspected and checked, our race number was sealed on to our wrists (this is to prevent any crew changes during the race—the number tags are checked at least 20 times and the kit twice during the race). Sixty other crews were starting with us and we went off at 30-second intervals, finally getting away at 08.15 hours.

It was a little chilly at first, but we were soon warm and the sun shone at regular intervals. Our support team, who had driven us

down and taken all the worries of preparation off our shoulders, were giving good vocal support every three miles. At the 30-mile mark we holed the canoe on a submerged rock, but were able to repair it satisfactorily and it held throughout.

The canal was choked with weeds and debris and at times we fancied ourselves on the *African Queen*. We progressed steadily throughout the day to arrive at Reading at 20.00 hours, a little tired but comfortably wet. (You are never really dry canoe racing, it's either wet cold or wet warm.) The last lock on the canal has a weir and the water changes dramatically from static to rapid. To

complicate matters the road bridge just below the lock was being rebuilt and all the water funnelled through a shootable eight-foot gap. A small crowd had gathered to watch the fun but with frantic support strokes we were able to disappoint them and sped off down the Thames.

With the coming of darkness comes depression and a rapid deterioration of morale. We had been paddling now for 12 hours and beginning to feel the strain. The night was fairly kind to us and a full moon peeped from behind clouds to shine an occasional light. The large and dangerous weirs thundered out their warning and we were glad of the additional impetus after each portage. At 05.00 hours the sky darkened and we were now both physically and mentally tired, a large danger sign loomed up on our left and as we carefully passed it a row of large sluice gates appeared before us. We had missed the lock cut and were racing towards a miniature Niagara. Turning a K.2 right round is difficult enough in still water—we had about 25 yards in which to go about with the current pushing all the time. Enough adrenalin was pumped into our blood stream to suffice all the competitors!

Once past this hazard we were further stimulated by dawn breaking. With just 25 miles to go we began to feel confident. On towards Teddington, our last portage, with the last 14 miles of tidal water

below it. To catch the tide coming in is disastrous as it will push a tired crew back up river. We dragged the canoe over the rollers and with a strong wind on our backs pushed ourselves on in greater effort with the knowledge that the tide had already turned at London Bridge and we were racing to meet it.

At Putney Bridge we were both suffering from cramp so much that we had to get out of the canoe and stand thigh deep in water stumbling about trying to restore our circulation much to the delight of waiting boat race supporters.

Off again and the tide had turned. The final four miles was to take us one-and-a-half hours. The wind against the tide roughened up the water and this was further aggravated by large ships that had started to move about on the high water. It seemed as if Westminster Bridge would never come and for the first time we lost our tempers and blamed one another for our predicament.

Suddenly we were there! Willing helpers lifted us bodily out of the canoe, a quick handshake to my partner and the relief of having made it was overwhelming. The watching crowd chanted "Never again" and took the words right out of my mouth.

I would like to take this opportunity to say "Thank you" to all the people who helped us, especially Trevor Colebourne, P.E.I. from Hindley, whose cheerful encouragement helped us so considerably.