Debate on The Cutting Edge of Kayaking

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Introduction:
This is a series of essays sparked by an article I did for American Whitewater in 2008. The original piece was titled “The Cutting Edge of Kayaking”, in which I attempted to describe what things were considered “cutting edge” in our sport, and how they evolved. Along the way, I delved into the wildest things done in the sport and made comparisons to try and understand what we’re doing out there, how it has changed over the years, and where it might go. Tyler Bradt had just done a 107 foot waterfall, and penned a reply, focusing on one small part of the original essay, defending what he considered a cut at waterfalls. He offered a summary of the sport and a vision of where it would go. I took advantage of the opportunity and invited a group of great kayakers to comment on both essays. These people reflect tremendous history and experience across the sport, as you’ll see when you read their commentary. Because it seemed that some of the controversy came from us talking about different things, I invited Tyler to read the comments and write a “reprise”. Afterwards, I wrote a second essay that attempted to pull everything together. My two essays are reprinted in my book “Whitewater Philosophy.”
Since then, Tyler did what a great kayaker should do – he went out and ran something way bigger. Meeting up in Missoula, he and I laughed at the outcome of the give and take, but his run of 186 foot Palouse falls was undoubtedly impressive. I’d actually scouted it many years ago, but he was the guy who did it in sharp New School style and with full media coverage. He told me with a big smile, “It’s funny how things ended up.” I congratulated him on his run and reminded him, “this isn’t the end.”

And with that in mind, I invite all readers to think about the evolution of the sport and what it means. Where will it go, what will people be doing in 10 years or 20 years? Tyler has his vision, and the commentators have theirs. I personally leave it wide open. There really are no limitations except in terms of the presumptions we bring to the sport, which are different for each era and for each person. There is no limit on what height waterfalls can be done. So long as there is a good lead-in, good aeration, and a deep pool, the kayakers of the future will be plumbing greater heights and more complex falls, just as they will be every other kind of feature on rivers and creeks. The sport is what we make it, and our collective ingenuity, skill, and motivation will keep opening doors. So I hope you enjoy the essays below from an outstanding group of kayakers, and they provoke your own thoughts.

The “Cutting Edge”: a beautiful anarchy
Doug Ammons

I recently had a discussion with some passionate steep creekers about the “cutting edge”. They love their pastime in the way only wonderfully fanatic kayakers can, and insisted that steep creeking was the “the most cutting edge” in kayaking - the area where there was the highest level of difficulty, and people were pushing limits the most. I disagreed with them.

The cutting edge is usually defined as the hardest things done in the sport. This sounds impressive and dramatic. It also implies something that cuts like the sharpest knife. The truth is more complicated.

When you start looking at it, the cutting edge is hard to characterize because it refers to so many different things. It has a media-induced buzz, but it is also used as slang for people’s ideals, including what they are struggling toward, and what they think they have accomplished. It represents these and much more – from the most neurotic of our desires to the precious things we aspire to, which sometimes are one and the same.

The cutting edge is a huge, sprawling confusion – more like a crate full of broken bottles than the edge of the single sharpest knife. There isn’t just one edge, there are lots of them, with people throwing more in all the time. Like a piece of broken glass, the edge changes constantly and drastically from one aspect of the sport to another. There is no measure of the edge, although we attempt to put numbers on it – the height of a falls, the flow in cubic feet per second, the feet per mile, and our ever-elastic rating of class V. In all of these, the assumption is that the higher the falls, the bigger the river, the steeper, then the harder and more cutting edge it is. However, anybody who has been around the sport for a good length of time will, if pushed, be able to list provisos for all of these. It
depends on the nature of the drops, how clean they are, what support is possible, the equipment used, subtleties of the line, how much you know about a run, objective hazards, and many other things. Finally, even though it is implied as “razor sharp”, many parts of the “cutting edge” turn out not to have much cut to them.

In terms of difficulty, I would argue that every aspect of the sport has its cutting edge element, because people are always pushing each thing as far as they can take it at any given time. People are constantly defining new branches of the sport, so the ways in which you can be at “the edge” are always multiplying. Consequently, there are dozens or even hundreds of cutting edges. Yet, we only recognize certain things.

Let’s start with some things that probably everybody will agree are currently “cutting edge.”

An example I saw just yesterday would be the “Young Guns”. By name and action, they and their many followers are certain that what they’re doing is raddest and baddest cutting edge, which includes 100 footers, hard steep runs, hard play moves, their self-chosen name, and their movies (“Young guns”, “The Source”, etc). Their ads say they are doing the tallest waterfalls, “new heights” in freestyle, and “global first descents” in “impossible locations”. Despite the hyperbole, my hat is off to them - there is no doubt they are great kayakers and paddling very difficult whitewater.

A contrasting example is that this spring a small, two-person Austrian-Brit team quietly dropped into the last unrun section of the Indus gorge and kayaked it. This is challenging big water in a canyon that is steep, cliffed out, and forbidding. It helped that they were alpinists as well as excellent paddlers – which made the rope work and complex portaging more feasible. That extra set of skills was another dimension that had to be integrated into the paddling skills. They went on to do the first descent of another river coming off Nanga Parbat into the Indus that had an astronomical gradient, and which they described as having “more sieves than eddies”. My hat is off to them, too. There is no doubt that this is a huge accomplishment in the expedition world.

Depending on your point of view, perhaps the Indus runs are “more cutting edge” than the Young Guns. Or, if you’re partial to the youngsters, you may think that their “big air” freestyle moves, waterfalls, trips to Vietnam and Africa, and steep Sierra drops are more impressive. Comparing these two current examples starts to underscore the variation in what people consider cutting edge. As a simple fact: the more things you look at, the less clear that edge becomes.

There are a lot of strange things about this appeal to the cutting edge. For example, tune in next year and people will have done even taller tallest waterfalls, have soared to newer heights in freestyle, and have done more global first descents in even more impossible locations. You can see the problem. If the location was “impossible” then by definition they couldn’t be there. If what they will be doing next year will be so earthshaking, does that mean they’re slacking it this year? Is the cutting edge nothing more than a synonym for “what’s new and cool”?

The edge is often used as advertising shtick and easily degrades into clichés and hype. Guinness got cold feet on world record waterfalls shortly after the initial widely publicized efforts of one paddler led to a quick succession of other people running higher falls. It’s unclear why anybody was talking about world records in the first place, but now, this quest has taken other forms, with a group supposedly “testing the limits of free
fall”. I’m left with a quizzical look: what does it mean to test the limits of free fall in a kayak (150 or so feet) when, for example, BASE jumpers go off things from 400 to several thousand feet, and for that matter, skydivers regularly do free falls from 15,000 feet. To complicate matters, a skydiver even went out of a plane at 10,000 feet in a kayak, doing flips and rolls on his way down. Hilarious, interesting, and let’s face it, very weird. Why is a free fall in a kayak so important? We appear to be talking about the skill in landing safely when running a large waterfall, but did the skydiver in the kayak have less skill than it takes to run a 100 footer clean? Is this getting ridiculous? Funner? Both?

In search of clarity, let’s look at the opposite extreme and restrict it just to kayaking for a minute. With all the breathlessness that accompanies the new feats, you might note that sometimes people do things that stand for a long time and are unrepeated, like Walt Blackadar’s amazing 1971 solo of the Alsek. Such things are undisputed examples of “cutting edge”. The fact they aren’t repeated looks like it is due to the runs being so hard and exposed that others do not want to take them on - cutting edges that stand the test of time. That might be so. However, again there’s more to it.

I firmly believe that anything one paddler does can be done by many other current paddlers. Nobody is so good that he can do things no other paddler can. This is a myth about the “cutting edge”. What is really happening is that people of multiple talents and equivalent ability make individual choices about what challenges to take on. The sport doesn’t just constantly progress by the best people pushing the same limits harder and farther. The edge has all the quirks of the people who seek it.

The sheer variety reflects how different rivers and creeks can be, how many ways they can be difficult. Not only that, it reflects how differently people can see these things. Frankly, it’s anarchy out there - people pick their own challenges, and most of the paddlers aren’t interested in trying to repeat something that has already been done. They deliberately do things that are new and different. They want to put their own mark on the board with their own style. The cutting edge is a combination of all the things people do. It shifts and changes according to interest, equipment, focus, publicity, time, sponsorship, and even fads. Most of all, it reflects the huge range of personality and what individuals see as their personal challenges.

Consider waterfalls again: The focus on running big waterfalls has led to it being defining “cutting edge” in many people’s eyes, particularly nonpaddlers. Paddlers have gone higher and higher, and even claimed world records. But arguments about the details sprout up just as fast: whether something was 98.5 feet or 100 feet, whether that is higher or lower than 32 meters, whether it was entirely a freefall, or whether putting jugs of water in the bow of the boat (to help keep the nose down) should be counted against the run, or even whether running the same falls at a different water level makes it 1.5 feet lower or higher. The little arguments multiply like mushrooms. Every single such comment illustrates the “edge” is not a single thing, but more like a generic symbol. We seek absolutes – the hardest, the highest - but only can ever find what is relative. The details shift and differ, making the “edge” a strange and fuzzy place.

Particularly over the past 10 years, big gnarly falls have taken a special place in some people’s minds. The appeal is straightforward – a big waterfall is impressive.
Height speaks for itself and is immediately equated to difficulty: the higher the falls, the more difficult it must be. On an aesthetic level, the visual simplicity leads to great photos that anybody can look at and say “wow!” You can communicate the feeling of difficulty instantly at a gut-level. In contrast, if you’ve ever given a slide show, you’ll know it’s hard for viewers to understand what is going on even in super difficult class VI+ whitewater. After a certain point, everything is white and chaotic, and it doesn’t matter if it gets whiter and more chaotic. There are thousands of rapids that are harder and more dangerous than probably any waterfall that has been run, at least in the sense of requiring more moves, more energy and skill to do them right, and having much worse consequences for failure. By way of proof, let me ask this simple question: how many people have died in hard rapids and how many have died doing big waterfalls? The score, to state it in a very crude way, is about 100 to 0. No excellent paddler has ever died doing a high waterfall, but plenty of top end paddlers have died running hard rapids. Now don’t get me wrong - more deaths doesn’t make kayaking hard rapids better; every single one of them is a tragedy. My point is simply this: using death as the ultimate measure of difficulty and consequences, waterfalls are far less dangerous than the usual class V. However, the finality of that single arc off the edge is spellbinding to nonkayakers and kayakers alike, so waterfalls take a special place at the “cutting edge.”

If you think a little further, running waterfalls is a rather odd pastime. Surely it is spectacular, which for most people is probably a good enough reason to do it. However, I’m reminded of the oddness by the guy who ran a 105-footer in Oregon in an inner tube after “scouting” for three minutes. The kayaker who ran the falls originally scoped it out for months, but the tuber just glanced at the falls, climbed aboard and shoved off. He made it fine, although he fell off his tube at the bottom. That means he ran the falls as well as several well-known paddlers ran their big ones. But it begs a question for the present discussion: what does it mean that something formidable in a kayak is easy in an inner tube? Why is it that a waterfall requiring “cutting edge” skill and daring in an specialized kayak can be run by somebody using a tube you can buy for $10 at a gas station? If you think about that very much, it suggests running falls in a kayak is silly. At least it undermines making such a big deal about height. What would happen if the goofy, skilled, and ballsy tuber did Alexandra Falls (107 feet)? How would we make sense of such a run?

We may never know because it’s doubtful that the tuber will get sponsorship from Goodyear Tires to roam the world running huge waterfalls in his inner tube. You will never see the innertubing equivalent of “Twitch” or “The Source”. Maybe he can get hooked up with the team that is supposedly testing the limits of free-fall. However, just imagine what would happen if he were shown running even one of the things they do - much less the showcase 107 footer right after the kayakers. It’d make the whole thing into a joke - the edge-daring kayakers against Zoltan the spoofer. Further, as readers of this magazine may remember from an earlier story, a high school friend of mine - a highly skilled gymnast, rock climber, and kayaker - jumped off a 180 foot waterfall, landed perfectly, and survived – a little worse for wear, but okay. That’s 70 feet higher than the kayakers are looking at. And Al Faucet ran a 200-footer in a wooden dug-out canoe nearly 80 years ago. Why is it a big deal to run a smaller falls in a kayak than it is using an inner tube, a dugout canoe, or by jumping?
There’s no question kayaking requires more skill, or at least different skills than tubing or jumping, but a question arises: isn’t it weird to celebrate kayaking skill when that skill isn’t actually required? We seem to be making something harder than it really is. The edge should lead us to a greater understanding of our true limits, not to deluding ourselves about our skill and daring. When the innertubers are seeing more clearly than we are, then we’ve got a problem. We need to apply the old Chinese proverb: “he who criticizes me correctly is my teacher.” The question for us collectively is, are we willing to learn from a tuber?

Waterfalls are an example of the peculiar and loose definition of “cutting edge.” They are spectacular. Some of them are hard and dangerous; others are dramatic and high but easy in an inner tube. You’d think that if the edge was so sharp, it would at least pop the tube.

Let’s go back to that original comment about steep creeking being “the most cutting edge” in kayaking, and consider contrasts between the types of edge paddling – what is different and why.

Expeditions put a premium on doing difficult things self-contained out in the remote sticks. It’s not only the difficult paddling, it’s everything about the difficulty of where you are. The first time a proud steep creeker does an expedition in a third world country where he gets strung out puking with some GI problem and still has to do class V for the next week, he probably will change his tune. There’s a different element of mental and physical toughness involved. Or, if he does one of the big wilderness rivers up north, camping out of a boat for days that weighs 80 or 100 pounds, running hard big water, portaging, living on slim rations, he probably will come back thinking that creeking on day runs with an unloaded boat – no matter how hard – is not the sum of the sport, and actually is a lot funner and less obnoxious than other forms of the edge.

But this can immediately be reversed. When the creekers’ boats are unloaded, they can take bigger risks, and attempt wild moves that you would never try in a loaded boat 100 miles back in the Himalaya. This turns the tables. The expeditionist taken down a cutting edge creek will not be dissing the creekers afterward. Any of the rest of us will be in the same situation if we proclaim our favorite runs are the hardest of all terrain.

To complicate things, the cutting edge of steep creeks hybridizes with other forms. Here is a personal example: I soloed the full Clark Fork Yellowstone canyon in one day back in 1994. It’s basically a Sierra-like steep river in a deep granite canyon, rated class V+/VI, 26 miles long and about 3000+ feet of drop. It has never been done without portages, and if you go there you’ll see why (Jackson, Wyoming paddler Greg Goodyear did it once with an astonishing 4 portages). I had a flow of about 2000 cfs (considered high) and did 8 portages (considered low), all of them strenuous, with several roped and quite awkward around cliffs. There are no big waterfalls but there are lots of steep, long rapids and sieves. The class V does not let up till the last couple of miles, which are continuous class IV. I suppose this shows if you can list enough numbers, the run must be cutting edge. It is a spectacular place, going from alpine meadows at the put in, to a deep desert canyon at the take out. Usually, it is done as a long two or three day run. I didn’t know the run (I had run it once five years before), and that was part of the draw for me. I was looking for a full expedition-like experience on a complex run, all
condensed into one day. I put in at 6 am and took out at twilight, utterly exhausted. That’s approximately three major steep creek runs in a row - runs you don’t know - in the wilderness, with portaging complexities, severe exposure, and no support. It’s a multi-day, hybrid wilderness/steep creek/expedition run, done solo in a day. Tommy Hilleke and John Grace’s one day descent of the Middle Kings in 2007 is somewhat in the same vein.

One could say this kind of thing was “cutting edge”, but actually it’s a specific personal challenge, and only a certain kind of person would want to do it. Tommy and John’s run was also in remembrance of their close partner Daniel DeLavergne, who had died the preceding year. Suffice it to say, there aren’t a lot of people out there seeking these particular edges, a fact that doesn’t mean they are better or cooler or harder. They fall somewhere between steep creeking, hard river running, and expeditioning, making them strange to characterize.

People haven’t repeated either of the above runs in the same ways, but it isn’t because they can’t. More likely, it is because there’s no reason to do it except the personal reward for having taken on these particular challenges. Others attempt to go faster, or add new sections, do it at higher water levels, and so on. Despite all the numbers above, the runs are not quantifiable in the sense of a “world record” waterfall. They’re just hard. Try one of them and then we can talk about it. The paddlers running 100+ foot waterfalls could say the same thing to those of us who haven’t run something over 60 feet – or whatever our personal limit is.

Here are a few additional examples, some of which are variations on a theme. Scott Lindgren’s runs of the upper Karnali and Tsangpo. Olaf Obsommer’s multiple steep runs in Norway. Felix Lemmler’s “exponential” runs on the Oetz and waterfalls up to 42 meters (137 feet). Willie Kern’s amazing runs in the Sierras, and lately in China. The “Triple Crown” trip that Gerry Moffat put together in 1998, where we did the three classic northern big water expedition runs back to back (Sustina, Alsek, and Stikine). Erik Boomer and Tristan MacLauran did it themselves two years ago. Tommy Hilleke, Daniel DeLavergne, and company did their “Seven Rivers” expedition as another extension – doing seven multi-day Sierra Classics in one summer (2004). The same group also did something I find especially impressive – the Stikine canyon in a single day.

The crux is, people want to define their own challenge. That’s what the edge is, for each of us personally and for the sport as a collective.

There are plenty of other things. Ben Friberg started pushing the idea of a vertical mile creeking in a single day. Interestingly, we did something similar back in the late 1980s and early 1990s on the North Fork Payette – doing three runs in a day (a vertical mile). That metamorphosed and in 1993 I did 8500 vertical feet of class V in a day. In 2007 the group of Bryan Fletcher, Fred Corielle and Ryan Casey did a full 10,000+ feet (two vertical miles) – six top to bottoms in a single day. That’s incredible! Friberg is encouraging creekers to do this, but they have different terrain – smaller volume, steeper, tighter drops, more “technical” in a number of senses. So which is harder – multiple top to bottoms back-to-back on the NF Payette – or multiple runs on a steep creek of your choice? There is no answer to that, because they are different kinds of paddling. Which
is the cutting edge? Well, I guess both might be, in their own strange ways. Finally, consider Steve Fisher’s runs of various huge, wild cascades in Quebec. Are they impressive enough as single runs, or will he have to do a vertical mile of them to be cutting edge? It seems safe to say they stand solidly by themselves.

The bigger issue for the cutting edge is, across the sport there is no reason at all why Blackadar’s, Hilleke’s, Lindgren’s, Friberg’s, Fisher’s, the Young Gunners, or anybody else’s challenge should be the yardstick for the cutting edge. These multiple examples – all different and all difficult – show there isn’t and can’t be any clearly defined edge that everybody agrees on. That’s not the way the sport functions for people on a personal level, and it doesn’t reflect how the sport progresses.

I can only speak accurately about the things I’ve directly experienced, but another prospect for “most cutting edge” would be if you saw what the North Fork Payette looked like at 6500-7000 cfs. It more or less qualifies as a steep creek, but with a massive amount of water. No waterfalls, but lots of steep drops. The drops are not sieve-like, or bedrock slides, or waterfall cascades, but incredibly powerful and fast big water – 30-mph exploding waves and holes going solid for a half mile or mile at a time. It’s full balls-to-the-wall. The half mile stretch through Jacob’s ladder/Golf Course is maybe 250 fps, but with 6500cfs – ten to twenty times the usual “creek” flow. I challenge any kayaking aficionado to take a look at that river at that level and then tell me waterfalls, creeks, or even expeditions are the single “most cutting edge” part of kayaking. T’ain’t so. You will have to make room for more.

Big water has its own cutting edge, and I think nearly every paddler would have to completely reappraise his attitude once he dealt with certain rivers – even those that have been run before: Devil’s Canyon on the Susitna at 25,000+ will never be a pushover, the Stikine at any level, the Tsangpo, Indus, Oetz, Thule Bheri in Nepal, the Zambezi at 90,000 cfs, as Fisher recently did, and so forth.

In the end, what it means is that together we have made a astounding sport with enough challenges to satisfy all of us for a lifetime. We’re generating new challenges all the time. We hold in our hands a diamond in which we are constantly creating new facets – a gemstone that keeps getting more beautiful and ornate; with more edges the longer we work it.

Height doesn’t define the cutting edge, or steepness, flow, or total vertical. Or rather, all of them do in complex ways. Nobody owns the cutting edge, and nobody can say what is hardest. Not the Young Guns – despite what they claim, and not any of the rest of us – despite what we do or criticize. All of us can create an edge of the sport if we are motivated and skilled enough. The cutting edge is open to our imaginations – expeditionists, waterfallers, creekers alike, and it exists on flowing water that is big and fast, small and steep, and everything in between. There will be new cutting edges next year and the year after – despite the old edges not being surpassed or even repeated, and even if the edges don’t cut very much.

The cutting edge is a symbol. In its anarchy it represents what is new, hard, and interesting; it represents fads, boat design, and advertising shtick. It represents the ideals we strive for, and the places we go for challenges. In all these senses, it is a microcosm of everything from the neurotic weirdness to the most beautiful aspirations of our sport. What more could we ask for?
Tyler Bradt is 24, from Stevensville Montana, and one of the outstanding new kayakers. He started paddling very young and through his teen years was running major whitewater and appearing in a variety of videos featuring the new generation. Venues were places like Iceland, Norway, Vietnam, and South America, with many first descents by the time he was 18 years old. Since then he has partnered up with other “Young Guns” like Rush Stergios and Patrick Camblin and made numerous videos of expeditions around the world, and is sponsored by a number of companies. You can catch up on what he is doing by going to his website: www.Rev-Inn.com. He ran 107 foot Alexandra Falls (second descent) essentially perfectly in 2008, which is described below, and bettered that in May 2009 by running 186 foot Palouse Falls in Washington.

Beyond the cutting edge: the next whitewater rampage
By Tyler Bradt

The honeymoon is over. Kayaking, once the world’s fastest growing sport has been on a roller coaster ride of popularity, innovation, progression and a consumer-driven industry. Now returned from its peak, the sport once again is only shared by the enthusiasts who understand the kayaking passions of lifestyle, friendship and a special connection with the watery world.

The outdoor industry, like any good investor, capitalized on this growth spurt, enjoying the consumers who walked hand–in-hand with the dramatic upwelling of innovative products, athleticism, and the media highlighting it all. The high times peaked, flattened then began a slow descent. The industry started absorbing itself. The once kayaker-owned companies became a part of the corporate world. The corporations watched their investments go from turning profits to barely breaking even as consumers realized that their boat from three years ago is just as good, if not better, than this year’s. Boat manufacturing companies who once stood as pillars of support to the paddling world now find that support making less monetary sense. And now that the honeymoon is over, who is left to nourish the future of kayaking?

Kayaking like all sports began with the passionate individuals who defined the sport and its potential. The Byrd brothers, Snyder brothers, Walt Blackader, Doug Ammons, and Rob Lesser pioneered expeditions, drops, creeks, big water and play. These individuals also created the first tremor of gear and boats. Lifejackets and sprayskirts from mothers’ sewing machine, boats fragilely created from fiberglass cloth and resin. Then the Kern brothers, Corran Addison, Scott Lindgren, NRPW crew, Eric Jackson, Steve Fisher and Tao Berman wrote a chapter of progression through out the 90s in all aspects of the whitewater world. With new and seemingly indestructible boats and egos, these individuals formed lifestyles out of the sport, discovered the gold mine of California’s creeking, explored the world’s most remote and challenging rivers, established world records and dominated the rodeo circuit. They enjoyed the competiveness of boat manufactures scrambling to design the next ‘revolutionary’ kayak and all the while, the industry throwing money at these figurehead athletes who legitimized their products and milked mass media from their stunts. The late 90’s came
about, and almost every kayaker considered themselves to be pro and the pros considered
themselves to be Gods. They were driving team vehicles, demanding six figure contracts,
righteous.

Kayaking was peaking and showing a promising future. Athletes spurred the
sport, pushing it well above the limitations of even their gear. Excitement hung in the air,
stuck to the pages of international publications, and flooded thousands of computer screens. With the good times rolling, the century turned and new breed of
kayakers took the podium. They were young and reckless with an appetite for kayaking
only equaled by their ability to party. Boats for kids, high schools for kayakers, sponsors
for young athletes, and with the sport in their grasp, a new rampage began. History
repeated itself as circles of young friends grew into the new figure heads of the sport.
The Young Guns, the essence of it all. The older paddling generation scoffed them
privately and publicly. Holding a high standard of humor, this new crowd loved their
critics or cared nothing about them. Their focus was progression and the world was now
theirs. With media induced popularity they rose to the occasion, giving the public a
spectacle of note. These paddlers began treating waves more like a trampoline then a slip-
and-slide, freestyle was redefined and rodeo died. The Big Gun Show was used as the world
championships of this new era of kayaking and paddlers sent film of their best moves and
lines from around the globe for a chance to claim fame but certainly not fortune. Athletic
progression was a rushing competition redefining the possible but who was paying for it?
The industry companies who once cut single athletes six figure checks were on thin ice.
Marketing budgets dwindled which meant athletes had to turn to more conventional
forms of income--jobs. Their focus, progression of the sport, now also had to make room
for paying for food and shelter. Why is it that individuals shaping the future of the sport
and fueling the industry have no one fueling them?

The year is now 2008, almost a full two decades since the main rush of kayaking
innovation began. A sport which went from a hundred thousand dollar industry to a
hundred million dollar industry in a decade now struggles to keep its own head above
water. Our sport which has now progressed farther than ever can’t even support the
individuals who could take it further. In a multimillion dollar industry there is only
equal amount of money to provide a full livelihood for a handful of kayakers. The paddlers still
getting the checks are the same ones who got the checks from the heyday, the majority of
them over the hill. The best advice to make it as a pro paddler now is to look outside the
industry. With many of the dollars gone, what does our future hold?

“Progression,” the word sounds like a fog horn throughout the industry. Our new
young and reckless paddlers are taking kayaking bigger, farther and higher than ever
imagined. Walt Blackadar might have had a heart attack had someone whispered in his
ear what the sport’s athletes would be doing in the year 2008. Global expeditions have
continued to show the possibility of ground shaking exploration. Freestyle has taken to
the air and acrobatic maneuvers now preformed in a kayak look more like what you
would see in a gymnastics routine. Extreme kayakers have shown the remarkable skill of
running hard rapids and the talent and focus it takes to run 100+ foot waterfalls and stick
them. All of it resting on the shoulders of the sports current “cutting edge” athletes. Why
do they continue to scrape together the money to pull it all off? Lifestyle and maybe a
chance to rejuvenate the sports zenith. No one pays most of these athletes; some pioneers
of the sport would rather cast away their accomplishments, brushing off even world
record waterfalls with analogies of inner tubers running waterfalls of equal height with only so much as a glance, or BASE jumpers free-falling further than anyone in a kayak. It demands the question, why do we do it?

To be a kayaker is to exist within water, around water and hopefully more times than not, on top of water. It is never kayaker versus river; those folks don’t last too long. It is to harmonize with the power of the river and to exist within the moment it creates. To run 100+ foot waterfalls is to first have a vision of it, then to have a feeling in your gut like you just swallowed an electrified golf ball. Your mind sharpens and focuses as the decision is made. You begin to buzz with anticipation and adrenaline as every element of the situation is in taken into account—from the temperature of the water to the ripple ten feet from the lip. Then you decide. Then you wait.

Finally, safety and cameras are ready and you have only had to suspend your mind in that anticipatory state for two hours. Death? Life altering injury? Yes, potentially yes, but your confidence overrides the questions. You have been training for this moment your whole life and now everything is climaxing at once. You are with your best friends; your mentor, the river, roars beside you and suddenly as you see your kayak at your feet perched on the rocky ledge, paddle in hand and life vest unusually tight you realize what is happening. Sitting in your kayak is almost comforting; this is what you know, who you are.

You snap the back band into place, loop your skirt onto the cockpit thinking to yourself it seems a bit insubstantial compared to thirty thousand CFS falling at close to 100 miles per hour. From your perch you can see the river below you stretching away downstream, it looks small. As focus shifts from the river to your friends at the lip you notice there is no more bustle of activity, everyone is simply standing looking at you. Thumbs up. A surge of energy courses up your spine and leaves your brain tingling. One more visualization and couple words of encouragement from deep down, your head hangs and your eyes close. You have played this game before and know the mind space necessary to pull this off. Calm and collected you open your eyes again, grab your paddle and slide into the water. Your kayak feels light and buoyant as you take your last two strokes away from ever turning back but you already crossed that line in your mind two hours ago; there was never any turning back. Your kayak enters the main flow of the river and like the plastic projectile you are, you shoot downstream, neither thrill nor thoughts register now, this is the moment. The lip rushes to meet you and like the river you begin to plummet downwards, time slows as your world turns 90 degrees, your body and mind reacting with the freefall as to ensure your boat is in sync with the river, you are flying, not falling, flying. Falling is how everyone has always run waterfalls but you are different, not just falling off a waterfall but running it.

Water droplets suspended in air and time sparkle around you, still trying to decide their shape. Your body is in a natural upright position, your paddling feathering the mix of air and water just behind your hips. Two seconds go by as your body and boat accelerate to 67 miles per hour, but you don’t feel acceleration, you don’t feel speed, you don’t feel anything but the sensation of weightless freefall. Your boat is perfect, you have had time to ensure it and relinquishing control to the forces of nature you tuck forward, hard. Paddle to the side you prepare for landing, BAMB! Your world explodes; your moment detonates, your face feels like a sumo wrestler just slapped you with all his might. Your boat transitions perfectly and rockets towards the heavens and just as quickly
as you went over the lip; your boat rests on the turmoil of confused water below. Your vision has nothing to focus on but the wall of white mist around you. Regaining your composure you sprint into it as it clears; adrenaline finally registers-your body and mind electrified. Your eyes take in the huge torrent of water falling out of the sky; it then dawns on you how beautiful your last ten seconds of existence has been. Putting a hand in the water you feel the river and exchange unspoken words of humble gratitude. You didn’t conquer the world record waterfall, you conquered yourself. You proved your ability to exist directly within the moment the waterfall created, if not you wouldn’t be sitting in your kayak laughing, crying and shaking with adrenaline. This is what you live for, an existence where it takes holding hands with one of the earth’s most powerful creations to stir the life of your soul.

How can you think about money now? It’s laughable. Something so artificial, it is a product of the human driven world. Luckily you don’t exist in that world you exist in a continuous pursuit of detaching from it with the real world, nature. People speak of the real world as jobs. The joke is on them. The only people you can connect with now are the ones who walk in that world-your paddling friends who help each other teeter on the cutting edge. Parents, girlfriends, professors; no, they don’t understand your world either.

Innovation has dictated the rise and fall of everything in our sport. You would think innovation and progression would walk hand-in-hand. Not so. Was any of my gear made for running a 107 foot tall waterfall? Certainly not.

Individuals shaped our sport through “user innovations”. They didn’t have anyone funding them either; they simply had a desire to make kayaks more playful and apt to run difficult things. In fact our sport is such a prime example of individuals inspiring an entire industry Harvard Business School professor Carliss Baldwin uses freestyle kayaking as a prime example of this upheaval of an industry from the garages of people like Walt Blackader.

“User innovations occur when customers of a product improve on that product with their own designs. In rodeo kayaking, the early participants built specialized kayaks from fiberglass using hand lay-up techniques; these crafts were especially nimble in rough water. In the early 1970s, other kayakers began asking these ‘user innovators’ to create equipment for them—and the rodeo kayaking industry was born. Since then, rodeo kayaks have gone through several major design iterations, and the sport has become a $100 million business.”  Carliss Baldwin also goes on to state, “For user innovation to be a force, the cost of creating a new design must be within the reach of a single user.”  If individuals kicked kayaking into its pinnacle before, can they do it again?

After I ran Alexandra falls and the adrenaline quit pumping I started asking questions. What if equipment failure wasn’t an almost certain factor in running big drops? What if we could create a full suspension kayak which would help protect against paralysis and broken ankles? Many of us know people now dead due to a blown sprayskirt, people with life-altering back injuries because of flat landings, people who despite their desire to kayak, almost cry walking to the river because of an ankle shattering peton three years prior. Is there something here that needs to change? Can we as paddlers demand this change, even create it ourselves?

The car ride from Alexandra Falls to my home in Montana is about 37 hours, longer if you run out of gas twice. My mind was buzzing the entire time; I felt I had the
key to unlock the future of the sport. The door was in front of me. I combined a dream of an expedition throughout Africa with my new desire to create product innovations. I started a company, Revolutionary Innovations and spent two weeks in Sandpoint Idaho with my good friend Tom Brunner. This is the same man who created my Japanese Fire Truck to drive from Alaska to Chile on the Oil and Water Project; he is a design fabricator genius despite how humbly he would deny it. Again, I paid him almost nothing to create my dream, a suspension system. But my mind didn’t stop there, what about the paddle and the spray skirt, the two things you can almost count on letting you down on a big waterfall. There was no time or money to improve those things at that moment despite the ideas train. The Africa Revolutions Tour needed organizing and the trip needed funds.

My kayak still sits next to me; suspension system intact after the abuse of African rivers and waterfalls, my mind still ponders a skirt that won’t implode and a paddle that won’t break. What if we could once again create a product that every costumer of the whitewater industry needed? Could we push kayaking back into another heyday? My mind full but my bank account empty, I write proposals knowing that if I put my mind to it I can still generate income from my accomplishments. I know that although kayaking has never paid me and maybe never will, it is still the driving force of my life. I know that although the honeymoon is over, a party has just begun. It is a party that is not exclusive to pro paddlers or sponsored athletes; it is a party in which dreams serve as the only form of invitation and whose participants will continue to nourish our sport.

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Eric Jackson. EJ is the consummate competitor in several areas of kayaking. He was a member of the US national slalom team for ten years straight competing on the World Cup, and was the top American finisher in the 1992 Olympic slalom event. He then had even greater success when he shifted to freestyle, first winning the world Championship in 1993, and four additional times since. He started Jackson Kayaks three years ago, with emphasis on freestyle and creeking designs but more particularly small kayaks for children and women, a niche that had been woefully neglected. Jackson Kayaks has been a recent bright light in the industry, becoming one of the top sellers of whitewater boats in the world. This last year, EJ also was named to the Whitewater Hall of Fame in the Competitor category as recognition of his long and multi-faceted competition career. We should also note that his young daughter and son are top competitors as well. His comments reflect the thoughts of a 25 year world-class competitor in two different disciplines, and the entrepreneurship of a successful businessman.

The Cutting Edge and the Total Picture

Eric Jackson

I am a kayaker, and have been for over 38 years, with 29 of those years being nearly full time. I love paddling, love pushing the envelope, and love the industry, people, and past and future of the sport. Perhaps one of the best ways to describe my
point of view and perspective is "total picture". I just finished reading both Doug Ammons’ and Tyler Bradt's well written, emotional, and factual essays. They both educated me, as well as put me into their shoes, as I imagine how they feel and perceive the cutting edge of paddling. I would not dare dispute either essay, because, for them, it is their reality, and they intend to live it. That is what is wonderful about life in this crazy world. You can happily live strongly believing things that are 180 degrees different from what somebody else believes, who is also living happily and "successfully".

The whitewater paddling industry is small, as I can attest as the President and co-owner of Jackson Kayak. We do well in this market as the top selling boats, but yet we are not a large company. Even smaller are the groups of paddlers that are leading in their field, or creating new fields. I have watched the segmentation of the market as paddlers started, for the first time, to "categorize" themselves. "I am a Creeker, I am a playboater." For example. Then it was, "I am a big wave surfer" (a sub-category of a playboater). Then it became, "I am an expedition boater", or "I am a big waterfall boater." There are quite a few that haven't been mentioned, that have fine tuned techniques and are clearly on the cutting edge with greater honed skills in their area than in most other factions. Slalom boaters, downriver racers, freestyle paddlers, squirt boaters, etc.. The best slalom boater in the world can operate with unsurpassed skill and precision while pushing the physical limits at top speed. Without that training, you can't even touch them. The top 20 slalom paddlers in the world can get down a slalom course, putting their boats where they want them, using one blade and laughing all of the way and still beat the top freestyle, creekers, squirt boaters, river runners, etc. to the finish line. I believe the same slalom boaters can get to the lip of the tallest waterfall ever ran and get to the bottom, if they have the desire to try it. With the quantity of swims in such big waterfall attempts, it can be argued that the skill level of running 100 footers isn't very high yet. Yet, given a choice between having a slalom boater on a remote trip with me or a seasoned expedition boater, with waterfall running experience, I'll take the latter every time. The complexity of safely running the hardest water as a team, requires much more than just the ability to paddle your own boat.

A freestyle kayaker is another example of cutting edge. The newest moves being performed in small holes in local whitewater parks is just as cutting edge as getting big air on a big wave on the Nile. Anyone who thinks otherwise, isn't doing both. Flying to Africa to a big wave is a bigger commitment than driving to your local run, but once you get there, and on the feature, in order to be cutting edge you have to push beyond what anyone has done before. At that moment, you are in a situation where the less people that have been there before you, the easier to push the envelope. I would argue that breaking new ground in slalom, or freestyle, for example, is easier than breaking new ground in running waterfalls over 100 feet. Why? Because so many people are trying to break new ground, in a competitive environment, that all of the easy stuff has been accomplished, and the new ground requires more than desire, but physical prowness, mental toughness, longevity, and creativity. If you are trying to break new ground doing something that only 5 people have ever tried, you can move the envelope further
and faster with just a little creativity and effort. If it is big waterfall running, than it also
requires mental strength and the willingness to put yourself in harm's way.

Solo boating. Awesome example of cutting edge, even if it is frowned on today. Many
people have run Turnback Canyon, only Walt did it solo. If you want to create a
category for solo runs achieved, and call that cutting edge, you'll create a new breed of
boaters looking for their "fame and fortune" by running around and doing as many solo
"first descents" as possible. Of course, today, when somebody says they are going solo,
it is frowned upon. In Walt's case, if nobody else wants to go, and he goes anyway, that
is cutting edge. Telling your friends that "no, you can't come, I want to solo it" isn't
quite the same.

The future of kayaking. Each of us has a vision of what that would look like. I consider
the future of boat sales, of what types of boats people will want to paddle, and of course,
where I'll paddle with my kids. Sure, I also consider what freestyle moves I would try to
come up with to win the next world championships. I will also consider what
expeditions my team will go on and how I can support them, as well as which ones I will
join in on. Being close to, or on, or in front of the edge is something that any paddler
can enjoy when they are there. They will certainly reminisce about if after they are no
longer close to that edge. I was asked if "giant slalom" on class 5 was the future of the
sport recently. Yes, it is. So is big water fall running, and so is freestyle, slalom, down
driver racing, etc. as long as people do it, and are pushing the limits. It is like religion. If
you go to a church and the minister tells you that the way of that church is the only way,
and all other poor souls will go to hell, you can be pretty sure that he doesn't have a very
broad perspective on the world. When somebody suggests that "this is the future, the
dge, the only future" that person will not survive in an evolving world. The future is
what people make it. Sure the big companies have lost the individuals who created a
kayakers' personality and had intimate relationships with all aspects of paddling. That
only left a void for new individually run companies to take over that role.

What is the future of paddling? Freestyle kayaking is resurging like nobody's business!
63 new events in Freestyle last year alone, called the Hometown Throwdows, marked the
biggests surge in new events in the history of whitewater. World Kayak was the creator of
those events. Why? Because we love them, and people love them. Jackson Kayak will
continue to sponsor freestyle boaters, like myself, my kids, and the much of my team.
Expedition boating is the future. Jackson Kayak supports expedition boaters who are off
to the most difficult rivers of the world, that have never been run, and successfully
ticking them off like a "to do list". Are they out for glory? No, they are doing it for the
love the challenge and the reward of accomplishing something so difficult, that most
people couldn't get past square one. We support them because their passion for paddling
makes the world a better place. Do any of our boaters have a serious salary? No.
Would ANYbody do what Team JK does for the money? No chance! The concept that
paddlers are playboys that make six figures is ridiculous. With that said, have paddlers,
and do paddlers make six figures? Absolutely, but not from being a paddler at a kayak
company. There are a rare few who have combined luck, desire, and hard work to create a great income, for at least a short period of time.

A word on who we think is the cutting edge. They say, he hold holds the microphone is the expert. Well in paddling, it is “he, or she, who makes the video is the expert. Just because somebody has a cool video, doesn’t mean that they are on the cutting edge. There are usually people watching the video cringing as the audience holds up the paddlers in the videos as the cutting edge, when they know that they are doing more, but it just isn’t being shown on the big screen that day. That goes for me, too, of course. Just because I create a “EJ’s Advanced Playboating” DVD doesn’t mean that there isn’t somebody somewhere doing the same moves better.

Now for what is serious business, to me. This is my personal challenge. In the USA 30,000 whitewater boats were sold each year in 2000. Only 12,000 were sold in the last rolling year. In the words of John Norton, "EJ, you don't want to be selling America's favorite buggy whip." For self preservation, it is mandatory that Jackson Kayak does everything it can to assure the health and future of paddling in the USA and abroad. This is why we have created World Kayak, which has, as a primary goal, the rebuilding of the infrastructure of paddling. This infrastructure has been left in shambles as a byproduct of whitewater companies selling out and becoming conglomerates, and abandoning their whitewater focus, leading many of the dealers, schools, etc. to do the same. My vision of the future goes beyond my new move, or the 120 footer being run, etc. It has to do with the total picture, the whitewater community in its entirety. All inclusive club, that is the future I am working towards along with many very capable people. Want to know what mental picture I have??? Here it is.

1. paddlers have a strong local community to rely on, to paddle with, to learn from, to compete with if they want, and to socialize with.

2. Instead of top paddlers saying, “look at me, I am the future, I am cool, pay me.” They’ll be saying, “Look at me, what I do is fun, and I will share my experiences with you and help you learn to do what I do too.” We attempt to create this concept in Team JK, many non-team JK paddlers achieve this too.

3. Instead of the primary suppliers in our sport dissing one discipline or another, or whitewater altogether, we will see those companies who are true supporters of whitewater, not just supplying goods for a profit, become the leaders of the industry and give the sport the adrenaline shot it needs.

4. Mainstream media can and will go after paddling, but the numbers dictate the quantity of that media. While getting on a one shot show about running a big waterfall is beneficial, or live coverage of the world championships for freestyle, or Olympic coverage of slalom are all good, the reason there isn’t a more consistent feed of media is that our total number of participants are too small. Cover golfing and you cover millions of interested people who will buy the products advertised. Cover paddling and you are limited to thousands of people
who won’t see a paddling ad because the cost is too high and the number of people who will see it too low. It is that simple. Want more media, need more paddlers! The future being mainstream, means paddling being more mainstream. Rafting is the most mainstream whitewater activity and arguably the most media worthy. With that said, our sport has so many wonderful personalities, worthy of a profile that will peak the general interest of our population.

5. Our beginner and intermediate paddlers will thrive, adding more great people to the sport, of which, some of them, will be so fired up and motivated, and skilled, that they’ll quit their jobs, become a full time kayaking bum, and paddle their way to the top of their discipline, and when there, share what they know with everyone else in a way that we can all appreciate and learn from. That person will be more marketable and make more money than the person who feels that the world owes them because they did some really cool things in paddling.

Meanwhile- this is all opinion, from the computer of a guy who left the real world behind in 1984, and committed my life to the pursuit of the paddling dream. That dream is to paddle when and where I want, and be all I can be in my kayak and out of it. My opinion is just that, and opinion, a waste of breath. My efforts to create the realities stated above are real. An opinion of how life should be, without the action to back it up is fruitless. My actions are the only thing worth measuring. They do affect the total picture, but only a little bit. It is the thousands of individuals in our sport, who’s combined actions, determine our future. They are the heroes.

EJ’s comments on equipment
The Cutting Edge of Equipment- Today's equipment is cutting edge, and improving constantly. Not all NEW boats or NEW gear are worth getting, but the best, is just that, the best and most cutting edge. It is important to remember that, for example, a boat that runs a 100 footer the best, still needs to get the paddler to the lip of the falls to be a good boat. As Doug’s humorous Devil Advocate might offer, perhaps the inner tube is a surprisingly viable boat for running 100 footers. But as kayakers we all know that there is a reason it isn't the boat of choice, and that is because there are so many other times that a good creek boat is safer, easier to paddle and more fun than the inner tube. In fact I would say 99% of the time for what I like to do. Skirts that don't implode. They can be purchased at just about any dealer. A tight rand skirt, on a good cockpit rim won't implode, period. Bungee skirts will almost always implode at some point. But then again, what is the goal of a cutting edge skirt? It is to be dry, easy to get on and off for those people using them, and to stay on during the activities the paddler participates in. There are skirts that will shred on the cockpit rim before coming off. Paddles that don't break - they are easy to make. It is much easier to make a beefy paddle than a lightweight one. Clearly some are much stronger than others. The strongest, lightest ones are cutting edge for that reason. Do you want a paddle to break on a big water fall, or against your body? If the paddle breaks and the body doesn't get hurt, then you can use a heavier one that is stronger. When the paddle starts breaking bones due to poor technique on landing then perhaps it is too strong. Experimentation
on such things is necessary but not for everybody, although the spinoff is positive for others.

Cutting Edge Kayaks: Let's start with playboats. The Jackson Kayak All-Star for example, for my tastes, is arguably the best boat available. I could make it loop bigger, but it would be harder to cartwheel. I could make it faster, but then it would not be as easy to get off the water or user friendly. Etc. etc. The cutting edge is taking the grey areas that never overlapped and make them overlap in a way that you are always in the best boat, or at least in as many situations as you might encounter. What people are doing at the moment isn't always cutting edge. When people started focusing on wavesurfing as the "be all end all", it was considered the future and the cutting edge as if hole riding was dead. That same year (2004), many brand new hole moves were invented, even more than new wave moves, and just as difficult, if not more so. Now, after 4 years, it has been evened out. Going to the Nile Special, or the BusEater is just as fun, but no longer perceived as breaking new ground. New moves are not just what happens when somebody gets on a bigger wave than before. Most new ground breaking stuff comes from manageable playspots, not huge waves or holes. The list goes on and on. As a user who expects to have an unfair advantage by having the best gear, sometimes before everyone else, the cutting edge is the only acceptable option. You have to know what to look for to find the cutting edge. It isn't always the loudest or most visible of the category you are talking about.

Is it cutting edge, or has the edge simply been cut off?

Corran Addison

There is this quaint little race in South Africa called the Dusi marathon. In a nutshell, it’s a 3 day kayaking marathon whose closest cousin is the Eco Challenge. Even though the kayaking is at best, class 3+, it takes one hell of an athlete to finish a race that includes multiple 1 hr running portages over entire mountain ranges, kayak on your back, just to get back into the river and then navigate 30 miles of class 2-3 rapids in a 20lb 20
foot long fiberglass kayak. Graeme Pope Ellis, who could not even Eskimo roll a kayak when he retired, won it 10 years in a row! Now that’s cutting edge!

This was the world of kayaking I knew as a kid. To win this race was the ultimate expression of having “arrived” at the extreme limits of what could be done in a kayak. But the very nature of this race meant that kayaking was doomed to be nothing more than a fringe sport which would never amount to anything.

Then I met a paddler named Jerome Truran, and one day we went out to a little rapid that is on one of the last sections of the Dusi Marathon, and he pulled out this absurdly small 13’ kayak called a Perception Quest. It was round, wide, fat, short, plastic and honestly, quite stupid looking (to my “marathon racing” eye). He pulled out of the eddy, surfed onto a wave, drove the nose in, and the boat exploded vertically into the air before he landed upside down, Eskimo rolled up, and paddled into the eddy grinning.

In exactly 5 seconds, my entire definition of what constituted cutting edge was overthrown. I had a new definition of what being a cutting edge kayaker would be. The skill set that was required to surf out from the eddy onto the wave, align the boat perfectly with the oncoming water, plunge the nose, control the lift-off until the boat was both completely vertical and completely out of the water was light-years beyond anything any winner of the Dusi marathon would ever know. But (despite Jerome being the reigning world silver medalist in Downriver racing at the time) this display of superior skill pales compared to the arduous task of winning the Dusi.

So which really is cutting edge? And more importantly, which of these two would be more likely to help kayaking and make it grow?

For some perspective, let’s turn first to skiing. Skiers for decades measured themselves against the clock. Actually, against the next skier, who was racing the same clock. The top skiers’ abilities were uncanny, and the industry marketed its wares to the rest of the world based on what the Tomba’s and Girradelli’s of the day were using.

However, skiing still was dying a slow agonizing death, with both retail sales and lift ticket sales moving from a steady decline to an alarming cliff-fall. Then in the early 1990s along came this punk spin-off of skating mixed with surfing and skiing. It was called snowboarding.

Snowboarding (the way most people do it) is notably easier than skiing the way Tomba does it. By 1995, snowboarders made up a paltry 10% of “skiers”. Yet this 10% were buying 70% of the retail gear and 90% of the lift tickets. The heroes were doing simple 360 spins off small kickers, or riding backwards, but the very look of snowboarding was appealing. Skiing had found its new “cutting edge” in this simple, relatively easy, yet massively appealing pastime.

The days of the elite skiers like Tomba being a major player in the direction of skiing (I include snowboarding as part of skiing) was over. However, 10 years later, skiing has made a comeback… and it looks like snowboarding. And while what the Kellys and Kidwells were doing on snowboards in the early 90’s was both fun and impressive, it paled compared to what Tomba, Plake, or Schmidt were doing. It took something as simple and stylish as sliding on snow sideways to rejuvenate a dying sport. This was skiing’s new cutting edge.

The application to kayaking is straightforward: despite advances in skills and techniques, by 1988 whitewater kayaking was entering its first phase of decline. The
generation that had made it cool in the 1970s had moved on. They had jobs, commitments and neither the time nor the will to go on major expeditions or run insane rapids. Sea kayaking was being “reinvented” and the first “recreational” kayaks made their appearance. The whitewater paddlers of yesteryear were moving over to recreational paddling, and there was nobody to take their place.

I got a job designing with Perception kayaks in 1988. Bill Masters, seeing this change in what his “pals” from the 1970’s needed in a kayak, brought me in to create an easier, fatter, safer kayak so the aging demographic could give it one last effort. On my off-time I designed a little boat which looked remarkably like the first flat bottomed playboats of the late 1990s – flat hull, low volume ends, high volume center. Bill walked in one day, looked at the boat and asked “who’s going to paddle that?” I responded, “ME!”

In fact what I meant was “people like me”. My generation. There were many players in the overall development of what helped whitewater kayaking make its fantastic explosion of popularity from 1998 to 2002, from the Snyders and Whitemore to Kellner and to a lesser degree, myself, but what is interesting is that despite the massive progress in creekering that had been going on since the late 1980’s with the likes of Kullmar and Wigginton, it took simple little fun playboating to create a boom that nobody in kayaking could ever have predicted.

The boom was both from within and outside the industry. We as designers and manufacturers were developing new ideas and technology at such an alarming rate that paddlers were compelled to change designs every 6 to 8 months if they were to keep up. They in turn were doing more and more with these boats, thereby inspiring newer and better designs. This created a massive influx of money into an industry that went from 4 brands in 1989 to over 20 at its peak in 1999.

Creeking never stopped. In fact, the boats got better and safer, and what the paddlers were doing by 2000 was off the charts (compared to the previous generations). But as Chan Zwanzig said to me on the release of his latest creekboat sometime in the late 1990s “we did it because it had to be done, but we’ll never sell one tenth as many as the playboats”. How ironic, when compared with today where the number of playboats sold is probably 1/10th the number of the creekboats.

What’s sad about that statement is that creekboat sales have not increased since 1999. Playboating suddenly died. Not a slow death, but rather a sudden and dramatic end. Industry whitewater sales dropped from somewhere in the 30 000 units annually (all combined) to significantly under 10,000 in less than 2 years, and this happened right as freestyle kayakers on the cutting edge reached new heights in skill and were doing more than anyone had ever done before.

When you look at sports, there seems to be a direct correlation of growth that’s related to “achievable fun” and a drop once it becomes “elitist”. When surfing looked like it was for everyone in the late 1960’s and 1970’s, it exploded. By the late 1980’s it was an elitist sport with boards so small no one but experts could surf them. It wasn’t until the “new longboard” revolution in the 1990’s that surfing took its place back.

The parallels are astounding. Windsurfing looked like something everyone could do, and it exploded in popularity. When it became the “elitist” definition of cutting edge,
it crashed. Snowboarding exploded when it looked fun – like anyone could do it – and it stalled when it became elitist (opening doors for freestyle skiing and shaped skis – something everyone could do). Kayaking exploded in popularity when freestyle kayaking and the moves that were done (spins and blunts) looked like something everyone could do (and then aspire to the now simple airblunt, and more importantly, not feel like they had to risk their necks to have fun as creeking demands). It died when complex multi-axis rotations and a spinal cord made from silicone became the minimum level to even be noticed.

There seems to be a direct correlation between the success of a sport, and its mediocrity. The more mainstream and “attainable” the “high end” appears, the more popular it is. The greater the distance between what the average person can do and what the top guys are doing, the less popular it becomes. No one wants to suck, and comparing yourself to the Young Guns today, you suck. So you move on to something else. Of the 200+ paddlers I kayaked with on a weekly basis in 2004 (by this I mean the number of paddlers I knew by name who I’d see in a week at my wave), less than half a dozen still kayak today… right when the sport is at heights that it has never seen before – whether that’s freestyle moves, waterfall runs or expeditions to distant places.

Now, how do we fix that? Well, that’s an entirely different question I’ll leave for the Young Guns to solve. After all, their livelihood depends on it.

**Brief Cost-Benefit of sponsoring paddlers**

**Corran Addision**

Tyler et al are great guys, hard core paddlers and are already, in just the 5 years since I've been retired, far beyond what I ever could do. The next generation is always better than the preceding one ... but somuch... so soon? WOW! However, that skill does NOT make one entitled to anything.

The hardest thing I had to deal with at Riot was team sponsorship. In particular, it was the question: "I KNOW what I can do for you. What can you do for me?"

To elaborate in a simple way, for the company a sponsorship is like any investment. If I have $40,000, do I buy 2 molds or 1 mold and a sponsorship to promote and sell that model? If I spend $20 000 on the 2nd new mold, what will that bring me more or less revenue than an athlete promoting the first one? From experience I know a mold, with little advertising for a new model, will sell perhaps 500 units, at a sale price of $600, of which $300 is the cost to make it. So it brings a revenue of $300 x 500 units = $150 000 "profit" (omitting overhead and everything else). Now if I give Mr Athlete that $20 000, he's going to have to DOUBLE the sales of that one mold for me to make the same money. And remember, that's not more money, that's just the same money, as well as the possible headaches of dealing somebody who might act like a premadonna. So the question that has to be answered is, can the athlete make me $150 000 in one year? Unfortunately for the athlete, the answer is always no. Always.

That being said, in reality it's not that clear cut, and the promotion overall of a brand is needed, but the cost/benefit analysis does give them a serious reality check. It comes down to this: I can give you $20 000 or put that into a mold, and if I put it into a mold, and do NO ADVERTISING (because I spent that on the mold) I always make
more money than splitting the two. It's a hard nut for them to swallow, but it's a brute fact the company must consider and base its decisions on, or else it won't exist.

When I approached sponsors it was always a case of THIS IS WHAT I CAN DO FOR YOU.

Maybe the biggest problem is one of how the athletes perceive their role. There are so many different MTV Pro sports out there that athletes who are young, hot, and rad can believe sponsorship is an entitlement for having arrived at the top of a sport. They do not realize that they are a small piece of a giant game, and only the most useful and nonreplaceable pieces get the dough.

Obviously I have been at the other end of the plate - I did once, make loads of cash being a sponsored athlete. In fact I was probably the 2nd highest paid kayaker of our times (after Shaun Baker of course). So I've been there.

But it was NEVER about the money. At the end of it all, I had nothing to show for it except some great memories, wonderful friends and perhaps I might even "live forever" as a small footnote in the overall history of what kayaking is and was and how it got here. That would be nice, but it was never a goal or ambition of mine any more than it was to make money. That just sorta happened. One day I woke up and realized people were willing to pay me well for endorsements. But a huge difference between myself and many of todays hot shots is that I went into an industry that promised nothing but financial poverty, but riches of novelty. When the money came along I was more surprised than expecting. I could no more have envisioned money in kayaking any more than Walt Blackadar could have seen the Airblunt.

But the legacy my generation has left the new, is that money can be had and should be expected. Ironically, the generation that never suspected it would be there made it, and the generation that expects it never will. Its' gone... moved on. Forever? Maybe not, but for now anyway.

Money is useful. It pays tickets and gas and food. It allows you to spend your week exploring and pushing yourself, rather than working to pay rent, and I suspect none of the new guys is hoping to get rich - they just want to kayak every day and payment for kayaking means they can do more of it - like an aspiring Olympic athlete on a state funded training program. The problem is, they chose the wrong sport.

My father said to me on many occasion after I reached a top level "Why, Oh why, didn't I teach you golf?" If you want money, play golf. If you want to be rich in character, experience and fulfillment, then kayak (and get a job).

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Jim Snyder is one of the most renowned figures in kayaking. He has paddled for over 43 years, while earning his keep for years as a scruffy raft guide, wood paddle designer, and boat builder in West Virginia. He was an “edge” kayaker for many years in more conventional, difficult whitewater, particularly pioneering steep creeks in the West Virginia area. He is probably best known as one of the pioneers and designers of an entirely new form of kayaking, called squirting. With massive experimentation as well as testing help from his brother Jeff and various close friends, Jim evolved a set of progressively smaller and more wing-like boats that allowed controlled vertical and three
dimensional moves like cartwheels, and underwater moves like mystery moves – along with a unique set of “cubic” moves and techniques. His book, “The Squirt Book” is a classic that redefined what one could do in a kayak. He has designed over 70 different boats, most of them independently, and also has been deeply involved in river conservation for the Cheat river watershed for many years.

**What does the "Edge" Cut Anyway?**

Jim Snyder

There has always been a "Hey LOOK AT ME!" aspect to this sport and I'm glad it's alive and well. It's usually prefaced with "Hold my beer". The thing to remember is - at it's heart - this sport is a personal evolution and discipline and amounts to little more. It's a recreation (OK- I'll stipulate that it's a sport...) no matter what we are trying to prove. It doesn't compare to being true to your family and actually doing something of worth to others in this world. All the progress in this sport doesn't amount to a hill of beans compared to the real issues in our lives. Our personal evolution is a spiritual evolution and as such has little traction in the 'real world' except for that it makes us better people- a bit more humble and awestruck perhaps.

The river has taught me some humility over time - something I sorely lacked as a young buck. The humble comes when you make mistakes and learn to question your judgment. Or when you lose friends. You second guess yourself- and that's actually the key to longevity - keep your head in the sky but your feet on the ground. But- maybe the thing is to cling to the real offerings of the river- clues and insights into our own nature and God's vast Nature. You know- the personal stuff that happens in such brief moments and defies description~ just so much magic on display as ordinary events. How puny it makes us feel- what a treat to get an honest glimpse at our minuscule schemes. Knowledge is always a bit of a face pie.

I can see where it's tempting to think that Tao ran a big falls- got noticed and is now fat and happy (big assumption). So- maybe it follows that someone runs a falls a few feet higher and asks, where is my reward? Good question. But- really they should be asking themselves some further questions. Maybe the whole reward aspect of it crapped out- but there is still this awesome experience to feel good about! Money is a thin incentive for plunging over big hazards. The river has a way of stomping on thin incentives. There's got to be more to it. "Leading the sport" is sort of like a worthwhile ambition- except that the sport is a lazy octopus that hates to be led.

You know, if it's really all about the money, then you have to look at things pragmatically. The sport is dendritic; there are many branches to the tree. The branches have many leaves. And they are all 'cutting edge' to some degree- cutting the wind on behalf of the sport. But the leaves fall off eventually and are replaced regularly. Entire branches can be overshadowed and wither. And some branches find their way to greater 'sunshine' and enjoy 'prosperity'. How fortuitous! Still, none of the leaves can actually pull the tree along and make it obey the leave's will. It's a reticent tree and all it's branches want to stay where they are.
If one of the leaves wants a lot of sunshine it has to strive to the open space—but really the sustenance comes also from the roots of the tree. This might lead one to assume that only the sedate old schoolers are making the the big sap— they are closer to the trunk and power base of the sport. They are more like the branches themselves. So—really the trick to making a fortune paddling would be to be closely associated with a main branch but have abundant sunshine available— not an untried concept. EJ is like that. But EJs are rare in this sport.

Still, it seems the 'leaves' are always striving to be away from the branches, the rest of the crowd, striving for the warm glow and high visibility. In our generation we aspired to being 'stuntmen' when we grew up and we could make a lot of money doing that!  And a precious couple made that scene work. But now it seems like "Jackass" has that scene all sewn up and there's not much room for innovation there.

I could babble on and on about what works and doesn't work, but let me just lend my unique perspective from someone who has not made a fortune innovating and designing and yet continues unashamedly. Sure it would be great to make a ton of money designing, but I don't. I've learned that about the only way to make a bushel of money in this sport is to make someone else 10 times that much. And yet I keep designing and innovating. Am I particularly stupid (could well be) or is there something else going on here?

To tell you the truth, what I do is selfish. I'm working for my own needs and desires and for those of my friends also. A lot of my designing is problem solving and it's so hard to stop doing that. Especially when you get positive reinforcement from your friends. But what does this mean to the rest of the sport? Very little I suspect, and in any case, it's not my bailiwick to sort out. I'm just designing the best stuff I can and taking my good old time about it. It's fun! So my incentive is small- not money, not revolution, not reward- just problem solving and fun hunting. Maybe that's why I have had such a robust career - over 70 designs with minimal corporate endorsement. The grandiose goals seem to deflate so easily and legions of followers can turn their backs in a moment if there is a better train wreck happening somewhere else. We are all very alone in this world and we're here for just a flash and that's why the big stones of our lives- our family and friends mean so much.

If you REALLY want to be cutting edge in this sport- try being the "Happiest Paddler on the Planet"! - now there's a worthy challenge. You could start with EJ's beautiful dream of being "whitewater rich"- paddling whenever the opportunity allows-and then make sure you're good with your family and friends on how you disappear frequently (and return responsibly). And then proceed to pile up the excellent times we all want. Let them soak into your soul and make you that much better. And if you are still inspired to stick your head up and say "I am GOOD!  I must be the happiest paddler on the planet!" Congratulations, you're right! But don't look around too far- there are a lot of us and if you're still competing, you may still have a long ways to go. But it's all good. Time well spent.

Going to the cutting edge and returning safely is a proper thing to do and is a time honored tradition, except that historically in most cases it has been a real imposed question of survival of someone and their kin- such as in ancient revolutions and plagues. Journeys to the edge are a sign of a life well lived. But to assert that the cutting edge is anything but personal, much less the potentially cutting edge of a sport, or the cutting
edge of human athletic achievement, endurance, bravery, or brilliance - is probably assuming too much. You need to stay connected with your edge - sniff the winds coming off the cliff - and respect it. But the edge is a personal affair and should be left as such. For someone to nobly assume the role of "cutting edge" is like the tail wanting to wag the dog. It's fun to imagine maybe - but the next fat juicy tire that rolls by will tell us who's really the boss. This sport is small for good reasons. You have to be a bit bold to go forth into the midst of the frothy waters - and not everybody is cut from that cloth. And it's just not going to happen - we can't make everybody like and want to do what we like and want to do.

People like Nature and people like to feel safe. That's why recreational kayaks are a much more popular product. It’s why touring boats are the main market. You shouldn't value your hard beating heart at the base of a big falls as better than the hard beating heart of a beginner in a rec boat. God loves both of them. Heaven holds a place for those who play.

If you really want a great job paddling every day- do what so many before us have done- be a raft guide! Live like a gypsy! Hang around the campfire! It's hard to do much better than that. A lot of great men before us - Alexander the Great, George Washington, Napoleon, and many others, have spent buku hours around the campfire. They all thought it was pretty cool too. Time well spent.

So watch your wake, eat your cake, and sing - very softly.

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Jamie McEwan is an outstanding figure in the canoe-kayak world, initially known for his bronze medal at the 1972 Munich Olympics in C-1 slalom, when whitewater slalom made its Olympic debut. Jamie was a top National and World Cup competitor and a fixture for many years on the US National Slalom team, culminating in his return to the Olympics in 1992, racing with partner Lecky Haller. He has joined his brother, pioneering river-runner Tom McEwan, on many river trips, including a 1998 attempt on the Tsangpo Gorge in Tibet, which was filmed for National Geographic. Articulate and thoughtful, he draws perspective from many facets of whitewater sport--competitive, exploratory, and personal.

The Seventh Grade

Jamie McEwan

This isn't really a piece on where we are and where we're going, because I don’t think I can predict that. However, I do have a few thoughts on the cutting edge.

It's hard for the outsider to know what's really cutting-edge. It isn't necessarily what looks good in a video. I'm with the legendary climber Reinhold Messner, who before he became quite so legendary wrote a book called The Seventh Grade. In it, he proposed adding an extra grade for the way a climb was done. What matters most is style. Messner felt, for example, that a quick self-supporting "Alpine" climb is more worthy than a massive "Himalayan" assault; I agree, and I think that the same holds true for whitewater expeditions. And the paddler who puts on a suit of armor, flips and
bashes down a rapid upside-down, is less worthy of respect than the one who paddles it cleanly and under control. These examples seem pretty obvious, but admittedly, what is and what isn't good style can be awfully subjective. Personally, I'm more interested in the guy who races a wildwater boat down the Upper Yough than the guy who hucks himself off a hundred-foot waterfall. I can't really defend that, but I don't have to. Subjectivity has its place. After all, the ultimate value of paddling is subjective. The ultimate value lies in the experience of the paddler. And many of my peak experiences have been far from what anyone ever called "cutting-edge": running a class III-IV river alone; or training slalom in class II, after dark, under the lights in the falling snow.

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Aaron Pruzan: Aaron Pruzan is the owner of Rendezvous River Sports and Jackson Hole Kayak School and has introduced thousands of people of all ages to the sport of kayaking. He has been involved with numerous whitewater expeditions, exploratory descents and competition in a variety of disciplines. In addition he has worked for river stewardship as a board member of the Snake River Fund and American Whitewater.

Comments on, “The Cutting Edge,” & “Beyond the Cutting Edge”

Aaron Pruzan

Tyler's piece isn't really a rebuttal of Doug’s article. While he makes it clear that he feels his crew really is on the cutting edge, this isn't the theme of his story. The main point I was able to glean from Tyler's heartfelt ramblings, is he bemoans the fact that the whitewater heyday of the 90s was short lived and most of the money dried up before the Young Guns were on top of the scene. For those of us who were exploring and running hard whitewater before anyone was really making any money, things have just returned to the way they were. The growth of the 90s was unsustainable and a small market sport got a big head. Pro kayakers making six figures - the couple I can think of that have had, or still enjoy such financial success are certainly not over the hill.

Doug’s, "Cutting Edge" piece, is a good story about what that edge really means and made some excellent points about whitewater challenges that have been cutting edge for 25+ years and may always be. From my standpoint he could have made his story 100% positive without taking shots at anyone, but he chose to throw in several pointed and negative comments. In return, Tyler could have been 100% positive with his story but clearly he felt slighted and wanted to take a couple digs back at Doug, and others. (Unless you are willing to go solo Turnback, while the Tweedsmuir is surging, at 20,000+, with a glass boat, while wearing a 70s wetsuit - never dis Walt Blackadar!) That said, the Young Guns (and a few other groups like them) are definitely running more radical whitewater and doing bigger freestyle moves than ever before. Why not just let them have their time of glory without trying to lessen or compartmentalize their accomplishments?
I enjoyed my brief time when I was certain that I was among those representing the cutting edge of kayaking. I definitely had more swagger during those years and liked to kayak and party hard enough to show it. The fact that Tyler and his crew are the same way doesn't make them egotistical, it is simply part of the necessary arrogance required to do the things they are doing. Now that the cutting edge has surged past me, I take pleasure in watching others push what is possible.

Concerning Tyler's idea that the cutting edge and the people on it drive a sport's success, the answer is mixed. As Tyler brings up the years I call the "Golden Age of Whitewater," we should look to the nineties, and since freestyle was the driver of that era, consider play boats. Almost every year of that decade brought a new design that enabled the average paddler to quickly do things they could not do before. While these new designs were being driven by those at the edge, things were happening so fast the edge was not yet that far ahead of average. This encouraged participation because many paddlers could do the latest cool new trick. While some of these innovations were truly exceptional - planing hulls for one - the other most noticeable difference was that the boats were getting smaller. Average boat length was cut by 40% in a mere decade. Shorter, more maneuverable boats were a major factor in driving sales and, anatomically speaking, there was only so far we could go. Another factor of that decade that cannot be over looked was that the rapid growth of the sport, and the money being poured into it, exactly coincided with the strongest economy in the history of our country, the likes of which we are unlikely to ever see again. When things collapsed in '01 and boats couldn't really get much smaller, whitewater went down hard and has yet to recover - even though the cutting edge continues to push forward.

Why did our sport not rebound along with other industries? For one we are an incredibly small market. More importantly, as Tyler notes, the design innovations of the last eight years were much less inspiring than in the previous decade. While year to year improvements have come and my All Star is definitely the most fun boat I have ever paddled, these improvements are mostly discernable only to expert paddlers. Recreational whitewater paddlers are not clamoring for the latest and greatest because for them it doesn't really make that much of a difference and in some cases offers less speed and performance for what they actually want to do. Furthermore, as freestyle moves have become more incredible, dynamic and gymnastic, the average paddler often feels intimidated, as per the following quote. "It's not quite as much fun surfing anymore because all I can do is front surf and spin and I feel like I should just get off the wave." While this comment is a bit lame, I've heard this or something like it said many times during the past several years. This situation leads to fewer boat sales, less money for R&D and only a little change left to sponsor a professional team.

During the past 15 years I was directly involved with putting on 40 different events involving 4 different paddling disciplines. What events were the biggest drivers to increased participation? Was it when the rodeo circuit was at its peak and athletes like Fisher, Ludden, Gavere and Robertson were going off on the Snake? While all their performances and those of many others were impressive and exciting, the event that creates more paddlers every year by far, is the Pole, Pedal, Paddle on a Class II section of the Snake River. This multi-sport relay is an event that is far from cutting edge. Yet every year - before, during and after people always ask me about learning to kayak so they can participate.
Is the cutting edge important? Absolutely - it is always enticing to some, it is historically significant, as people will remember those who were considered to be at the edge at defining moments in the progression of a sport, and it does drive innovation. Whether this helps the sports success depends on how you measure it. At this time, the cutting edge is mostly irrelevant to the financial success of whitewater. Fortunately, money isn't the biggest thing for those of us involved in the paddle sports industry. Fun is a better measure and the more the edge gets pushed, the more things are possible and this in turn creates more possible fun - thus success.

Where is the sport going? Here is a simple fact to consider when contemplating 150 foot waterfalls, air screws and the next big innovation in the world of whitewater - there is not a single major whitewater boat manufacturer that survives without also making touring boats. For most, the latter is by far the more important part of their business. E.J. grabbed an amazing amount of the whitewater market very quickly by making great boats and being totally focused on whitewater. He even stated that Jackson Kayak will never make a rec-boat, yet a couple of years later they entered the recreation market.

Will innovation and those at the cutting edge bring about another, "Golden Age of Whitewater?" I certainly hope so, and maybe Tyler and the Young Guns will be the ones to do it. For myself I'm not waiting around, nor does it really need to happen. The success of paddle sports is still moving ahead by the hard work of all those who are passionate about it. While big moves and big drops are super cool, it is coaching kids, preserving rivers, teaching lessons, getting folks out in touring boats and enjoying all the fun disciplines of paddle sports that are continuing to drive our success.

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Risa Shimoda - Risa has been one of the best and most versatile women's kayakers for nearly 30 years, excelling in river running, freestyle, and squirt kayaking. She has represented the US six times at the World Championships in freestyle and squirting events. She was president, long time board officer and executive director for American Whitewater, filling several different roles in her concern for clean rivers and supporting useful events. She also spent almost ten years as the Director of Marketing, Sales, and R&D at Perception during the boom of the 1990s. Currently she still paddles a great deal, runs her own successful marketing company consulting for various non-profit organizations and companies in kayaking industry, is the co-producer of the biennial “whitewater courses and parks” conference, and chairs the board of governors for the International Whitewater Hall of Fame and USA Freestyle Kayaking Committed of USACK.

Cutting Edge or Elements of a Continuum?

Risa Shimoda

Tyler offers several sweeping comments about the path taken by small whitewater kayak companies that grew, hit a peak, went corporate and now resemble a “herd of cattle
on a burning ship.” Sadly, he focuses on a short period of time and describes the industry as though it is about to expire. If we step back a bit, we can be a bit more hopeful.

The industry will never look like it did in Germany during the 1920’s when Klepper created a boom and owned the category; in the fifties when whitewater boomed as one of our nation’s new sports; and in the seventies when kayaking was booming AGAIN for real due to the first use of rotational molding and broad distribution of kayaks and their promotion by the ’72 Olympics, the film Deliverance appeared in the US and there was celebration of the first documented descent of the Blue Nile abroad. In the eighties, non-conformist designers broke the rule that boats had to be to the required length of slalom boats (four meters), when they created a Dancer.

During the growth period Tyler refers to, kayaks that were as technical (not) as a john boat were introduced, driving sales to new and previously unimagined heights. This growth obscured the ongoing fragmentation of a healthy but slower-growth whitewater market, flooding it with a half dozen new companies that each offered multiple new models in multiple sizes every year. Material improvements, the collapsing of design times (e.g., that which is required to produce multiple sizes of one model) further facilitated the model proliferation.

One of the greatest contributors to the injurious fallacy of limitless growth was the trade's inability to report aggregated category sales and inventory, which drove product development and financial planning. News of tremendous growth encouraged sales managers to project aggressive growth indefinitely, without much thought to the inventory glut that might occur among their retailers. Unfortunately, some very negative impacts ensued financially due to 1) growth that was decent, but far less-than-anticipated, and 2) marketplace clutter due to continued proliferation of models that were available in multiple sizes. This was a nightmare for retailers, who found it increasingly difficult to sell them on any predictable schedule.

If you could have viewed a summary of each company's projection for 1996, for example, those company owners would have choked on their coffee, because their projections were based solely on recent history, which was terribly unrealistic. In those days, no one had real data or a crystal ball to project sales accurately by model or category.

Tyler’s view of the funk that now prevails in the sport is a bit narrow, and certainly need not seal its coffin, for such times can create the fertile ground for innovation (e.g., squirt boating during the drought of the mid-1980’s in the Southeast). I’m a glass half-full type, I guess. The flow and ebb of whitewater sales simply reflects changes among its customers and the many new opportunities to re-invent and evolve. The sport doesn’t fall to its death so easily, just as each new generation doesn’t believe that all the cutting edge feats have already been accomplished. The sport will always have its edges, and the industry will always evolve.

Displacement – Kayaks have largely displaced canoe sales and continue their conquest into fishing (e.g., flats) boats.

Demographics – Baby boomers drove growth when they were in their 30s and 40s are now paddling less frequently on calmer water.
New Media — Paddling networks that were once limited to the paddling clubs, destination paddler-owned shops and slalom races or whitewater rodeos and a couple of magazines now span many online vehicles, instant messaging and online stores that can ship a boat to your door the next day.

Innovation is occurring all the time in the ‘boundary-less’ nature of our community – in how we communicate, learn, and inspire others and the related likelihood of immediate imitation. It might be that they are so frequent and continuous that they are a bit more difficult to identify. If someone believes there are easily measurable, quantum-sized actions that floor everyone and convince them to buy certain gear, he might be disappointed. Instead, it is more likely that he needs to learn to be content with nourishing himself, having faith that others will find their own nourishment, and that they are doing so right now, and they are not waiting for something or someone else to ‘nourish the sport of kayaking’ and show them the way.

A leading edge for the sport includes individual visionaries who are building whitewater courses, which cuts into the mainstream world of parks and recreation. If hundreds of decrepit dams are replaced by in-town, convenient river recreation courses or parks, our sport will benefit. On another side, the magazine Kayak Session has returned romance to the high end of the sport. Also, in a reversal of what Tyler is arguing, the sport has actually seen its public reputation and market damaged by thrill seeking. Romance sells better than thrills.

The cutting edge for individual accomplishment? Our hope can only stay strong. There will be 20 pound boats that dial up desired characteristics or which can stay underwater for minutes on end to facilitate new physical feats or exploration. Each such change will keep the sport vibrant as long as a dialog or debate continues, and people like Tyler and Doug challenge others to argue the points. We’re only in trouble the day that no one cares enough to share their thoughts, complain, or celebrate their love for this sport. Personally, I think it is in good hands.

Whitewater Courses and Parks 2009 will inform and pull together project managers, municipal leaders, parks and recreation managers about whitewater facilities. There now are over 50 such facilities in the US alone with several dozen in the works, and 100 worldwide. As they proliferate they will introduce paddlers to a lifelong sport and encourage more experienced boaters to hone their skills.

I am pretty involved in other areas of awesome churn as Chair of the USA Freestyle Kayaking Committee for USA Canoe Kayak, and the International Whitewater Hall of Fame, and the annual AW Potomac Whitewater Festival. All of these are organizations that support aspects of the “cutting edge”. In an area that has been racked by harsh arguments and disagreements, the USACK is completely rewriting its Bylaws and structure to make competitive sport more relevant and allow more growth (hey, at least they are trying!); the one-year-old USAFreestyle Kayaking Committee is planning activities to become one onramp for kids and normal people who may never try a Tricky Whu but are often curious as to what it is. Potomac Festival organizers, who are the most hardcore boaters you’ll ever find for people with jobs that range from international trade
policy experts to event planning for the US Chamber of Commerce, are re-inventing the event’s format and sources of revenue in the face of current economic stress. These are unmentioned aspects that make the sport stable, and introduce thousands of new people every year to accessible aspects of a sport that for decades, has had a remarkably individualistic (and almost self-destructive) “sink or swim” attitude toward newcomers. Running big waterfalls is the least of it. If more people swim and fewer sink, then we’re on our way to a bigger and livelier kayaking world. I’m hopeful that’s the case.

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Shane Benedict has paddled for nearly 30 years. He has been a highly skilled river runner, doing hard runs and expeditions around the world. Particularly in the 1990s and into recent years, he was a highly successful competitor in freestyle, qualifying for the U.S. Freestyle team 5 times, and consistently placing in the top ten in World Championship competitions. Shane has also coached many of the top paddlers today. Andrew Holcombe, Brad Ludden, Marlow Long, Jesse Murphy, Dustin Urban, and Pat Keller to name a few. He also was one of Perception's influential designers. After the major reorganization of the sport and multiple mergers, he and several friends such as Steve Jordan and Woody Callaway, founded Liquidlogic kayaks. They have become one of the larger companies, with many successful designs used in freestyle, creeking, and expeditions. Thus, Shane pulls together a long career of high level challenge and performance in competition, coaching, designing, creating new moves, and running a company.

The Cutting Edge

Shane Benedict

I've read both Doug and Tyler's interesting essays. I would like to begin by saying I disagree with the idea and ambition of being cutting edge or consciously trying to push the envelope. That particular attitude strikes me as ridiculous. Doug's essay questions the idea of cutting edge and what are the most difficult parts of our sport. Tyler takes a different track and more directly says that he believes he and his friends are at the cutting edge, such as doing big waterfalls, and this edge and the people on it are what drive the sport.

I don't agree with taking the cutting edge so seriously. The fact that anyone would say, or believe, that they are cutting edge seems silly and self-absorbed. First, the sport is way more than that. Second, trying to be cutting edge takes from the essence of it all. It belies the true feeling that comes over you when you do something that feels incredible - to you. People would be on more solid ground if they focused on the feeling of personal progression. That is more true to the point. Is somebody doing something to be the first? Are they doing it to be sponsored? Are they doing something to be the "baddest ass" of all? Hmmm. That's not it. The point is to push yourself and see what you can do, to move your own progression forward. It's the only thing you can control and the only part that really means anything. After all, just to take one example, there are
paddlers who have logged many first descents full of manky unkind lines, or easy, unappealing runs just to notch up one more first descent. That really can't be the point, can it?

When Mark Lyle, Bob McDonough, Corran Addison, and I were trying to figure out how to do cartwheels we weren't thinking, "we are on the cutting edge". We were just pushing ourselves through fun progressions, trying hard, and having a good time. It was the best of competition and encouragement. I think that Tyler has run 50, 75, and now 100 foot waterfalls because he thought he could, not because he thought that would make him among the "elite cutting edge envelope pushing paddlers", but because it was a progression and inspiration for himself. I mean I sure hope neither he or anybody else gets to the top of a huge drop thinking, "oooh, I will be the baddest ass if I do this". I would hope that each of us at the top of our progression-pushing rapid is thinking, "I can do this!"

Where have we been and where are we going?

Contrary to what Tyler says or implies, there are no golden parachutes, or executive buyouts, nor 100k paddling jobs, and there never have been. Our sport won't fall by the wayside because of recession, or corporate take over, whitewater kayaking is as it has been for the last 30 years and will be in the future, an industry for the kayak bums: a core driven sport.

In the beginning, the paddlers themselves made their own gear, pushed themselves, explored, and dreamed of new ways of kayaking. We have seen the progression from the ender to the combo move, the 7 foot falls to the 100 footer, and from the local creek to the depths of the Tsangpo Gorge. These progressions have been impressive, flawed, beautiful, and not so graceful at times. The choice of line, style, and craft are your own. The outcome in a sport like ours should only be judged by you. Today paddlers still conceive, create, push, and explore the world and kayaking itself just as Mick Hopkinson, Doug Ammons, and Rob Lesser have. As designers we no longer sniff styrene in our basements, we have nicer shops, tools, and materials, but E.J., Corran, Robert, Celiers, Charles, Snowy, Graham, myself, and others still drive as passionately as anyone has in our industry, to make the boats that let us experience water anew. We just have better ventilation.

Like Prijon, Lettman, Johnson, and Stancel before us we are trying to make boats that we want to paddle, that can go higher, and further, more safely. These days many more people are focused on making kayak equipment stronger, lighter, that can perform at higher levels, than ever before. The collective focus of our industry on a plastic toy floating down a river these days is mind boggling.

As we go forward I expect Tyler, The Young Guns and others to continue to push their paddling, new designers to create better boats, and the huge majority of paddlers to simply enjoy "messing around in boats", because that is what nourishes the sport.

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Joe Pulliam Joe Pulliam has paddled and built kayaks for over 35 years. He was the marketing director or Perception kayaks through much of the 1980s while the sport was
growing quickly. He split with Perception and cofounded the company Dagger in 1988, the first direct and highly successful competitor to Perception in the US. They were also the first to have a formal, sponsored company team. Joe was in on research and development of multiple boats through this era, has been directly in change of sales, marketing, planning, and direction of two major companies. His comments reflect his extensive knowledge of the development of the industry over the past 30 years. He also has been an ardent supporter of AW and is a former AW director.

Another view of the past and future

Joe Pulliam

Doug Ammons and Tyler Bradt both present interesting reads, and I'll leave it to them to debate the definition of "cutting edge" whitewater, if there is such a thing. It's been decades since I even pretended to be part of that scene. But here's a different perspective on a few items, based on my years of making kayaks, which started not in a garage, but in a back yard, 35 years ago, almost to the day.

I can't help but start with the issue of waterfalls. While I gather that Tyler believes that those who are running higher and higher falls are worthy of significant financial support from the kayak "industry", as one who has spent years attempting (mostly for selfish reasons) to grow participation in whitewater kayaking, I'd much rather see he and his cohorts keep these exploits to themselves. While I understand the appeal of a photo showing a tiny, brightly colored kayak flying over an enormous drop, paddler along for the ride, this very presentation of kayaking scares away more potential paddlers than it will ever attract. At least that's my opinion. I guess I really don't have a problem with waterfall or other class V/VI images, I just want to see more pictures of folks in class II or III water, complete with big smiles. I'm a big believer that we need to promote the more attainable side of whitewater, at least alongside the "hair". Those who want to push the limits can and will do so, and that's fine by me. But it's also fine to be a whitewater paddler yet never push oneself beyond class II, which is what probably 80% of all kayakers are doing, most of whom do not aspire to running gnarly rapids. I'm not sure what part they get to play in Tyler's vision.

Manufacturers of kayaks and other whitewater gear will financially support those paddlers who influence others to more positively consider their product. Does someone using a product to set the waterfall height record positively influence potential customers? Perhaps. But I very much doubt it.

And just how much money are any kayak "pros" worth? Hard to quantify, but I'm skeptical that even in the heyday of whitewater kayaking, which I consider to have been at its peak about 1999, there were any kayak companies paying any athletes "six figures". Hell, I was running the biggest whitewater kayak company at the time and I wasn't making six figures! Dagger had a few paid athletes, but I don't know if any were making five figure incomes without having multiple sponsors. Some of the top paddlers of that era, like Eric Jackson, Marc Lyle, and Corran Addison, were on the payroll of one company or another, and were winning freestyle events, but they were earning their salaries largely by designing boats, not just paddling.
The reality is that there wasn't, and still isn't, enough money in whitewater kayaking to support anything close to "highly paid" athletes. Tao Berman, Shawn Baker, Steve Fisher, and a few others found sponsors beyond the kayak and paddle companies, and probably did fairly well financially. More power to them! But despite what Tyler might think or imply, the whitewater kayak industry has always been small and the amount of money available for athletes is very limited. Here are some ballpark numbers to consider. About 1999-2000, participation in whitewater kayaking peaked, and sales of whitewater boats topped out at something like 32,000 kayaks a year. (This includes all whitewater kayaks made and/or sold in North America.) If the average retail sales price of a boat was $900, that means total revenue of about $29 million was generated. Of that, the boat manufacturers got about 60% (the remainder being retailer mark up), or a bit over $17 million in sales. Now split that among six or so companies. From that revenue the boat makers must pay for materials, labor for building the boats, rent, designers, sales and customer service staff, molds, insurance, catalogs, warranties, etc, etc. Despite what some may think, there just wasn't much money left over. Today…unit sales are down about 40% from this peak, prices are about the same but costs have gone up significantly, so the amount for promotion of any kind is way down.

I agree with Tyler's comments about needed innovation, and while I recognize his need for gear better suited for 100-ft waterfalls, let me offer a different perspective here as well. I applaud efforts to make skirts stay on better and therefore be "safer", as I too have taken a couple of nasty swims due to spray skirt implosion. Yet I'll contend that the biggest innovation waiting to happen with skirts remains one that goes on and off easier and is less intimidating to a new paddler, not one that will survive a record setting drop. Skirts are vastly improved. I got a new IR this year….goes on fairly easy and stays on. That's great. But to someone who has never used a skirt, this remains the most intimidating aspect of kayaking. I don't have an answer, but I contend that skirts are still a major limiting factor to those considering whitewater kayaking. And boats with a full suspension? …please, just give me a boat that weighs 25 pounds and won't break in year one!

Finally, a comment on Tyler's comments about the corporatization (can't believe my spellchecker allowed that one!) of the kayak industry. Is it a coincidence that whitewater kayaking peaked just about the time that Dagger, Perception, Wave Sport, and Necky all "sold out"? That's a subject for debate. But what I think is beyond debate is the fact that corporate ownership has not been good for these brands, nor for whitewater kayaking. On this I believe Tyler and I would agree. And though I won't apologize for my role in this transformation, I do regret that some things have turned out the way they have. It’s hard to foresee the future, as I think we’ll all agree.

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Nick Turner Co-Author of Montana Surf: Whitewater Guidebook to the State of Montana. Over 30 First Descents in 15 countries including Iceland, Norway, Nepal and Kyrgyzstan. Many of Nick’s expeditions and descents were chronicled in a series of Teton Gravity Research films which have become some of the best-selling whitewater kayaking films of all time. Nick assists WRSI with product engineering and design. For the last 8 years Nick has been facilitating and designing whitewater parks throughout the
world. He is currently employed designing whitewater parks and river recreation enhancements by the McLaughlin Whitewater Design Group. Some parks he has helped engineer are Glenwood Springs and Vail, CO

**The Cutting Edge of kayaking –**

**The person who is most in tune with the river**

**Nick Turner**

The cutting edge of kayaking is an always moving boundary and the person pushing that boundary is the one most in tune with the river on that day. However the river can always be more powerful than us, and kayaking is so much bigger than us, it can feel odd to take fame and fortune from it.

There’s a need for perspective here. As kayakers, we know we are never more powerful than the river and we are never more powerful than nature. We can only work its margins. We can only work in those places which are just right for us. Downstream there can always be a waterfall that is too high to huck or a rapid which is un-runnable.

One can get to know the river well from being on it every day, all day long. Somebody with that experience and knowledge will explore and start putting himself into different situations, situations that other kayakers – even those with better skills – won’t accept. In that process, a person can become so in tune with the river that he is able to push the always-moving boundary of what is runnable. When Doug Ammons did a solo descent of the Stikine River, he was so in tune with kayaking and the Stikine River that he was able to push the always-moving boundary of runnability. When Tyler Bradt stomped 100+’ Alexandria Falls he was so used to kayaking every day and running waterfalls (since he was 14 years old) and was so in tune with those skills on that day, he was was able to push the boundary in another way. When Eric Jackson wins a World Championship, he knows the feeling of playboating and flipping in his kayak so well, and is so comfortable with playing in waves and holes that he is the most in tune person in the world on that day. Each of those examples shows a different branch of the sport.

The river is much more powerful than us, and it does not hesitate to remind us of that. It’s not necessarily even selective, because it doesn’t pick the least in tune person or the one who with the least skills. I know of nobody in the world who could have run better the rapid on the Black Canyon of the Gunnison which took Chuck Kern. There was nobody in the world more in tune with Chilean steep creeking than Brennan Guth when he died there. This limitless power of the river makes things like sponsorships, contracts and competitions seem so small. In an intense atmosphere where one is in tune and hard as possible, with a real chance of death, those things are just paperwork. How can paperwork be as important as the huge power we flirt with and the fulfilling experiences we have with rivers?

I hope the kayaking industry rebounds from its slump and is able to pay people to kayak once again. However, I do not think that the lack of payment has slowed the pushing of what is runnable. In the cyclical nature of all things in this world I am sure financial solidity will be back and the young generation will be able to make money at it. All of us, whether pro kayakers or weekend warriors, get much fulfillment from the river. The river gives us so much that our lives feel incomplete without it, so it feels out of
place to complain about not getting paid to kayak when the river already gives us so much.

Each new generation becomes the old generation, and the older generation will always be left behind in some ways. However, the rewards do not come from wanting to hold onto a record or feel like the best kayaker forever. We get our rewards by being the most in tune person on that day and pushing that boundary on that day when we are the most in tune person - and that is the best feeling in the world. It is a reward for pushing the boundary, not a legacy.

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Patrick Camblin is 26 years old, from Ottawa, Canada, and started boating at 15. He is one of the superlative younger kayakers of the sport, has paddled in more than 20 countries, and been in many videos. He is a multi-skilled kayaker, from waterfalls to expeditions to freestyle, and won the “Big Gun” champion (the world championship of “big air” freestyle moves), while also winning a number of major competitions. His last trip was just a few months ago, a 400 km self-support in Labrador, and is already packing up for another three months of river exploration in SE Asia. He is a fellow “Young Gun” with Tyler and Nick Turner.

Where is kayaking going?

Patrick Camblin

Where is kayaking going? That’s hard to say. As sales falter and the economy takes a downturn some companies in the industry are finding it hard to stay afloat. Sales are incredibly important to the future of the industry, but I don’t think they are the sole indicator of the health of whitewater sports.

When I started boating it immediately enveloped my life. It brought me a sense of purpose, an independence I hadn’t found before. Decisions were important. For the first time it felt like my life was in MY hands. On the river the world worked differently; it allowed me to live in succinct moments, and eventually, for them. Anyone that has paddled whitewater has felt this. It happens every time we are given the opportunity to go outside our comfort zone and successfully push forward, and it’s the same for someone running their first class 3 or for someone like Tyler at Alexandra. There is nothing like a quickly approaching horizon line to force our thoughts to the present. These moments overwhelm the senses to the point that everything outside of them disappears.

The first time I experienced this was on an incredibly fast and dynamic river wave in Québec. Water was flying under my boat at speeds that didn’t allow for tangible thoughts, instinct and reaction was all that were left. I had to be quick. Make slight movements, small corrections. The seams and boils flew towards me, challenging my course. An unconscious forward thrust kept me in the pocket, a hard carve avoided the pitch of the wave. Things were happening fast, but somehow, time seemed to slow in a way I had never experienced. The outside world disappeared and I got my first taste of
the moment. I was hooked. Repetition builds resistance and the intensity of those first surfs disappeared. I had to keep moving forward. I continued to search out these moments, on bigger waves, harder rapids, taller waterfalls, class 5 multi-days, and international expeditions on rivers with crocodiles. In whitewater more than elsewhere, these moments lie in wait. This is what kayaking has to offer. It is what makes people want to go further, push harder and is what continues to motivate the core of our sport.

There have been very talented kayakers taking the sport forward since its inception, but what is heartening now is the depth of talent in the sport. Never before have there been so many incredible boaters pushing things forward in all facets of whitewater. No longer is it just one person pushing freestyle or one group exploring the world, pioneering first descents. On any given day of the year there is a team of badass boaters, in the thick of it, on an expedition somewhere - and kids everywhere are trying to make their mark on freestyle. This is something to acknowledge and appreciate.

Kayaking is gaining an army of skilled youth whose passion for whitewater adventures runs deep.

Each year as more young boaters push themselves to improve, the pool of talent grows deeper, more people search out these moments, and the bar continues to get raised. The hardest runs from years past might remain the hardest runs, but now they are descended en masse. Descents of huge waterfalls are increasingly commonplace, and the level of skill in the freestyle scene is staggering. These are boaters that care deeply about kayaking, it has taken over their lives, shaped their identity. They push forward with little or no support from the companies simply because they love to kayak. The forward movement is slowed because of this lack of support, but these boaters don’t stop just because no one has handed them a free boat or a plane ticket.

With each passionate boater that joins the ranks our sport grows healthier. Yes, we are losing some fat from the edges but our core is strengthening, and that is a litmus test to a sports health. With these boaters at the helm the future of our sport looks bright. They will stoke the fire by continuing to explore, finding new rivers, running bigger drops, pushing freestyle - and most importantly - by inspiring the next generation to continue where they’ve left off.

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Austin Rathman

is 24 years old and hails from Jackson Wyoming. He has kayaked all over the United States, as well as in Mexico, Canada, Italy, Corsica and Ecuador. He has done many difficult runs, including the Stikine and appeared in a variety of videos. This fall he attempted the Alsek, but found it impossible due to the surging Tweedsmir glacier. He started his own business making action videos in the Columbia River Gorge, but has recently changed directions to devote himself to teaching in a school aiding disabled children. He is currently thinking about pursuing a graduate program in psychology. He says he loves “the way kayaking can give us everything from soothing satisfaction to intense adrenaline filled challenges. I really enjoy the opportunities kayaking provides. I've gained some of my best friends and best memories through the sport. As a sport I think we need to focus on protecting our rivers while getting out and enjoying them in the safest and most impact-free ways possible.”
Comment on Tyler Bradt’s “Rampage”

Austin Rathman

I am a youthful paddler but have sought out my own cutting edges over the past seven years. I don’t consider myself technically gifted, and am more a product of desire than talent, but I have pushed myself hard while paddling with many of the best younger kayakers in the country, including Tyler. I know inside Tyler possesses a true love and a respect for the sport that is pure. His description of his big waterfall run shows that feeling. However, in other places I was a little jarred because his article makes it sound—unfortunately—that he and his friends have a bit of a dual personality, the pure love mixed with a touch of ego and even personal gain. I realize maybe many of us have that duality and he’s just more honest in stating it. It might also be that he just is so revved by his runs that he stresses them rather than the bigger picture.

I don’t want to focus on negatives, but there are a few things that I feel should be recognized. In my opinion he gives a somewhat less-than-strong attempt to sound respectful of the old boys, while holding up the younger generation as "right". Maybe that’s because they felt Doug’s original piece was too critical of their waterfalls runs, although I didn’t read it that way.

I don’t want to read into Tyler’s essay more than is there, but one message I got from it was, Tyler does not approve of the kayakers of the 90s and their attempts to mainstream our sport, but he also sounds like he wants what they had. It seems like there is a contradiction there.

My biggest problem is the emphasis on free-fall waterfalls. I understand the passion, but there is way, way more to kayaking than waterfalls, even if they are impressive and fun. I’ll be the first to say that Tyler has found a way to run large waterfalls more successfully than almost anyone before him, including Tao Berman. I will also say Tyler is one of the best kayakers in the world. Period. However, the essay didn’t quite settle with me because it sounds like those skills aren’t enough by themselves, and that he and the younger guns see the skills also as a means to an end, so they are focused on world records, flash, some money, and fame. That’s not what I get out of kayaking. I don’t think it’s what most people get out of the sport either.

Tyler, Rush Sturges and other Young guns recently ran the Stikine. I have not spoken to Tyler yet, but I did speak to Rush and he gave the river great credit and sounded truly humbled by it, calling it "The best there is". I assume Tyler had a similar reaction. But knowing that, I’m left thinking that he focused on a waterfall while not saying anything about a humbling and rich personal experience on the Stikine.

The thing this piece doesn’t say, and that maybe Tyler and the Young Gun crew haven't realized yet, are the simple joys of the river without the addition of ridiculous class V. Maybe that sentence reflects my own journey and recent experiences, but I know it is possible to have some of your best days on the river without running a single hard rapid. For instance, my favorite kayaking trip ever (even favored over my Stikine run) was the 5 days I spent on the Alsek this summer with two of my best friends. We ran a total of only two easy rapids in that entire time but yet we spent 5 days enjoying what is unquestionably the MOST beautiful place I have ever been. We didn’t run Turnback Canyon because the glacier was surging and spilling huge chucks of ice into the river.
The canyon not only had hard whitewater, but was filled with massive floating icebergs rolling through the rapids and filling the eddies. It was a truly incredible sight that only added to the trip.

This brings me to one more point. Tyler suggests that Walt Blackadar would shake his head in awe at what kayakers are accomplishing today. I can only shake my head and say no. From what I saw of Turnback Canyon during the middle of a glacial surge, Tyler and any other paddler would shake his head in AWE at what Walt Blackadar accomplished 40 years ago. The four of us who saw that canyon that day with all that ice (3 kayakers, one amazing pilot) all knew with absolute certainty that it was too much for us, too much for anybody really. And it would have lasted a lot longer than 2.3 seconds or however long it takes to fall 100 feet.

I feel that Tyler hasn’t really put his finger on what is important, and has emphasized some things that aren’t valid. I think his heart is in the right place, but that the essay might fuel the clash of new-school vs. Old, which doesn’t help kayaking, and it doesn’t really show what we all love about the sport. I do think Tyler's article is interesting and worthy of being read, some great points are made. But as it stands, it sounds more like an advertisement for how amazing and above the rest the young guns and their waterfalls are, rather than a statement of love for the sport and what we share. I wish he had focused on that more.

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Landis Arnold started kayaking in Colorado with his parents in the mid 1970’s. Learning early that the beauty of slalom training was its propensity for lessening the weekly chores of boat repair and fiberglass itch. Landis attended Dartmouth College because, at the time, it was the only school in the country that had both a Ski Jumping and Kayaking program. He became a member of the US Ski Team and competed on the World Cup between 1981 and 1985, mixing in one the side some side trips to Rosenheim and Augsburg for kayaking. He was a member of the US Olympic Team at Sarajevo in 1984. In April 1984 of that year he made his way to Corsica and met a group of Frenchman who happened to have an extra Prijon Taifun… A few weeks later, having gotten back to Austria and then the Prijon factory in Germany, he picked out what seemed the best of the first T-Slalom’s (his first personal “plastic boat” weighed a mere 32 lbs) and a dozen paddles in his checked baggage and was headed back to Colorado. Landis has been an officer for AW. He was an early sponsor of various freestyle competitors and expeditionists. Thus, his perspective runs the gamut of personal experience with difficult runs here and abroad, sponsorship of some very inspirational expeditions in both whitewater and sea kayaking. Landis has designed a few boats along the way: the Rockit, the Twister, and the Kodiak -- all boats in different realms. More recently Landis has been most focused on making the connection to “normal paddlers” fun.” The whole Arnold family, from grand kids to grandparents, does paddling trips together. Landis also has kept, as well as possible, an extensive collection of boats dating back to the 1930’s. Just now he wouldn’t mind a museum to “gift” some of those boats to, but a visit to Wildwasser shop has the collection corner for folks who are interested in seeing it.

Styles of Paddling
Landis Arnold

I have looked different sides of this debate and similar forms of this discussion in other sports. There often is a tendency for one faction or another to claim that they are on the cutting edge whereas the other factions are not. The reality is that in most sports there are multiple frontiers in which to pursue excellence, and the “absolute edge” is mostly a personal definition by one person or another. Absolutely, there are “extremes” to which one can go in various dimension, but no extreme, by nature, is more extreme than another.

When I was a youngster I actually started whitewater kayaking to be a summer offset to my primary winter sport of interest, which was Nordic ski jumping. Kayaking charged me; Kayaking felt a lot like ski jumping in its challenges and the way I felt I needed to approach it. Both sports had very real dangers that I found compelling to take, and through which I could improve and expand my base of experience from one day to the next.

In the time when I transitioned from being focused on ski jumping to being primarily focused on paddling, I drew techniques directly from my ski jumping experience and was driven to run the hardest rapids I felt that I could run. Preparation for these runs involved the same mental techniques that I used in my ski jumping. Forced relaxation and deep imagery coupled with a transition that would bring me into the moment and a mindset where I was both confident and in track to follow the movie I had just rehearsed. This reminds me quite a bit about the preparation described for running a big waterfall and realistically whether it's a big waterfall or rapid it doesn't matter, it is simply a very good technique for taking on those things we want to pursue in this way.

Back when we started doing the Europeans called extreme paddling, and which later germinated under the term “steep creeking”, a friend penned a short piece about the new sport of “Bashing” that was happening around Boulder. He quoted a simple statement of mine: “You Gotta Want To Be There.” The rubber meets the road in those things that are perhaps difficult and certainly dangerous. From the point of view of a young business person I was pretty concerned about the liability of recommending what seemed pretty dangerous to me, but at the same time I was really excited about the experience of “being there”. “You got to want to be there” for me talked about how compelling it was “to be there” but also about that “other space” from normal life it also seemed to be, and which I felt to not be for everyone.

As opposed to “Sports”, Sport (in the singular) is about “those things we do. “Sports” rather is about those things we watch and admire in others. I do recognize the place and reality of “idolatry” in kayaking, but for me the Sport of Paddling is about the experience of doing – on whatever level, or edge a person wants to take themselves to. Kayaking challenges our bodies, minds, or sensibilities, and the best ones challenge all three. We find beauty and fulfillment on some edges we sometimes find pride. together with both accomplishments and failures. But in all this, “you gotta Want to be There” and if you don’t, it is pretty much imperative that you not be there because otherwise you’ll get hurt or worse.

When I was ski jumping, the part of the sport that most drove me was called ski flying. In ski flying the hills are bigger than in ski jumping. At that time there were 120 meter, versus 70 and 90-meter hills. Ski Jumping is very difficult technically. It all
comes down to the takeoff, much the way that golf has almost a preoccupation with the swing and moment of contact. In jumping the preparation, the position in the inrun, its maintenance through the transition and that all important takeoff movement and timing, would launch you out into flight - was a combination of body, mind, and universe. I lived for that flight, and it was all-important for me to track my personal records and techniques as I dreamed about how far I might be able to fly. The progression found its upward end in two sequential jumps of 161 1/2 meters, tenth place that day at the World Ski Flying Championships. That day a new world record was set at 181 meters. Today the world record stands at 239 meters. Similarly to Doug’s original essay where he talked about the details of waterfall world records and how they are measured, in Jumping the fellow did go a little further - 240 meters, but dragged his hands and broke his tail bone and did not have a “standing jump”. As such his jump is not counted “as the longest standing jump”. Probably he could have gone 250 meters, but then the hill was getting very flat and that would not have been a good idea that day. (They are working to make the hills bigger every few years to allow some progress here). So when "world records" come into play, it is important to remember the roll that "rule setting" should play, as it should in any sport. This should assure "fair" competition, and it should also do what it can to assure as "safe" a competition as possible. For me, paddling "hard stuff" I never looked to be a "competition"... perhaps the opposite of it, but vain glory has its magnetism and the quest for exploration even for me, I do see to have been a form of competition. When I look at the history of ski flying, Walter Steiner’s dominance of that element in the Mid 70’s so far eclipsed the other skiers (and he was jumping for the first time into the 170’s that for me his accomplishments eclipse those of today that are supported by new techniques and equipment that simply were not available back then.

But now for parallels with kayaking: One could also ask, is ski jumping really skiing? There’s different gear, different terrain, but it’s a different sport. They were similar for me personally, but probably not for most people. It is true that jumpers have skis on their feet. But they jump these days from both snow and porcelain rail and land on highly groomed snow or thatched shingles of plastic. As much jumping takes place these days in the summer as the winter.

When I think about waterfalls, on the one hand I can see a similarity to ski flying, but it’s more metaphorical than literal. On the other hand I’m not sure if one can really compare performances because they have different purposes. It’s usually a big thing in kayaking to be the first to go down a waterfall, but of course, that’s not the point in ski flying. What mattered there in competition was the style (half of our score), the distance we went through the air, and whether we stood up at the end of the jump. I had some falls close to my long jumps. I found personal satisfaction and pride back in that ski flying competition, not only for my jumping and my placement, but also for the fact that I took two falls that week on the hill and didn't end up in the hospital. Unfortunately, several fellow skiers ended up there.

Kayaking is much less regulated than ski flying. Anyone can go take on a rapid or a waterfall. The extremes to which people have taken the sport in the last 25 years have been quite phenomenal. I'm actually very glad that I was able to do my explorations at a time when that cutting edge seemed to have some danger but not the true consequences that it appears to have today. And yet I say this in the context of a friend, Mark Lane,
who seemed to go a lot further out on the edge than I or many of our friends were willing to step. Mark's other sport believe it or not was Trapeze flying which he used to do at the Denver YMCA in the winters. One drop that Mark pioneered we named, ”Lanes Leap” after his first decent. That drop is now called Double Trouble, on the big South Fork of the Poudre. We were not vociferous enough in staking Mark’s claim.

Mark was the one guy who just never seemed to get scared. He reminded me of the jumper named Matti Nykannen and likewise seemed absolutely imperturbable. I used to wonder if it wasn't some genetic mutation in both of them. It was both beautiful to behold and at the same time somewhat worrisome. I wasn't afraid really that they would get hurt but I was afraid somehow that their lack of fear could bring them harm and other parts of their life. For his part Mark ran both the steepest and most dangerous stretches I knew of.

So let’s consider the “cutting edge” issue before us. Whether people are talking about running the North Payette at 7500 CFS, or taking on another of Mark’s firsts “Eddies Flyaway” down in the Toltec Gorge, or whatever other big one might be looking at these days, it’s still true that ”You gotta Want to be There.” I don't know if these are particularly sane activities, but they can be beautiful activities to do and to behold. They also are fleeting activities at best, perhaps, remembered by a few. As we don't have stadiums filled with 50,000 onlookers you can't make allusions to the feats of Michael Jordan or Babe Ruth. But athletic endeavor and accomplishment deserves note for what it is, as we look at from the outside. Probably it is even more important what feels like on the inside. In going to those places, we need to always respect the fact that coming home is not a guarantee. The risks that are taken are real, but our understanding of them isn’t real until after they take their toll. Younger people can talk about consequences, but until you’ve experienced them you’ll never know the sadness that they bring. There are limits to what the human body can take. The length of fall one can tumble or drop. The time one can go without oxygen. The amount of compression one can take in the spine, leg, or helmet. It's a beautiful thing to look at the edge of Niagara Falls, but not such a beautiful thing to contemplate actually surfing the waves there on the brink, much less falling into the mist and rocks below. The sheer beauty of big water is magical, but after a mile long swim it has never pulled at me so hard again. I think of my friend Doug Gordon on the Tsangpo and remember our days camped at Rapid #1 (river left) running everything we could. It seemed easy then, but most of it was just wonderful – that river thing.

One more point of comparison. Extreme kayaking and ski jumping really are sports for young people. It is harder and harder to do them as one gets older. We are left with speaking in the past tense. And this also raises a problem of understanding: we don’t know the challenges that were in front of those folks taking on the goods in the 1950s and hardly even those from the 1960s. People like Ron Mason heading down the Animas in 1967. 8 years later I was lucky enough to have him teach me the intricacies of a proper eddy sequence and how to work a slalom course. Bill Clark and his team heading into Black Canyon in 1977. Everyone of them had a 13 ft boat, and not one of them had a boat that weighed more than 30 lbs. They had their own frontiers, as every generation does, and I think we would all do well not just to applaud their accomplishments, but also to applaud anyone who is out there pushing their limits. This is really where the wonder comes from in these sports, and our ability to share and smile about that makes us all better, and does a lot to make folks “want to be like us”.

Kayaking is 7000 years old right now and it is not going away, nor will its essential core ever really be changed. A kayak (or canoe) is a vehicle for both exploration, and for life. The more we share that, the better things are for everyone, no matter what the arena.

Here are some observations about what does or doesn’t make our sport and the business around them “grow” : ski jumping unfortunately doesn’t really sell skis and running waterfalls doesn’t really sell kayaks. Kayaking is a lot more fun to do than to watch, so films will always be a distant and faint reflection of our experience. Aerial freestyle moves that most people can’t do will not replace the simple moves they can do. Just running a rapid, pulling an eddy, and ferrying back into the current truly is the core. If you add a little front surfing to that, it is the most expansive and shareable part of our sport. You can do it your whole life, and it’s a great alternative to fly fishing and golf. And yes, seeing someone “get it done” can be inspirational to some people -- mostly those who are “on the train” so to speak. A lot of people do “want to be” like Eric Jackson -- at least that part of the time when his head is above water.

As for new gear and changes in the sport: our Bashing was defined as paddling down rocks as much as water. We pushed and waited for the gear to make it possible. Corsicas and Freefalls followed T-Canyons, Gattinos and Topolinos from Europe in short order. Bulkhead footbraces and keyhole cockpits, the rediscovery of the value of buoyant volume, all contributed to the opening we found in creeking and that thing we called Extreme. New developments will surely always follow, allowing other new explorations. The sport is far from dead and abandoned, but like the closing of the American Frontier we are forced when we reach the Pacific to find new ways of thinking, new purposes and today, that includes what it will take to sustain our world. Kayaking, I hope, will always be there to show us a way. We will need to work to become more sustainable, that much I know.

In this sport one can excel in many different arenas. No arena implicitly is better than another. I have as much respect for daring undertakings in sea kayaking and river touring as I do for those in big water, steep runs, slalom, marathon, or downriver racing, freestyle, squirting and all the variations in between. Our sport is the sum of all these. Each is a real and vibrant aspect for some group. Each is a real place to develop and achieve mastery, including personal, internal mastery. And yes, there is also that wild edge “like going to the moon.” The Tsangpo expeditions ended with one group going something like 11 miles further than the one that preceded it. I'm not sure but it seems that there's another 20 or more miles yet to go that might never be run. And beyond that, there are side streams and other rivers and tributaries behind the ridge and ridges beyond that. We all are part of a fun and personally rewarding culture, one defined by physical and mental exploration, with each generation finding ways to share and expand this life. It’s is a beautiful pursuit. But being honest with ourselves, it is probably most beautiful when it is our own pursuit, our own exploration. Luckily, the Inuit made some pretty cool craft for us to go out in the ice flows with. Lets all raise a cheer for them giving us some warm boats and gear to do these awesome adventures.
To be “cutting edge” or to look “beyond the cutting edge” or even to perceive what that is, is of course a personal journey. We all have amazing similarities in the journeys our sport has lead us on. This voyage has directed us deep into jungles, across parched deserts, through thunderous rapids, up and down ice covered mountains and literally to the corners of the earth and then over the edge. No matter how exotic the location, remote or desolate, we find that our journey also leads us into ourselves, the most fascinating place of all. We learn about ourselves alongside the strokes and maneuvers that help us navigate these amazing rivers. We master techniques while attempting to understand the river in all its variations. The more we learn we find the less we know.

Our incentives for paddling are personal and vast. However one lesson we all learn from paddling is that incentive ill-conceived or selfishly motivated will quickly leave us humbled at best.

My motivation in writing about the industry and sharing my experience with Alexandra Falls parallels the reason for running it in the first place. I didn’t stand at the lip of Alexandra and envision myself a poster boy with sponsors scrambling to their pens and check books. I saw a beautiful and powerful creation of nature which spoke to me. Its untranslatable words registered in my brain as a personal challenge and an opportunity to share if only for a brief moment the feeling of the power of nature. To feel life itself. I did it too because I believe you can accomplish whatever you genuinely desire. It still embarrasses me when people praise me as the world record holder putting me on a pedestal above them. I have much to learn and little to teach, I am above no one. The only entitlement I have is to learn and grow, certainly not to be rich and famous (two things which warp the ideals of entire societies).

If my motivation for running the tallest waterfall ever run wasn’t to be rich or famous or to be a sponsored athlete then why write about it? Much less why publish it in our sport’s most cherished publication?

Kayaking has given me everything I hold dear: my lifestyle, friends, character, passion, drive, focus and humility. My words not directed inward but outward. I have a chance to give back to the sport which has carved my identity. I feel obligated to. We learn from the river but we also learn from each other. This only happens when perspectives are pooled, thoughts are voiced and conversation is opened. These words being read are the very measure of this success. This success is not mine, Doug’s or the incredible folks who took time to contribute to these ideas and share their own; this is the success of a sport. It seems none of us judge success monetarily. Is this our great lesson? Or is our great lesson that we as individuals can inspire others around us and share this wisdom with the world? I don’t know; but maybe some who reads this will, maybe one kid will be encouraged or a single pair of eyes opened. This is my personal measure of success. To quote Doug’s old Chinese proverb: “he who criticizes me correctly is my teacher.” Our lessons come not only from an innertuber but also from each other and the sport which will keep us all humble and happy.
The Cutting Edge in Kayaking:
Part 2 – From The Edge to the Gifts
Doug Ammons

As I noted in the opening of this set of pieces, the focus of responses changed drastically from my original essay. Tyler and the commentators ended up discussing things that had very little to do with my topic. I was investigating what the “cutting edge” might be. I said nothing about the financial past and future of the sport, or about sponsorship of young athletes, designing kayaks to do big waterfalls. Nor did I talk about cost-benefit tradeoffs between dollars spent on athletes versus molds for boats, or whether the sport was driven by professionals pursuing the cutting edge, or by everyday paddlers pursuing their own personal enjoyment. I also didn’t talk about family and simple, beautiful experiences on the rivers because I’ve written extensively about them elsewhere. Had those been my themes, I would have written a different essay. In what follows I am joining back up with my original topic, and then joining it with the current topics.

The original essay was my response to a claim by some steep creakers that creaking was “the most cutting edge”, where the hardest things were being done. I disagreed, began mulling over what the “edge” might possibly be, and the essay contains some of those musings. The cutting edge is usually used to refer to the hardest things we do, but it actually is just a slang or buzz word that hides more than it describes. If there is an “edge”, it is not a single edge, but more like a crate of broken bottles – hundreds or even thousands of different edges, some sharp and dangerous, others dull, some spectacular and others less so. It represents all the things we do in the sport that are new, interesting, and different. Contrary to what the words “cutting edge” literally suggest, some of the edges actually don’t cut at all, but seem relatively benign. The edge is incredibly diverse. It evolves in unpredictable ways. It is essentially driven by individuals’ personal challenges and desires, and their own creativity in applying their skills to a challenge that they find unique and personally interesting. It’s an expression of who they are and what they seek. Most people aren’t really interested in doing the same things better or higher or faster, although that sometimes is part of the change. Much more so, the edge is a symbol of freedom. It is anarchy as opposed to some constant, predictable expansion along clear dimensions. There aren’t any clear limits to it, except that we could be sure people will continue to figure out new cutting edges as experience, equipment, designs, skills, and attitudes continue to change, which they always will.

I described a number of specific examples of what people might consider the edge to be. I deliberately contrasted the different branches of the sport: steep creeks with big water, expeditions, hybrid runs, waterfalls, peak flows, doing multi-day runs in a single day, and so forth. The intent was to show that every branch has its cutting edge aspect that will stretch or even be beyond the edge of aficionados of the other branches. If you’re great at one, then the tables are turned if you go into another branch. The point
was, no part is “better” than the others. Another point was, nobody is so good at one branch that there aren’t plenty of others who could do the same things. Some humility is in order.

Additionally, I didn’t get into freestyle or competition, because the article was already way too long. I cut out the drafted sections on those, and for the same reason, cut sections on the importance of building on earlier people’s experience, and on equipment and designs - even though it is obvious that many of the things we do can’t be done without specialized boat designs. The edge is all mixed up with changes and innovations in equipment. The best paddler in the world couldn’t flat spin an old Dancer or a 13 foot slalom boat.

I took special aim at waterfalls because they seem an exemplar of many peculiar notions and confusions about the “cutting edge”. They truly can be difficult and look spectacular, yet, people seem to believe in a simple equation that higher is better and harder. Falls have been a centerpiece for the cutting edge for last ten years or more, and have generated a lot of press, especially claims about “world records”. Among other things, I pointed out that an inner tuber had run a falls as high as the current “world record”, and asked what that meant – if anything. It’s clear that more skill is involved in running a 100 footer safely in a kayak, and there’s no question that a kayak is infinitely more versatile for running rivers in general. But what are we to make of this crazy dude doing our “world record” in a $10 tube? Do we dismiss him and blithely go on, certain that our sport is so great we don’t have to pay attention, or do we ask ourselves with some humility whether we really are doing something special with our “world records”? Do we ask how “cutting” the edge really is if it’s not even sharp enough to pop the dude’s tube? And who’s to say he isn’t having as much fun as us, or that it isn’t harder than what we do?

In a list at the end of the article, I added that a Swiss paddler had already broken the current world record by 30 feet, which again begs the question of what is so important about free-falling in a kayak. It certainly can be an incredible experience, as Tyler’s beautiful description shows. It certainly is part of the cutting edge, but just what does that mean? People need to answer that question for themselves. I asked the question, and Tyler gave a needed personal statement of what is valuable about it. I expect readers will each have their own take on all this.

My larger message was that these questions apply to everything we do. No aspect of kayaking is better than any other. They all have their cutting edges, and it’s all great fun. Those edges have evolved with the sport, and they evolve for each of us personally. It’s silly to get on a high horse and think we’re so special that the tubers don’t have something to show us. Simpler can be fun too. Huck Finn didn’t have any less an adventure down the Mississippi because he was on a wooden raft instead of paddling a Jackson Kayak All Star. Talking about some apocryphal edge hides more than it illuminates.

I also would like to add that waterfalls led to front page claims of world records, which is a notion that seems completely contrary to what rivers are, and what they teach. A primary lesson rivers teach is endless change, and of our inability to hold and grasp flowing water. Our sport is defined by taking part in that ever-changing flow, and learning to live with endless change, at least for a short time. We all know a river’s character varies drastically from instant to instant, water levels are up and down, eddies
surge, waves build and break. It’s what makes running rivers so difficult, challenging, and fun. Our skills don’t capture the change, they allow us to meld with and become a part of it. That’s a grand and inspiring experience: literally being change and evolving with each paddle stroke and rapid. At the same time, the river has a lesson of timelessness; it flows through the eons and when we join it for a few hours or days, it allows us a glimpse of that timelessness. There is nothing constant, except perhaps the realization that we are much, much smaller and more finite than it is. It has been here millions of years before us, and will continue to flow for millions of years after we’re gone. We don’t change it. It changes us. So to claim one has captured something valuable in a precise number, and that there can be a “world record” of 98.5 feet or 107 feet, seems ultimately silly and self-centered to me. It seems to contradict the lessons of change, timelessness, and humbleness in the face of the infinite. This is doubly so when the height of the falls is so small. The example of the Hail-Mary tuber, this dude in an absurd floating toy, seemed to call out these things in a humorous way.

While I originally focused on the twist of an inner tuber running a big waterfall, I was informed by a friend that this same guy has run the entire class V stretch of the Futelafu, and a host of other gnarly rapids. Are the Alsek and Stikine next? Maybe the expedition paddlers will be in the same position as the waterfallers soon. Maybe we’re all “misunderestimating” the lessons here. Eric Jackson got it. He wrote me saying that he’d already sponsored a couple of tubers and given them a private jet.

In case you don’t know, there is much greater precedence for doing massive and dangerous big water in an inner tube. When rafter Ken Warren was trying to be the first to descend the Yangste, the Chinese had several teams “racing” him. They were made up of workers from various cities that belonged to athletic clubs; most had no river experience at all. However, Chinese nationalism spoke strongly to them, and they didn’t want some foreigner to be the first to run their Great River, a river that symbolized their history and culture. From a polite standpoint, they used what was essentially a big rubber inner tube or capsule, into which they would strap themselves. They ran some incredible rapids this way – including Tiger Leaping Gorge, a massive stretch of whitewater that is stunning in its raw violence and immensity. Let me put it this way – you won’t see anybody running it in a kayak anytime soon. They paid for their daring, as at least 6 of the 15 team members died over the course of the several thousand mile journey. The craft would get caught in an apartment-building-sized hole and the river would brutally slam and spike them for minutes at a time, until eventually they were torn out of their harnesses. As the loose bodies flailed around inside the careening capsule, the hatch would be wrenched open by the water, and people would disappear into oblivion.

If any of us, including the Young Guns, had to face that high a chance of dying on a single descent, then we almost assuredly wouldn’t do it. That’s a good thing as far as I’m concerned. It also is a statement that the cutting edge is something different than what most people think.

The fact is, we carefully choose things that are within our skills, and deliberately do not attempt things that seem impossible. The Chinese tubers were truly on the cutting edge – actually they were way past it – and it turns out not to be a place where you can expect to have a long shelf life. As my good friend Bob McDougall aptly said about such things, “There’s no future in it.” So in light of this, what we’re talking about in kayaking most of the time is a sort of well-mannered cutting edge that we’re very careful about
selecting, while there are thousands of things much harder and far beyond our skills, strength, and equipment. The full range of Nature’s power and beauty is on display out there. Take a look and compare it to what we do. Personally, that seems inspiring and wondrous at the same time it is humbling. If we could do everything, then we’d probably be looking for another sport. But we can’t. In fact, we only do a tiny slice of the possible. The inner Tsangpo gorge is a case in point. The Stikine above 30,000 cfs. Or how about the release flumes on any big dam? Plus, I saw a beautiful 250 foot high punchbowl falls the other day, and then ran through a set of impressive photos of falls from 400 to 1000 feet high. There must be hundreds of thousands of waterfalls in the world that are higher than 100 feet. If we put our heads together, we could make a very long list of such things. An endless list. So we won’t be running out of edges for a long, long time. The question is, do we only look at what we can do, or do we also remind ourselves of what else is out there in the real world? Both, I hope. The first is our drive and optimism, the second is our humility and perspective. Together they balance into a sense of inspiration and in the end, into awe.

A sobering twist on the cutting edge is revealed by when and where deaths occur in kayaking. Revealingly there are almost no deaths on the highest end whitewater. Essentially nobody dies attempting horrendously difficult rapids or falls. Nearly all the accidents occur in strange and even bizarre situations on standard runs that are well within the kayakers’ abilities, rather than on runs where the best guys are hanging it out. We point at the most dramatic things as if they define the edge, when really that isn’t the part that cuts. The edge that truly cuts and kills lies in the subtleties hidden in the water, in the undramatic things that don’t catch our attention, that lurk unseen beyond our awareness, and that injure or kill us or our partners on runs we believe we know. In this sense the edge is hidden and unknown, and cuts hardest and deepest when we least expect it. We take care of all the dramatic things just fine, and then die in a rapid we know well, or due to an unknowable hazard, or an inexplicable mistake in an otherwise normal river situation. Conrad Fournery, Rich Weiss, Pablo Perez, Tim Gavin, Dugal Bremner, Chuck Kern, the list could go on and on, and it makes me deeply sad to think about each one. These accidents underscore in a different way that the cutting edge is nothing like what most people think. It doesn’t exist where they point, and many of the things they believe about it simply aren’t true.

I don’t want to minimize the deaths, but the numbers also tell this story: that kayaking even at the highest level is fairly safe. Very few people die. If we truly were facing a readily identified edge that cut, then you wouldn’t see this. In contrast, the first ascent of the Himalayan peak Nanga Parbat shows the opposite. Before Hermann Buhl climbed it in the early 1950s, the various German teams had lost a total of over 40 climbers and sherpas. 40 deaths to climb one peak. It sounds insane to me. The same has been true on other Himalayan mountains. On one especially unlucky day, 11 climbers died in a storm on K2, including some of the best mountaineers in the world. A similar tragedy occurred just earlier this year on the same peak. Another similar tragedy happened on Everest.

Such things never have occurred in kayaking. We’ve never seen a team of five kayakers all disappear off an unknown waterfall in the middle of a big run. The Lunch Video crew maybe came the closest on the flood stage Sispus. Purely by happenstance
they filmed a violent landslide 100 yards upstream that obliterated the rapid they had just run and filled the canyon with colossal slungullion of matchsticked trees and muck, damming the entire river. If it had happened a few minutes earlier when they were in the rapid, at least three or four of them would have died. This is entirely equivalent to an avalanche on a mountain – except it is so incredibly rare on the river. The total surprise and astonishment they show just underscores that even if water crashing through rapids is constant, canyon walls collapsing on kayakers are much less frequent than avalanches burying climbers.

This may mean that the cutting edge in kayaking isn’t all that cutting. But frankly, who the hell would want it to be? Maybe it shows we’re way more careful. Some people might say it’s because we’re so good. But maybe our edge is milquetoast in comparison. Maybe the climbers of that earlier era were totally nuts and accepted an astronomically higher possibility of death than we do. Maybe the inherent uncertainty of control and cascading power in whitewater paradoxically leads us to take fewer outrageous chances. Any realistic appraisal would also note that the terrain and hazards are different as well. Himalayan peaks have far more “objective hazards” than even really hard kayaking runs. On a big peak you can easily get killed by avalanches. Weather, high winds and storms are all constant major concerns. Rockfall, shifting glaciers and seracs go with the territory. Almost never are any of these present in kayaking. Considering the comparison between kayaking and Himalayan climbing, one thing is for certain – there’s not as much cut in the cutting edge of kayaking. Or, at least the way we approach it tends to dull that edge considerably. That should be considered a mark of sanity. It’s bad enough as it is to lose a friend; it would be insane if it were worse. Yet, as you are about to see, that depends on how deaths occur and what they mean to people.

In the 1980s before the fall of the Soviet Union, western paddlers were stunned by the announcement that Russian rafters and kayakers were doing “class seven”. It seemed impossible – how could they be paddling something two grades harder than what we were doing? Reportedly, dozens of them were dying, so it seemed that indeed, they must be way out there. After some exchange, a very different reality appeared.

It turned out that river running was one of the few things the communist regime didn’t get around to restricting, and all the passion, freedom, nationalism, brotherhood, camaraderie, and deep sense of individual heroism that we know so well, blossomed in a riot in that microcosm. They were starved of these things in their normal life, and the river released it all. They weren’t doing anything that was harder than the usual class V, but they were using the damnedest, lousiest, most jury-rigged craft and absurd gear cobbled from anything they could get, haz-mat suits, aircraft aluminum, inner tubes(!), and anything they could find to construct a floating vessel that could be piloted down wilderness rivers. What they were doing was Class IV and V, but they were doing it in the most dangerous ways, with horribly poor gear, where injury and death were possible on every trip - and yet they relished it. They sought the ultimate challenge and found things that all of us reach for – freedom and the power to control our destiny – and to them that cutting edge was worth their lives. “Living is the only thing worth dying for” is a trite slogan for us since we have near infinite freedom: but it was absolutely true for the repressed people of a communist regime who found free flowing rivers as the outlet for
their deepest feelings and their desire to choose how they wished to live - and to die.

Their cutting edge was their freedom. As one of them put it, death on a river was not just acceptable, it was to be revered. It was “a glorious way to die”. Certainly it was better than being a depressed alcoholic hiding in a bottle of vodka and numbing oneself to a dismal world, unable to affect one’s fate. They were heroes to their companions and renown in their groups. Plaques were erected on the rivers, toasts made. Great stories told and retold. They were like the knights and heroes of the Old Days, of myth and legend.

This leads to my own ideals of the cutting edge. There are two of them, and they are entirely opposite in some ways. The first involves difficulty. It is the desire to pull together the entire repertoire of skills on a single run or even in a single rapid. In retrospect, it’s what I did on a number of my favorite runs. For me, an ideal “cutting edge” run is one that requires paddling at the highest level on big steep rivers with every kind of feature – thus demanding from the paddler every kind of technique from big water, slalom to freestyle just to do the rapids. That is a different definition of a “line” when you have to pull all the stops and every skill out of your quiver. Then, it includes portaging and rope work. In a sense, it is combining the entire sport into a single run, or perhaps even a single rapid.

Each individual aspect has a “cutting edge”, but the more interesting thing to me is putting all of the different edges together. In this light, the Young Guns are making great strides. Also, I greatly respect what Steve Fisher has been doing, because he shows this aspect. Several of Scott Lindgren’s expeditions show this as well. There are many other superb kayakers doing their own versions of it.

As Jamie McEwan talks about Reinhold Messner’s ‘Seventh Grade’, the above is my seventh grade. When you can take all the skills that we collectively have as kayakers, learn them, excel at them, and then find a run where all of them are needed in order to do it, that’s my ideal. Finally, for me personally, the step after that was to do the same thing, the most technically demanding and diverse multi-day runs, but solo.

This leads into my mirror image “cutting edge”: which is the purely personal aspect of any run. It is the personal evolution that comes from melding with a river, feeling its change as a part of you. That might be a sense of wonder, beauty, and friendship on an easy float with no whitewater at all. Or, it might be the fun shared with a beginner who goes down his or her first class II run. I remember the feeling of personal freedom and sheer joy, of new possibilities unfolding, and it’s a wonderful thing to share that with somebody else. It is not an edge that cuts, but one that gives life and shared warmth.

On the serious end of this edge, I’m interested in the personal crucible where I seek something much deeper. As a long-time martial artist, I treat running rivers as a martial art, in the sense of working with nature as the ultimate master, learning to flow with the water from its simplest forms to its most chaotic and powerful. Doing this forces you to find the heart of the river and blend with it. It leads to realizing you’re a small and frail human in the face of the grand forces of nature. That perspective has some of the mythic quality the Russians were so attracted by, and I believe this fundamental feeling is a part of everybody’s experience. I chose to take it off in a particular direction for myself,
seeking long, difficult wilderness runs, and doing them solo. It is a test of character, a reflection of who you are or what qualities you seek inside.

Every person no matter what his or her level, can experience this kind of rich challenge, and both mirror images of the edges I describe. A beginning paddler doing his or her first roll in a river finds a cutting edge, where challenge is mixed with pure fun, and success leads to a sense of freedom. A class I paddler in the first class II rapid feels this, and so on up the line. As Patrick mentioned, as their skills improve some paddlers require harder and harder runs to find this same feeling. Most of the rest of the commentators remind us that this doesn’t need to be the case. It doesn’t require big league class V, it’s all about personal balance within oneself. So, the scale can range from fun and freedom to a personal crucible, a fun get-together to a sweat lodge experience, and even to a vision quest.

All these different senses of personal challenge and freedom are shared across the sport: the hardest-core dude may find them on his cutting edge run or falls, the Russians found them on their “class seven”. But the fact is, you don’t have to go to the ends of the earth or do something hard. They are all around you all the time. Every one of those experiences, whether in class I or class VI, is a beautiful and valuable personal milestone. And the lesson isn’t that what we do is so special, it’s that the river has so many gifts. These are easier to see in the drama of a hard run, but the magic happens by all the time disguised in the ordinary moments. Look, and you’ll find them.

That puts us right back where we should be. We started with claims of the hardest and ended with gratitude for the gifts we are given. We are lucky to have a sport so rich.

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