Hello,

Please enjoy my columns. I am interesting in keeping track of which communities they go to. I would appreciate it if you could take a moment and send me a quick email at rejeangiguere@rejeangiguere.com when you publish the first one.

Thanks, Rejean.

The Longest Canoe Trip Ever: A True Canadian Feat

Recently I discovered a KickStarter campaign intended to raise funds to make a documentary film based on the classic Canadian story, “Paddle to the Amazon”.

Learning that Don Starkell, the driving force behind the story, had passed away in 2012, I started thinking about his book’s influence on my own life.

I originally read Starkell’s story in a book I chose from the prize table at a golf tournament. I remember walking down the table seeing beer coolers, a putter and other regular items you might expect at a golf tournament. Then a book caught my attention. It had a picture of a canoe on the front and a subtitle that said 12,000 miles. Before I knew it, it was in my hands.

Don was a professional canoeist who won ten out of twelve races. He was part of the Manitoba team that raced across Canada from Rocky Mountain House, Alberta, to Montreal, Quebec, for the Expo ’67 Centennial celebrations. After a grueling 104 days, his team won the event.

For years after that Don had a bigger plan. He and his two boys, Jeff and Dana were preparing for an epic journey. Finally in 1980, with a group of friends on hand, just down the road from their house in Winnipeg, they launched in an extended canoe loaded with all their gear.

The trip would take them two years. Heading down the Red River to North Dakota, they portaged across to the top of the Mississippi. Here they continued south past big paddleboats that tried to rescue them. A three-month stay in Mexico gave them time for Jeff to think and decide to head home.

Don and son Dana continued on, facing everything from rough seas in the Caribbean, to thieves and an encounter with militia in Honduras and Nicaragua where they were robbed and put to their knees with guns to their heads. Next came pirates along the coast of Columbia. The pair almost died while stuck on a sand bar with no food off the coast of Venezuela. After a six-week break in Port of Spain, Trinidad, they entered the Orinoco River, then paddled down the Casiquiare canal to reach the Rio Negro River.

Once on the Amazon River they saw piranha and boa constrictors. They were amazed by butterflies the size of a person’s hand as they made their way down the river to the Atlantic Ocean. By the end of their trip they had covered 12,000 miles, just under 20,000 kilometers.

After playing guitar at night for a large portion of the trip, Dana went on to become a classical guitarist. Don went on to another epic trip, soloing the Arctic’s Northwest Passage. Only a 3,000-mile trip, it took three years and just thirty miles from his goal he was stopped by frostbite and weather. He would eventually lose a number of fingertips.

Many years later I know that small book was a big part in pointing me to my love of the wilderness and my enjoyment of canoeing. Today, I still own a sixteen footer that gets regular use all summer long.

The Guinness Book of World Records has recognized the trip from Winnipeg to the Amazon as the longest ever. I just look at it another great Canadian accomplishment, two Canadian adventurers putting their heads down and getting it done.

Rejean Giguere is a Northern Ontario author of six novels whose passion spills over into the sports world. Check out his website at www.rejeangiguere.com.

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