

Spring time competition at the White Water Grand Prix

By Josh Neilson

Not for the faint hearted!



After a long NZ summer of photo and film jobs it was that much loved time of year again. It was time to leave New Zealand again to follow the summer to the Northern hemisphere.

First stop on the trip was Canada and more specifically the thawing rivers of Northern Quebec. We often talk about chasing summer and living in the sun and warmth the whole year round, but this trip began far from that!

After about 40 hours of air travel I disembarked in Quebec and then set out on a further eight hour drive to the frozen area of Lac St Jean. After a much needed sleep and a few hours of catching up with friends competing in the White Water Grand Prix (WWGP), it was time to get to the river.

The event had been on for a week already and there were three stages left to go. My first day was a rest day for the athletes, so we went to check out the Mistassibi River. At the put in the huge icebergs floating past us, indicating that spring was still in the air. It was a bit of a shock to the system coming from a season on a warm and low water Kaituna River, dropping in to rapids in freezing temperatures and hundreds of times the flow. A swim in these rivers would mean lots of time underwater and a good chance of hypothermia!

With a new dry suit and neoprene gloves, we were set for the elements and had a great day on the river. After the initial shock the sun came out and we were on track for a great spring. The next stage of the WWGP was a big trick competition on a seldom surfed wave called Black Mass. The opaque slab of golden brown water that formed the wave's launching



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pad shimmied ribs of water towards the crest of the nearly vertical wave, shooting riders into the air, but also causing them to flush and flip. The athletes were getting huge air and I was nice and warm on the bank helping shoot footage for the media team. Coming from NZ, where we don't get world class freestyle waves, it was great to see how dynamic some of the paddlers were in amongst huge water.

With a few more days off to wait for prime water levels, we set off to paddle some new rivers and enjoy the area. Right next to our hotel was a rapid called 'Bridge Rapid'. While some paddlers chose to run the middle line in creek boats there were two who could see a huge wave at the top and wanted to surf it. To get the most out of the wave they got into their tiny play boats and dropped in. It is by far the biggest river wave I have seen with a kayaker in it. To make things even more intense there was still the huge rapid below. Dane Jackson and Kalob Grady caught some of the biggest air time pulling tricks on this wave until Dane lost his paddle and was forced to run the huge rapid below with just his hands.

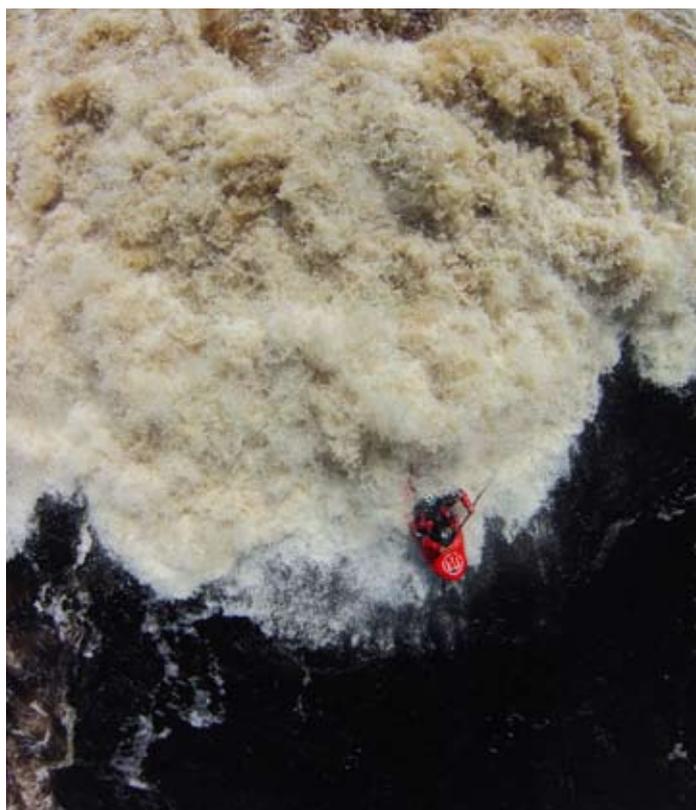
By now everyone was ready for competition again, but unfortunately the flows were not ideal for the waves they wanted, so they chose to compete on a smaller, friendlier feature. With less stress the athletes could get some more wave time and pull off the tricks they had come here to show. Top competitors were still pulling moves out that wowed the crowd and it proved to be a great event.

The last stage of the event was a time trial on a river close to Quebec City about four hours away. With everyone packed up, the convoy of team vans and buses headed south away from Lac St Jean.

At the river everyone was pretty nervous. The flow, in my opinion, was unnavigable. But word was that by the next day it would be ok. After a good night's sleep we were back and most paddlers were ready to compete.

Some and chose to sit it out. It says a lot; as these athletes were chosen for this event for being the best paddlers in the world.

It's good to see that there is no pressure to compete in conditions outside your comfort zone and people are willing to give up the glory if they are not





feeling safe on the day. With that said, the event was a hit and there were some fast times being set on the Basse Cache River. After a few swims and a few more paddlers pulling out, it was time for the final runs and the conclusion of the WWGP. Dane Jackson kept his composure and took first place with a strong list of paddlers very close behind him. Martina Wegman from the Netherlands was in first place in the women's race but Mariann Saether took out the overall winner for the competition.

By now everyone was ready for a break and a good closing party in the city.

The next day Tyler, Kim and I headed out together for some more kayaking and it was perfect timing. We revisited a run called the Mastigouche, I'd paddled on a previous trip and its up there as one of the best runs I have done. With perfect flows we paddled from the top all the way down huge slides to our camp. Every rapid drops with a huge gradient

but nothing compares to the bottom slide. The bottom slide pours over a wide horizon line and makes its way toward the left wall before pushing back to the middle and into a huge pool at the bottom. In total it drops about 30m and slides for about 80m. So much fun!

We spent two days here running laps on this river and enjoying lots of time in our kayaks. The others had some work commitments, so we set off back to Ottawa for a few days before beginning a new trip exploring the world's best freestyle spots.

In the next issue you'll see why Canada is the place to go to enjoy freestyle kayaking. Congratulations to all the athletes who competed in the White Water Grand Prix!

This is a huge progression in kayaking competition!

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*Josh Neilson & Tyler Fox run the
Big Slide on Mastigouche River
Photo by: Kim Dodd*