

Making sense of death

A number of years ago more than ten excellent paddlers died within a season, stunning many in the sport and putting a damper on the enthusiasm for pushing hard whitewater. The names included people at the top of the sport like Chuck Kern, Rich Weiss, Doug Gordon, and others who were less well known but extremely experienced, like Dugal Bremner, Tim Gavin, John Foss, and Joel Hathorne.

Here at the end of the 2007 season, we've had another shock, as three excellent paddlers died in less than a month: Americans Conrad Fourney and Max Lentz, and German Tim Weinmann, each in a situation that can only be considered bizarre. None of the cases had a clear cause, and all of them lead to a sinking feeling about the sport. More than once after the loss of a friend, I have asked myself whether it is worth it.

Despite all the publicity, the fact is there are not very many deaths in kayaking. Unfortunately, each year there seems to be another name to add, like that of Brennan Guth, a superb young paddler and friend of mine who drowned several years ago in a bizarre and heart-rending accident. Equally unfortunately, a great many of the deaths on rivers can be summed up as freak accidents or bizarre happenings. Those of us who feel the loss of friends try to gain some insight from their passing.

The desire to find a clear cause for death is powerful. Finding a reason gives us a salve for the wound, and the desire goes far beyond anything rational. It makes the death easier to handle, but also, knowing that cause, we can now hold it as a talisman to ward away the same thing from happening to us. I am as guilty of that as anybody. I feel the loss of my friends acutely and have spent many, many long nights staring into the darkness. I pour over accident reports and talk to people who seek resolution, but I have long realized there are many questions that will never be answered. The river never gives all the answers, and the hurt remains alive even after decades have passed.

The problem is, there are an infinite number of bizarre things that can happen on a river. Some things are more common, while others only ever happen once.

In that difficult season ten years ago, Paddler ran a number of articles on the theme of the accidents and the problem of "raising the ante", and asked to reprint one of my essays, "Why I paddle class V." There was a push to reevaluate the river rating scale, and to incorporate more safety training.

My German friends were deeply sympathetic to the problem. After a rash of members died in pins, broaches, entrapments in the 1980s, the German elite kayaking group AKC, the "Alpiner Kayak Club" instituted a serious program of safety training, developing most of the techniques that are standard today. Despite knowing a great deal more and people generally being more highly trained, the deaths still happen.

In many cases, the accidents largely look like an issue of being in the wrong spot at the wrong time. This is a truly unsatisfying answer because it hides the fact we can't tell head of time where the wrong spot might be. Most of the spots were only identifiable after something completely unexpected and desperate happened. In a number of cases, some of the very same lines had been paddled by another member of the group literally a few seconds before without any problem. It is the seeming arbitrariness of this that is so difficult to make peace with.

A brief history makes this apparent.

In the late 1990s, Rich Weiss was the best slalom racer in the US and one of the top two or three in the world. He was a phenomenally skilled paddler and river runner. He died when he did not clear a waterfall, became trapped in a small “room of doom” pocket and his partner was unable to reach him to help. To underscore the tragedy to the point of being unbearable, Rich’s pregnant wife was waiting downstream at the take out.

Rich died running a rapid well within his abilities. In fact, he’d run it the day before, and although class V, it was probably two grades easier than he could do technically. To those who knew him it was inconceivable he would have had any problem with that drop. That theme runs through many of the deaths. Some though, are even stranger.

Max Lentz, an excellent young paddler from Missoula, died on a class IV rapid on the upper Gauley last fall. He and others of his group had been running creek lines for several days, when Max drowned after his boat somehow got caught in a crack deep underwater. He and multiple members of his group had run that same line several times in the preceding days, and two other paddlers had run the same line just seconds before him. Somehow, as he came through, he became trapped in a crack that was completely underwater. Another paddler was right behind him and the very competent group immediately tried to extricate him, but all attempts failed. The question that was impossible to answer was, how did his boat get wedged in the crack in the first place? As best anybody could tell, the water level apparently suddenly decreased right as he went through the critical spot, allowing his boat to wedge down, then surged back to submerge Max completely underwater.

There probably is some reasonable physical explanation, but this was truly an “act of God.” How does such a strange thing get incorporated into our knowledge? Nobody could ever scout and paddle a line with this kind of assumption. The fact is, you can be an excellent paddler and yet die in what looks like a simple rapid for reasons you cannot see and cannot know.

Conrad Fourney, a veteran of the Stikine and tremendously experienced paddler, died in Nutcracker on the NF Payette in August, shocking the Idaho paddling community. It was a class V rapid on a well-known, difficult river, but also a rapid he’d run hundreds of times. Members of his group think he went through the hole to the left of the Nut and his sprayskirt blew. Whatever the reason, his water-filled boat broached against a fan rock just downstream and he was able to get out, but the current washed him into an underwater obstruction close to the left bank and flagged him around it. Conrad had an air pocket over his head from the fast current, could move and gesture for several minutes, but numerous attempts to rescue him failed and he drowned.

Tim Weinmann, one of Germany’s finest young paddlers, died on the Heiligenkreuz gorge of the Venter Ache last October. While showing several paddlers down the run, he was hammered in a rapid he had run dozens of times before, and swam. He signaled his companions, waving and pointing downstream, which they took to mean he was fine and would swim after his boat. He had at least 100 meters to the next whitewater. When they looked at him again, he was face down washing into the next rapid. There was a 24 hour search for the body, which was found in an eddy downstream. He was 26 years old and in tremendous physical condition. The bizarre possibility of a heart attack pends the outcome of an autopsy.

Strange problems are not the exception. They are the rule. The list of past deaths is filled with such stories.

Chuck Kern was one of the best river runners in the history of the sport, and died on a fairly simple move on the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. Chuck attempted what appeared to be a boof, but which was actually a thin shelf bridging a sieve. Instead of skipping over the boof, his bow dropped into the sieve. All attempts to reach him failed and his body was not retrieved

until the dam upstream was turned off several days later. Dugal Bremner died in a crack exposed on a class IV rapid at lower water on the Silver fork of the American River. The team scouted the rapid, which was a longish slide. The main features looked like crossing waves, but actually were formed by a bedrock crack running in the direction of the current; the boat settled into this siphon. He was stable for some time, but unable to get his boat to release. Two other members waded to his boat and got ahold of it, but were actually sucked into and through the siphon, popping up downstream. Finally, Dugal and his boat were wedged underwater and he drowned. Brennan Guth swam out of a drop on the Rio Palquin in Chile, a rapid much easier than the extremely difficult rapids he'd just been running in the hours before. The swim washed Brennan into a cave, where he held himself spread eagled across the sides against the current for more than an hour until he succumbed to exhaustion and was swept underwater. His partner, an equally experienced paddler and a long time safety instructor - who to my knowledge and experience has always been one of the most safety conscious paddlers in existence and *never* without adequate safety gear - didn't have a throw rope this one time.

Joel Hathorne missed a small eddy at the top of a cascade on the first descent of Warren Creek, probably due to the same kind of misreading as Chuck. His body was never found. John Foss literally disappeared right in the middle of a Class IV+ rapid on a first descent in Peru, to the stunned bewilderment of his partners who had run the same line 30 seconds before. His body was found two weeks later far downstream. Pablo was stuffed under and pinned by a log in a chute, invisible in the backwash of a hole. The first paddler of his group had plunged into the hole, bounced off the log, and immediately eddied out to warn the others. Before he could, Pablo was already in the middle of the rapid, hit the hole and went under the log. Within a few seconds his hand groped above the surface and his partners desperately did everything they could, jumping in, grabbing it, hitting it with a throw rope, trying to shinny out on the log – all to no avail. Tim Gavin, who probably knew the Upper Blackwater River better than anybody else, died there getting sucked into an undercut on a rapid he'd named years before, gruesomely and ironically, "Just a matter of time".

And there are the dozens or even hundreds of times other people have come ever so close to being in the above group. I'm one of them. Among other things, I've been pinned several times underwater in desperate situations, each one of them completely bizarre. One of them involved being wedged between the bottom and a submerged log in what appeared to be a simple, straightforward rapid. It was a silent, desperate struggle underwater, and then a swim downstream and a pummeling on some rocks before I reached safety. After retrieving my boat and returning to the rapid to figure out what happened, it took several minutes of careful and very puzzled looking before I saw the log, buried deep underwater in a wave and essentially invisible. It was just another drop out of dozens of class IV drops on a class V run, as well as being at least two grades easier than several other drops I'd already run, and a drop nobody ever would have scouted. Even if they had, they couldn't have seen the fatal hazard lurking there. To add to all these, I've rescued other paddlers who found themselves in unpredictable and nearly fatal situations. I've been told by friends, or heard through the grapevine, about dozens of other situations where the person was stuffed through a cave, a sieve or siphon, trapped under a log, hung up on rebar sticking out of a submerged cement block, tangled with underwater debris, and popped out somewhere downstream safely.

These more striking situations grade into the mishaps that virtually every paddler has, things that end up being personal fears, or even the punch line to a local joke. However, the horror stories capture the imagination, particularly when you're among the ghosts who can

relate. All of them underscore the complexity of what may happen, as well as the limits of what we really know out there. We can be extraordinarily experienced and skilled, take care of everything we see, and still not take care of the one unseen key that determines whether we live or die.

A few general lessons:

Lesson 1: Virtually no deaths happen on cutting edge whitewater. Essentially all of them occurred on rapids that were well within the abilities of the kayakers.

Lesson 2: While we believe we have an acceptable level of control on the river, in virtually every case there was something additional that occurred which the paddler couldn't have prepared for.

Lesson 3: You can die in a simple rapid. The flip side of this is, you also can get away with the most astonishing misjudgments and errors. There is no accounting for this, but a prudent person would choose good judgment and fewer errors as the way to go.

Lesson 4: Error cascades: When one thing goes wrong, it often leads to another and another in what I call an error cascade. The water magnifies each error and carries it into the future in a powerful way. The key in kayaking is to stay in control, and when that isn't completely possible, to quickly bring any mistake back into control. In a sense, a major part of kayaking includes the skills of constant and creative correction to keep from falling into an error cascade with a bad ending. You should assume that any error cascade may have a bad ending.

Lesson 5: Very infrequently, in the wrong spot, even one simple decision can lead to an error that is not retrievable. Most unfortunately, those are almost always spots that you cannot see ahead of time: a thumb-sized stick that catches your life jacket, an underwater obstruction, a rock with a crack just wide enough for your paddle blade if it comes in at just a particular angle, or another that just fits your foot if you happen to be swimming and kick at that particular instant at a certain water level. Accidents are always somewhere in the details.

Lesson 6: no matter how well conditioned you are, your body may fail you. There are limits to what it can do or survive. Extreme alpinist and tough guy Marc Twight got a lot of mileage out of saying he trained like a maniac in order to make it harder for mountains to kill him. Well, that was Marc's acumen for publicity more than an accurate reflection of reality, as I'm sure he knows. Mountains and rivers are not out to kill us, and they most certainly are not adversaries. They are beautiful physical wonders completely unconcerned about our existence. If we are going to live with them for a while – whether that is a few minutes, days or weeks – mountains and rivers simply have certain hazards that we must learn to deal with, physically and mentally. Our skill at adventure sports proves it's possible to do that to an amazing and inspiring degree, but only when we are prepared and in excellent condition.

Lesson 7: It is our own decision to be in those places, so it is likewise our responsibility to have the skills and conditioning to do it as safely as we can. The adventure sports are challenging precisely because those environments are only partially predictable. The unpredictability is a major element of what draws us there; so learn your skills well and always be open to learning more. Rivers have been practicing what they do a lot longer than any of us have been kayaking. Perhaps the greatest lesson they can teach is that we should never stop learning.

Lesson 8: If you are worried about getting injured or dying while kayaking, that is a useful concern that should be channeled into positive action. Get better conditioned, work on your roll as well as all your other paddling and rescue skills. A paddler can narrow the range of problems by a healthy safe attitude, having good gear and partners, choosing runs carefully. If

worry or fear cripples your fun, then seek solutions. If that doesn't work, back off or find another sport.

Lesson 9: The numbers don't lie – overall, kayaking is a safe sport. You can paddle and enjoy rivers safely for decades. But it is equally true that a single ugly experience can weigh heavily on our enjoyment and attitude, and in extremely unfortunate situations - just like in having a drunk driver hit you or tripping and falling down the stairs at home - it is possible to get injured or killed. Nobody has a sure and certain path. And revealingly, those who do have sure and certain paths often eagerly give them up to find something more interesting.

The beauty of rivers is in large part the same kind of beauty that good music has. It has patterns that delight us and evoke our deepest feelings of excitement, awe, and mystery. Even the simplest surf wave is changing and surging, and even the simplest eddyline is a wonder of complexity. Add up a river full of such things and you have the treasures of the planet spread before you. The river is the essence of creativity and change, creating rapids and features of boundless variety. But among those changes and slight unpredictabilities - the very things that create our pleasure - lie features that can injure and kill us.

The river doesn't care. It is a force of nature, following the laws of physics and showing us continually that flowing water contains all the beauty and magic of the world. Learning to engage that magic is what creates our sport. Challenge and fun, as well as danger and death, all come from the same place. It is up to you to decide what that means, and to treat it with the care and respect it deserves.
