

Round Manhattan Race (28.5 miles)

By Glen Green, PCC member since 1975

July 4th, 1983, 8:30 A.M, East End Avenue and 89th Street, Manhattan, N.Y. The sun is beginning to rise from behind the tall buildings in Queens, New York. It is going to be a hot Independence Day. I stand with 25 other well conditioned canoe and kayak racers on the main dock of Carl Schurz Park behind Gracie Mansion where New York Mayor Ed Koch (first mayor to host "Saturday Night Live") resides. This race is being sponsored by New York City as part of their 4th of July celebration and has attracted some of the top guns in canoe and kayak racing from up and down the Eastern Seaboard.

The race organizers gave us a little history on this event. They recounted how New York City was the birthplace of rowing in the United States. The earliest boat clubs were organized in New York in 1834. Numerous rowing clubs were located along the Harlem and Hudson Rivers. A grouping of boathouses called 'Sculler's Row' on the Manhattan side of the Harlem River rivaled the extant 'Boathouse Row' in Philadelphia. One of the more successful clubs, the Atlanta Boat Club, was founded in 1848 and lasted for almost one hundred years. This club was the first to row around Manhattan in 1848 thus starting the tradition of 'Round Manhattan Races.'



In the 1930's and into the 1940's, many rowing clubs, canoe clubs, and individuals regularly did the circuit. In old journals of the Appalachian Mountain Club, these events, often races, are described. Some of these round Manhattan races were sponsored by local daily newspapers such as the Daily News.

In order to take advantage of the tides, this year's race will go counterclockwise around the island of Manhattan, as did most of the rowing, canoeing and swimming races that were competed over the past 135 years. The gun sounded at 9 A.M sharp. We all headed upstream. As we approached the junction of the East River, Harlem River, and the opening to Long Island Sound called 'Hell Gate,' we hugged the West bank to avoid the treacherous whirlpools and standing waves caused by the sheer volume of water from Long Island Sound flowing through the narrow straits of Astoria.

The competition-cruiser canoes took to an early lead up the flat-as-glass muddy brown Harlem River. These lightweight racing canoes were built for all out speed. While I was not paddling the fastest boat, I did learn from 10 years of racing how to draft. I got behind one of these canoes and did my darnedest to hold onto to its wake.

We passed below a footbridge, then under eight highway and street bridges; each time I would look up this man-made concrete canyon to the hustle-bustle of the city life above and say to myself, please don't anyone throw anything down on us – I am not wearing my helmet. But my worries were unfounded, not a soul even looked down from above to notice us below - millions of people in the city and we were by ourselves in our own little world.

As the race pack neared the Hudson River, I fell off of the wake of the canoe I was drafting and watched it slowly draw away. All the canoes made a sharp left and hugged the bank of Manhattan as they headed down the Hudson towards the George Washington Bridge. The winds were picking up and you could see the white caps on the cresting waves of the Hudson River.

I had a decision to make, do I continue to follow the pack of canoes and try hold onto first among the kayaks, or do I gamble and paddle towards the center of the Hudson River and hope that the current would help me; but the Hudson River was a mile wide and angling out to the center of the river would put me even further behind the canoes. I decided to 'go for it,' after all I was paddling a wildwater 'Lieser King,' and I was wearing a spray-skirt; so towards the middle of the Hudson I went.



Glen Green passing under the George Washington Bridge

What a roller coaster ride! With 2 to 3-foot swells spanning over 20 feet, with white caps curling back onto themselves, I estimate that I went from 6 mph to 12 mph with little extra effort. Serious concentration now was required on my part to stay upright. I could see the competition canoes far off to the left against the shoreline. They were also moving swiftly, but I could see them having slight difficulty with the river swells rebounding off the bulkheads of the piers. I was gradually catching them and by the time I reached the World Trade Center one hour later, I had passed all the canoes. They were so far behind me I couldn't even see them anymore. I had a major adrenaline rush near the twin towers when I was passed by the QE2 ocean liner

coming upriver – she put out such a bow wave that I had to turn my kayak completely around to face the wave head-on in order to prevent from being flipped.

My first real crisis came when I rounded Battery Park – the park was filled with thousands of spectators leaning over the railings cheering and hundreds of small craft anchored next to the quay wall. I thought, all those people came to see me? NOT! They were watching a demonstration of frogman jumping from a helicopter hovering 30 feet above the water. I had nowhere to go but between the anchored boats and the helicopter demonstration. Just then, the clock struck 12 noon and the battery guns started blasting celebratory blank rounds over the river in a 21-gun salute to the 4th of July Independence day. Each shot of the canon was so loud, I had to hold my paddle in my right hand and stick my right index finger in my left ear at the same time trying to stay balanced in my kayak as it was being buffeted by the down swirls of the helicopter rotor blades. I shouted into the wind, “I am in a race and you are slowing me down!”

When I rounded the bend I was clear of this congestion, but then I got caught in the backwash of a Staten Island Ferry that had just pulled into its Manhattan slip, the wash was so fierce that when I crossed the eddy line I almost went head-first into the drink.

Then came the really hard part of the race. With my water bottle now empty, the heat of the sun directly overhead, and my muscles running out of glycogen, within sight of the Brooklyn Bridge, I entered the East River and was hit with an East River in full ebb with several knots of current running against me. This brought my kayak almost to a standstill forcing me to hug the piers to get away from the full force oncoming flow. I gritted my teeth and persevered on, but with serious thoughts of dropping out of the race. After 30 minutes the tide went slack, gradually reversed, and began coming in giving me a gentle push from behind. I headed back to the center of the river. Maybe I can make it after all.

Only 5 miles to go – I still remember it today as being the most painful 5-mile paddle ever. I was totally depleted, but I couldn't quit now when I was so close to the finish line. As I passed the U.N. Building with my body failing and my mind becoming numb, I kept looking over my shoulder, looking for the rest of the racers – I didn't see anyone. I studied the map of Manhattan I had taped to the deck of my kayak – did I make a wrong turn somewhere?

Dehydrated and exhausted I finally finished back at Gracie Mansion where I started, to waiting stopwatches, completing the 28.8 mile circuit in 3 hours 52 minutes 17 seconds (30 minutes ahead of the first canoe and 45 minutes ahead of the next kayak). The fastest time ever recorded by a single person man-powered craft paddling or rowing around the island of Manhattan, beating the previous record established by a rowing shell in 1924.

P.S. I was offered the first prize of \$500.00 which I turned down because of my aspirations of paddling in the Olympics some day and not wanting to jeopardize my amateur status (wishful thinking!). Though several 'round Manhattan races' have been competed since 1983, the course record of 3 hours 52 minutes still stands as of the date of this article, July 4, 2004.

