

RACING TWELVE HUNDRED MILES
AROUND FLORIDA BY SEA KAYAK

WITHOUT A PADDLE

A MEMOIR



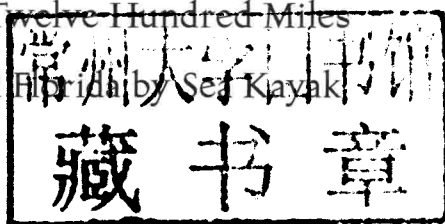
WARREN RICHEY

WARREN RICHEY

Without a Paddle

Racing Twelve Hundred Miles

Around Florida by Sea Kayak



ST. MARTIN'S PRESS  NEW YORK

WITHOUT A PADDLE. Copyright © 2010 by Warren Richey. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

www.stmartins.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 978-0-312-63076-8

First Edition: June 2010

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Without a Paddle

To J.R. and L.F.

The basest of all things is to be afraid.

—William Faulkner



Without a Paddle

PART I

Consider Yourself Warned:
Paddle or Die

On the Water

At night, alone in the boat, everything feels dangerous. No margin for error. Clouds blot out the stars. No moon. The water, the horizon, the air itself is black and empty. Dry land is a notion somewhere to my left. Navigation is by feel and sound, accepting whatever is offered within the sweep and swell of the sea. The sluggish gurgle at the bow tells me to pick up the pace.

I have been traveling like this longer than I can remember, stopping on white beaches to catch a few hours of sleep in a jungle hammock, but always breaking camp too soon to achieve any genuine rest.

Just keep moving forward.

Sixteen hours. Eighteen hours. Twenty hours alone in the boat.

Did you feel that?

Don't start.

I move my feet to stretch my legs inside the kayak. A butcher's knife is jammed between my shoulder blades. Again.

You must sleep. Sleeeeeeeep.

My eyes close, briefly. The paddle strikes something solid in the water.

Did you feel that? You know you felt it.

I pull hard and begin to count strokes. "One . . . two . . . three . . ."

I hear the reassuring sound of water moving at the bow.

"Twenty-six . . . twenty-seven . . . twenty-eight . . ."

Something big. Something hungry.

"Forty-two . . . forty-three . . . forty-four . . ."

I twist around, but I see nothing.

Where am I?

Exhaustion and confusion are with me now almost all the time. They are faithful companions on a journey like this, and a really bad influence. At this point if I capsize, the water grants an opportunity for brief struggle, but no escape. I know this. I know it with every impulse I possess for survival. The problem is I can't stop paddling. I am dead tired, but I can't stop.

Happy Birthday

Some time ago, having arrived at the middle years of my life with little to show for it but a thriving bald spot and a flatulent seventeen-year-old Toyota, I decided to do something completely nuts. I entered a race. It was a fiftieth-birthday present to myself, one of those well-intentioned but somewhat desperate attempts to stir things up a bit, to get the blood flowing again.

This was no ordinary race. It was a contest for small boats circumnavigating the entire state of Florida. I never actually got out a map and measured it, but the event organizer made a big deal out of the fact that it would be twelve hundred miles of round-the-clock racing.

I know, I know. These things rarely end well. I could already hear the *thwack-thwack-thwack* of the Coast Guard helicopter. The news-cast would include something like: "Details are sketchy. The man apparently had a huge bald spot and owned a 1989 Toyota with an inoperative muffler."

I didn't care. What did I have to lose?

I've been a newspaper reporter for twenty-eight years, so I have intimate knowledge of failure, doom, and destruction. I've covered suicides, fatal house fires, and bloody car wrecks. And I've learned a few things. Call it reporter's wisdom. For example, always wear your seat belt, keep fresh batteries in your smoke detector, and if you really, really want to kill yourself by drowning in the river but would like to spare your family the grief of having to identify the stinking, bloated corpse, don't wear underwear with an identifying laundry label. Trust me on this.

That's just the easy stuff. The hardest part about being in journalism is working with "newsroom managers" willing to throw reporters under a train, if necessary, to manage their own relentless march toward that corner office. I've worked for a few. Through much of it, I had the last laugh. Every night I went home from work to a beautiful woman and a smart, talented son in a four-bedroom piece of heaven with a swimming pool in the backyard. It is no exaggeration when I tell you I was the luckiest man alive.

Then, one day, it disappeared. Just vanished. When the judge stamped the divorce final, I felt as if I was free-falling into a giant vat of Kool-Aid.

I didn't know what to do or whom to trust. Of course, I wasn't the only one. If you can believe what you read in the papers, one of every two American marriages ends in divorce. They even have a proper name for my condition. Apparently it is called a midlife crisis. Some men buy a Corvette, grow a mustache, and start dating bosomey twenty-somethings. Not me.

I entered a race.

Twelve hundred miles around Florida, and you are thinking, but Florida is a peninsula. How can you circumnavigate a peninsula? Strange. I wondered the exact same thing. Turns out the race rules require that I carry a wheeled cart in my boat. When I run out of water I have to load the boat onto the cart and pull it behind me over land until I reach water again. Among nautical types this maneuver is called a portage, but it sounded like torture to me. The portage in question takes place in north Florida between the St. Marys River and the Suwannee River. The two rivers are separated by forty miles.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning.

The Beginning

It was love at first sight.

There I stood in the center of a palm-shaded kayak shop in the Florida Keys, surrounded by all manner of boating gear. Kayaks to the left, canoes to the right, paddles, life jackets, paddling gloves, spray skirts, and a slew of those pirate-themed T-shirts arrayed around me. "ARRRRR! Where Be the Treasure?" and "ARRRRR! I'm with Stupid."

I had arrived at the shop under false pretenses. This particular kayak shop allowed customers to take sea kayaks into nearby Blackwater Sound for a test paddle. With alimony and child support payments draining my bank account each month, I wasn't exactly rolling around in cash. I figured this would be an inexpensive way to enjoy a few hours of kayaking without having to fork out \$50 or more to actually rent a kayak. That was my plan at least. There I stood in the middle of the shop trying to act like a customer, when something caught my eye.

I'm not sure what forced me to look. Maybe it was the glistening radiance. Perhaps it was the flawless smooth skin with curves in all the right places. What I remember most of that first magical encounter was a yearning, a quivering anticipation that welled up from some secret place deep inside. She was as close to perfection as I could imagine.

Impossible, my practical side thundered in protest. It can't happen that fast.

Oh, but the places we could go. The things we could see. The adventures we'd share.

You are not here for that. Cheap fun, remember? Cost-free paddling. Hello?

There would be sunsets. Think of the sunsets. Even better, think of the sunrises.

Look away! Avert your eyes.

I wanted to reach out. I wanted to run the tips of my fingers over those curves, but I worried about leaving unsightly smudges.

You wonder, of course, what it would be like to be inside, whether it would be a good fit. Not too tight, not too loose. You savor the prospect of someday basking in her radiance.

The salesman whispered in my ear like a pimp in a dark alley. "Would you like to try her out?"

It was a short walk to the water. Twenty paddle strokes off the beach, I knew she was the one. I paid by credit card. The salesman helped tie her to the roof of the Toyota. For three weeks, the gleaming seventeen-foot yellow and white sea kayak occupied the better portion of my living room, propped up like a goddess on fluffy pillows. I just sat there on the couch, admiring it.

Some people say I'm crazy. I don't care. I think you can tell a lot about a man by how he treats his boat.

The Dare

At some point it is necessary to stop admiring the boat and start paddling. Thus, I decided to travel around a bit and see the watery parts of Florida.

I'm not talking about a pleasure cruise on one of those all-u-can-eat buffet "fun" ships. Floating crap factories is what the commercial fishermen call them. Or a three-hour tour with a man in a captain's hat and Hawaiian shirt holding a microphone. Blah, blah, blah. "Look, there's a dolphin." Blah, blah, blah. And I'm especially not talking about that "Jaws" ride at Universal Studios in Orlando. That's me sitting in a fake lifeboat attached to a conveyor belt, wedged between seasick Baby Bertha from Ohio and Anthony, the blimp guy from Jersey, who is bellowing "Yo Vinny," as a thirty-foot plastic great white shark squirts a laser beam of water into my left eyeball. No sir. Count me out of tourist excursions, cruise ship extravaganzas, and vomit-soaked amusement park rides. Truth is, my preferred mode of travel is a bit more rustic.

I always liked the idea of backpacking. It's the notion of taking nothing but those few possessions you can't live without, cramming them into a pack, and heading off into the woods just to see what's going to happen. I guess if you put a gun to my head and demanded to know my philosophy of life, I'd tell you less is more. Get rid of all the extra stuff, lighten the load, and be free. That's the way to go. But Florida is not the greatest place for backpacking. You can't walk very far in the Sunshine State without confronting a body of water, and in most places the water is teeming with stuff that bites.

Instead of a backpack what you need is a sea kayak. The idea is to take nothing but those few possessions I can't live without, cram them into the kayak hatches, and paddle toward the horizon—just to see what's going to happen. It's my way of raising a middle finger at the advancing years. Whenever I find myself gritting my teeth instead of smiling; whenever the boss's voice drowns out the inner song; whenever I begin to weigh my lot against those unfortunate specimens of the human condition featured on *The Jerry Springer Show*, then I know it is high time to get into a sea kayak as soon as I can.

It isn't so much about being in the boat as being on the water. There is something about moving across the surface of the sea that sharpens the senses and lifts the spirit. The mind concentrates on the immediate. Part of it is instinct—that unused portion of the brain, residue of our wretched past as prey. You never know what lurks below.

There's more. When you paddle a kayak you move at the rhythm of the earth itself. You leave the man-made world of machines, technology, civilization, and you enter a different realm. You are no longer traveling through the landscape—you become part of the landscape. There is a pull, a connection that binds you to something mysterious, something fundamental.