



Out of the Mainstream

Paddler Priscilla Reinertsen of Contoocook, N.H., is dedicated to the sport of canoe racing.

By Laurie D. Morrissey

Photography by Jim Block

Prisilla Reinertsen spends New Year's Day hiking up Mount Moosilauke in Benton, N.H. Above tree line last Jan. 1, the wind picked up to 60 mph, making it a challenge for the microspike-shod, 113-pound hiker to stay upright. But, she says, "The views were just spectacular. It's a great way to start the New Year."

Perfecting the sport

This year, 2017, sees the 74-year-old Reinertsen paddling her 35th General Clinton canoe marathon and her 26th Kenduskeag Stream whitewater race, as well as other flat and whitewater courses; continuing as president of the New England Canoe and Kayak Racing Association; organizing weekly training sessions that finish with pizza at Dimitri's Pizza in Contoocook, N.H., and ending the season with another tradition, the winter solstice paddle on the Merrimack River. She is as dedicated to the sport of canoe racing as anyone, earning a reputation as one of the most technical paddlers around, and even "the mother of all canoeing." You might also hear "first lady of," "queen of," "machine" and "legend."

Reinertsen, who lives next to the Contoocook River with her husband, Terje, took up the

paddle after years as a long-distance and triathlon runner. Having summers off from teaching sociology at the University of New Hampshire allowed her time to perfect the sport.

"I don't tootle around enjoying the scenery. What I like is competing," she says.

And compete she does. She enters 30 to 35 races each year, including the 70-mile General Clinton, an endurance race on the Susquehanna River near Cooperstown, N.Y. She has more finishes than any other female participant. She has won eight times in four different categories, earning a place in the race's Hall of Fame. Although she generally races with a partner, she has soloed three times

— her fastest solo time being 10½ hours.

Long distance is one thing. Rapids are another. Asked why she is not terrified as she heads through the waves into a chute between boulders, she says, "I'm nervous before a big race, but when you're in the moment you're just intent on doing what





Reinertsen trains year round — even in the winter.



Photo by Dave Grainger

Reinertsen and Bob Walsh during the USCA National Canoe Championships, 1st C-2 veterans

has to be done.” She relies on not only strength and endurance, but finely honed skills and a massive amount of experience. An experienced (and successful) canoe racer understands wave dynamics and knows how to “trim” the boat, a term that means managing how the hull rides in the water. Slight changes in positioning the weight of both paddlers can make a critical difference in performance.

“I like technical rivers,” she says. “I may have been stronger 25 years ago, but the older you get, the smarter and better racer you are. There’s so much knowledge involved in knowing how and when to use each technique to your greatest advantage.”

Not that she always stays dry. On an S-curve in Vermont’s West River, whitewater rushes past a pair of SUV-sized boulders called the Dumplings. The Class III and IV rapids are a true test of a paddler’s skills. One year, Reinertsen recalls, she and her partner “took one hell of a swim. Oh, it was bad. About a mile. If you’re going to compete seriously, you have to expect to take a few swims.”

It is a winning attitude. “You could go the chicken route, which is slower, or you could go the hardest, fastest route. That is the one Priscilla takes,” says Peter Heed, president of the United States Canoe Association (USCA) and a champion racer. (Reinertsen credits him with getting her started on flatwater canoe racing.) They co-chaired the committee that organized last year’s USCA national marathon championship races.



Photo by Dave Grainger

Women’s Round Robin, Mansfield, C.T.



Photo by WillArts

Reinertsen with Dana Henry, United States Canoe Association National Championships



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The community of racing

In a 30-year paddling career, Reinertsen has raced solo and as stern person, on dozens of rivers, and with partners aged 9 to 90.

“It’s about more than competition,” she says. “It’s about the community and camaraderie of racing, sharing your knowledge and experience and enthusiasm with other people.”

According to Heed, “no one’s had a greater impact on paddling, certainly in New England, and the waves of her efforts are spread all over. If you go to Michigan, Wisconsin, or Maine, they know Priscilla. She has that incredible combination of being not only a good athlete and racer, but also a helper, teacher and organizer. The picnic she and Terje host after the Fourth of July race on the Contoocook River is one of the highlights of the season. All the paddlers are invited.”

Reinertsen especially enjoys sharing her enthusiasm with young girls. One of the high points for her was the Athol-to-Orange River Rat Race (Rat Race for short), a packed, mass-start event she refers to as “flip city.” An 11-year-old friend wanted badly to win it and, after much training together, the pair succeeded.

Like many in the sport, the Contoocook canoeist puts stock in the maxim, “there are two kinds of days: paddle-able and un-paddle-able.” She keeps an exercise log and trains year round. In winter, the power plant on the Merrimack River in Bow, N.H., generally keeps a stretch of about two and a half miles free of ice, which she and her canoeing buddies use several times a week when the plant is



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generating. They are exercising “muscle memory.”

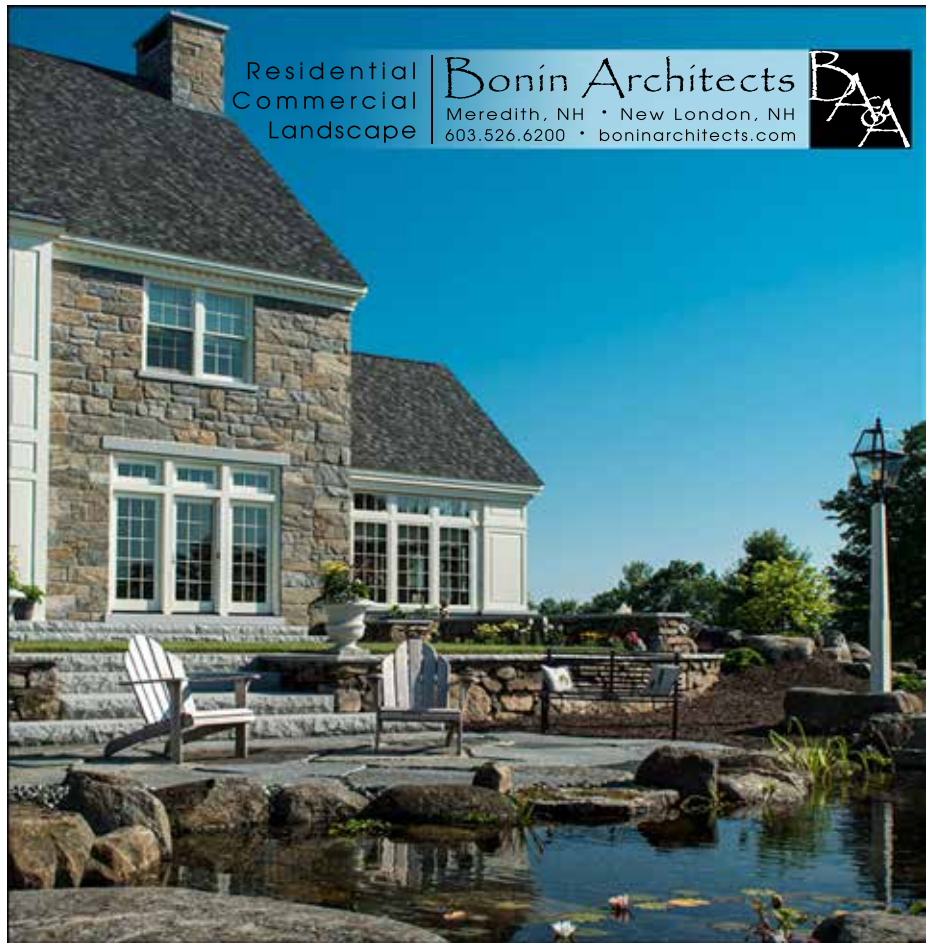
“As with any endurance sport, you build up tolerance in the muscles and tendons for repetitive action. It’s cumulative,” Reinertsen says.

Her favorite races include two whitewater races in Maine: the 16-mile Kenduskeag Stream Canoe Race (which she paddles with Alan Paradis of Pittsfield, N.H.) and the Passagassawakeag, held so early that it sometimes is postponed due to ice.

But while most of her paddling takes place in New England, Reinertsen’s favorite river is far to the south: central Florida’s Weeki Wachee, where she trains for a week or so every March. Besides technical paddling and scenic beauty, part of the attraction is the manatees swimming up the crystal-clear stream from the Gulf of Mexico. They are up for some serious competition from the Contoocook Canoeist. **KM**

Laurie D. Morrissey is a writer who lives in Hopkinton, N.H.

Jim Block enjoys photographing almost anything: children, adults, families and celebrations; nature and wildlife; sports and action; buildings and businesses. His clients range from publishers to businesses to individuals. He has taught four to six digital photography courses each year to small groups since 2000. Helping others discover the joy of photography and increase their technical and creative abilities gives Jim great joy. Jim lives in Sunapee, N.H., in the summer and Hanover, N.H., in the winter. Explore his website at jimblockphoto.com



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