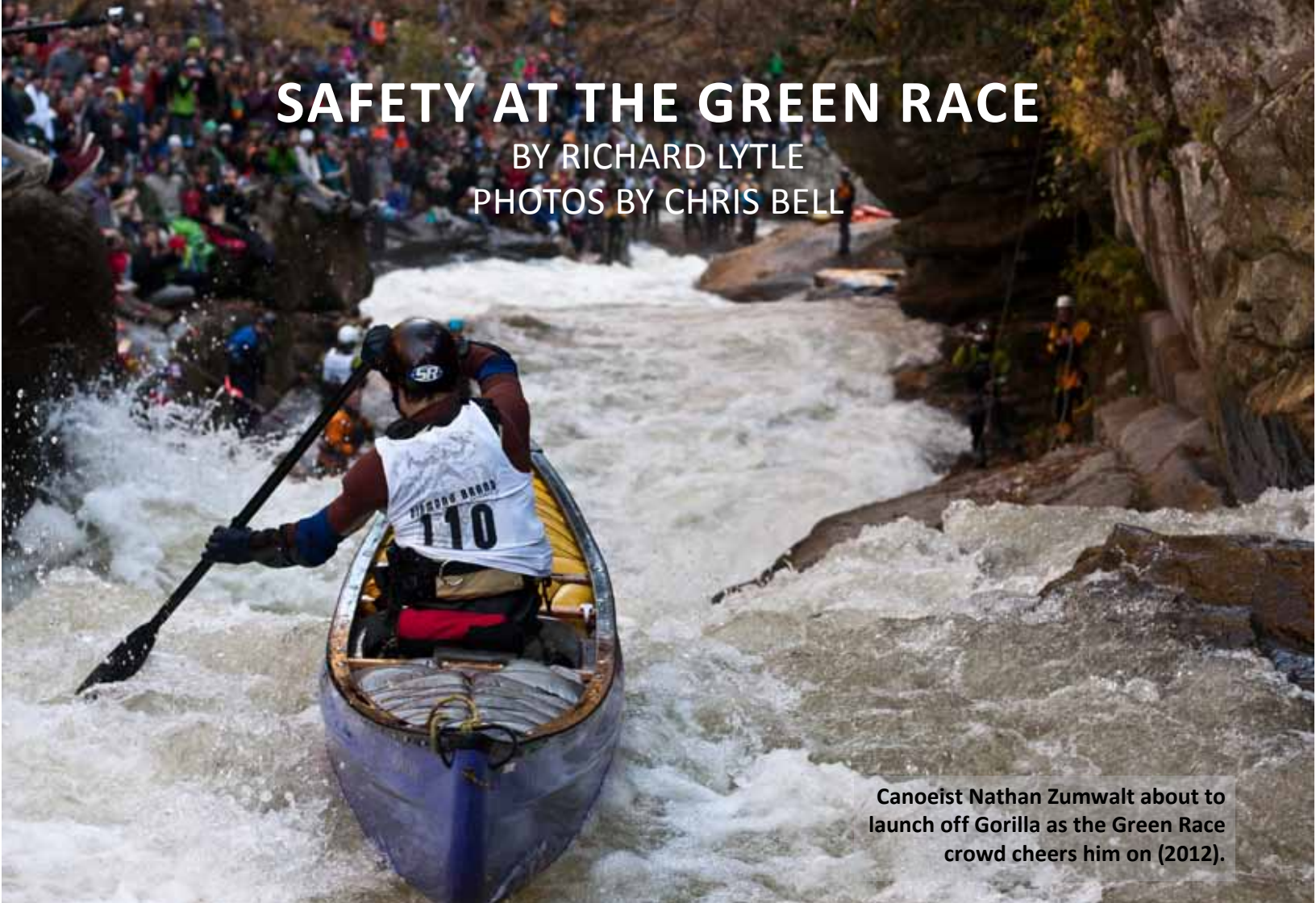


SAFETY AT THE GREEN RACE

BY RICHARD LYTLE
PHOTOS BY CHRIS BELL



Canoeist Nathan Zumwalt about to launch off Gorilla as the Green Race crowd cheers him on (2012).

I'M STANDING AT Gorilla, looking over the lip of the 20-foot waterfall. Suddenly, a boat comes through the notch upside down. A figure pops out. This is the worst thing that can happen. Swimming over Gorilla is not a pleasant experience. Those who have lived through it have sustained injuries as serious as broken ribs and punctured lungs. Right now, however, all I can imagine as this kayaker is about to plunge over Gorilla is, "What got him to do this race?"

It's Saturday, November 5th, the day of the 20th annual Green Race, which is thriving more than ever. As I was hiking in, I saw Gorilla and realized that there were at least twice as many people as there had been last year. Signs like, "Legalize the Braap," and "Jackson did Harambe," are just some of the early clues that this is not your average kayaking race. Instead, it is like a normal kayaking race on steroids; people come

out, drink beer and ring cowbells. Last year, a man in a Gorilla suit jumped the notch, which has Class V consequences if you miss.

Although the environment for the Green Race is different from many others, it doesn't mean the race is easy. In under a mile, kayakers are forced to navigate 14 Class IV and V rapids. It's physically grueling for kayakers to just paddle through the rapids at a normal pace. To race them takes a much higher level of preparation and skill. Plus, with hundreds of people yelling and screaming from the shores of Gorilla, it can make a racer distracted or confused.

In addition to Gorilla, the biggest rapid in the race is called Go Left and Die. To enter the rapid, you come in on a little rock slide, then turn left where the entrance meets the main drop. You go over a fallen tree, and then attempt to

get left as well as you can. If you cannot make the move, there is a nasty hydraulic you will most likely get stuck in and will very likely swim out of. If you make the move too fast, you will hit the left rock wall and possibly get pushed back into the hole, or get flipped and go through the last slot upside down. Sitting at the bottom of this drop is a huge rock. If you make the move well, you go directly between the rock and the river-left wall. If you don't make the move well, bad things can happen.

I have seen people get absolutely beaten up in the hydraulic right above the rock and to the side of the right wall. At last year's Green Race, a racer didn't make the move at Go Left; he hit the hole sideways and got pushed back right into the hole. His boat proceeded to get pinned between the right wall and the rock in the middle. His skirt imploded and he swam down the last slot. From my

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perspective, it did not look fun. I believe that kayaker would agree.

Go Left might be technical, narrow, and steep, but Gorilla is a monster.

Gorilla is the rapid that one usually finds when looking up the Green River Narrows. What many people don't realize is that Gorilla actually has five parts, and four of them are Class V in difficulty. The first drop is called Pencil Sharpener. This is not a very hard move, but does consist of two, five-foot drops immediately before The Notch. The Notch is by far the hardest part of Gorilla. Here, the whole creek narrows down to a 196-cm slot, just big enough for a kayak to go through. You must be perfect when going through the notch, because if you go too far left, you will flip and go down The Pad upside-down. If you go too far right, you will catch the eddy line and either flip, or go down The Pad backwards. The Pad directly follows The Notch, and you have to make a screaming left turn to set up right. The best line down The Pad is to go next to the left wall, boof, and hope for your life that you land well. The 10-12-foot waterfall is very unforgiving if you don't set up correctly. To the right is a rocky mess you don't want to get caught up in either. At the bottom of The Pad there is a hole that will flip you, but is relatively easy to get out of. If you have swum after The Notch, don't expect the bottom of The Pad to be the end of your swim. Directly after it are two more drops called Scream Machine and Nies' Pieces. These would be Class IV if they were not directly after The Pad and The Flume (the landing spot below The Pad). If you mess up on The Pad badly, you can easily get eaten alive in Scream Machine and Nies' Pieces. Scream Machine is about a 10-foot rockslide, which leads into Nies' Pieces which is a 15-foot gradual

Green Race safety crew scrubbing the rocks below Gorilla before the event so that they can safely work at the water's edge.

rockslide. A swim on Gorilla any day of the year other than the day of the Green Race means there is a very good chance of swim Scream Machine and Nies' Pieces, which makes these rapids Class V.

Even beyond the two big rapids, Gorilla and Go Left, the Green Race is not easy. If you don't boof at Zwick's, you can get stuck in a very retentive hole. At Chief's, if you go middle, you can get vertically pinned. At Frankenstein, you can get caught under a nasty undercut rock. These are just some of the many unpleasant possibilities facing competitors on race day.

The Green River Race is held every year on the first Saturday of November. Racing presents a lot of issues for racers. As veteran Isaac Levinson said, "Going down the Green if you're racing it is completely different than running it." One way that the organizers try to bridge the gap is by having safety volunteers spread throughout the race. At Frankenstein, Boof or Consequences, Go Left and Die, Zwick's Backender, below Chiefs, and below the Notch and the Pad there is safety set up for racers who swim. Although it is meant to bridge the gap between casual paddling and racing,

sometimes this precaution can have some unintended effects.

The safety at the race is world class. If you are having trouble, the guys down at the bottom will help. Normally there are three guys at the bottom of each rapid. One is attached to a throw rope and can jump into the water at any moment. The other two hold him while he jumps in, and can throw ropes as well.

Every year there are 10 swims, on average, during the race, and although anyone racing the Green has potential to swim, many people who swim are unprepared. The unprepared people often come in with the mentality that, "If I screw up, the safety crew will save me." Many people won't say that out loud, but someone I talked to before the race who was a first time racer said, when asked whether he felt comfortable running Gorilla without safety, "Yeah, I feel more comfortable with safety." Another said, "Depends on the day."

A big part of racing for first timers is deciding whether to go or not. Many first time racers are very well prepared and are great, like Elias Longenecker. Elias has been training since summer for the



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Competitor upside down on The Pad. Note the safety crew on alert below Gorilla.

Green Race, logging over 50 laps. Since August, he has been running the big three and practicing his race lines. This is the epitome of what people like Jason Hale and John Grace want first time racers to be like. He finished the race with a 5:15 time which is very good for a first timer. Although many people are like this, there are always some who are less prepared.

Some racers come to race who are maybe comfortable with running Go Left and Gorilla, but might only be willing to do so believing that safety will keep them from getting injured. Racers, old and new alike, don't like this mentality. Elias called this approach a "Kind of a selfish thing to do, because someone might mess up their time, if you're getting pinned somewhere. You're free to do whatever you want, you're free to make your own bad decisions." Veteran Pat Keller said, "If you can't pull into The Notch eddy (Right after the notch and above the Pad), drink a cola, eat a sandwich, and peel out laughing, you shouldn't race."

Many veterans said that it would be better not to race than to push the limits. Chris Gragtmans said this about the issue: "It (Green River Race) will be there, and

foundation is the most important. Build that foundation of skills far before you try and push the limits on them." Even though Green Race veterans seem to feel this way unanimously, it doesn't prevent people from wiping out on race day, like the competitor described in the first lines of this article.

Flipping in the notch is not unusual. Rush Sturges, one of the world's best kayakers, flipped there on race day. He rolled up and went off The Pad fairly well. The man swimming below The Notch was also a very experienced and prepared kayaker. He flipped in Pencil Sharpener and could not roll up. As Keller said, "Yeah, he (Rush) rolled up. You need to be able to roll up in a situation like that." When the man in paragraph one wet exited after The Notch, I thought he was going to sustain some injuries. By the skin of his teeth, he SWAM into The Notch eddy and was safe. He was

The crowd in the Gallimore Road parking lot before the 2011 Green Race.

extremely lucky that fortune turned his way at that moment. While no one is sorry that he was safe, it does show how dangerous the Green Race can be.

After the race, I glanced over the DNF list and saw that many of them were first time racers. First time racers have the problem of not knowing what the river is like on race day. Most probably train day in and day out for the race, and are very well prepared. Even so, some of the first time racers showed that they aren't 100% confident that their skills will get them down. When asked about how prepared you should be, veteran Andrew Holcombe said, "You need to have experience running the Green and other Class V." An overarching theme among Green Race veterans was that race day is not the time to push limits. Sometimes people just need to look at their decisions to race a little bit harder. They might not get hurt, but they are putting the race in jeopardy if they don't believe they themselves have the skillset to get down cleanly on race day.

The issue of safety is something that is being handled the best it can be at this point. The safety people themselves are so good that a very small group of racers, made up mostly of first timers, think that the safety will keep them from sustaining bad injuries. Granted, no one has died in the race's 21-year history. As Holcombe said, "Most of the time, the only thing that is hurt after a swim is your



confidence.” Nonetheless, there have been serious injuries, and the potential exists for worse. It is a great thing that the safety is so good, and quite frankly, all of the first time racers I knew who were prepared styled the race. The race organizers already ask the younger racers whether they think they have the ability to run the race. Some will obviously say, “yes” even if they’re not be prepared, but this is still a great step leading racers to introspection. The race organizers are doing their best to limit the risk inherent in the race by informing first time racers about the risks involved, and asking them about their confidence.

Despite some concern about underprepared racers, paddler safety at the Green River Race is top noth. After talking to veterans, I got the impression that they’re less concerned about the safety of the racers than that of the spectators. This is just part of the great job that John Grace and Jason Hale are

doing with this race, taking it to a whole new level. Every year they pick up a few more racers, and every year the racers become more diverse. This is, in my opinion, the best kayaking race in the world, and I don’t see it being surpassed any time soon.

To all readers: keep shredding, come out to the Green Narrows, train hard, be aware of the risks, and hopefully race in this one-of-a-kind whitewater race someday.

Richard Lytle is a 9th grade student at Christ School in Arden, NC. He got into whitewater kayaking two years ago at his middle school, called French Broad River Academy, and has since paddled rivers in NC, GA, TN, and Costa Rica.

2016 Men’s Results				
Place	First	Last	Category	Time
1	Eric	Deguil	Long K1	0:04:11
2	Pat	Keller	Long K1	0:04:12
3	Brad	McMillan	Long K1	0:04:23
4	Isaac	Levinson	Long K1	0:04:24
5	Geoff	Calhoun	Long K1	0:04:25
6	Matt	Anger	Long K1	0:04:26
7	Holt	Mcwhirt	Long K1	0:04:31
7	Billy	Jones	Long K1	0:04:31
7	Hunt	Jennings	Long K1	0:04:31
10	Michael	Ferraro	Long K1	0:04:33
10	Stephen	McGrady	Long K1	0:04:33
2016 Women’s Results				
1	Adriene	Levknecht	Long K1	0:04:35
2	Emily	Shanblatt	Long K1	0:05:31
3	Rowan	Stuart	Long K1	0:05:39
4	Moriah	Heaney	Long K1	0:06:02
5	Cody	Stokes	Short K1	0:06:10
6	Genevieve	Royer	Long K1	0:06:17
7	Mary Katherine	Fields	Long K1	0:06:24
8	Kendra	Kaiser	Long K1	0:06:25



Dane Jackson paddling Gorilla switch in the 2012 race (he did one entire run switch that year), as chaos ensues below.