

# Claudia Kerckhoff-Van Wijk

Few people are as deeply involved in whitewater paddling as Claudia Kerckhoff-Van Wijk. Even before 1972, when her parents developed the Madawaska Kanu Centre on the Madawaska River, ON, her family spent every summer travelling across the country, running rivers along the way. After only two years of paddling, at age 13, she won the Canadian women's slalom title—a title she held until she stopped racing ten years later. Throw in a bronze medal at the 1982 Worlds, teenage paddling buddies the likes of legends Jon and Ron Lugbill, Cathy and Davey Hearn, Sue Norman, Cathy Tummonds, Kent Ford and Jim Snyder and you have a woman with firm roots in whitewater. Claudia and her husband Dirk now own and operate both MKC and Owl Rafting on the Ottawa River; both extremely critical parts in the development of whitewater paddling in Canada.



photo > Andy Heijs

### Who influenced you the most?

Whitewater kayaking was the passion of my parents, and thus became the summer activity in my family. I grew up around the sport.

Jon & Ron Lugbill, Cathy and Davey Hearn, Bobby Robison, Sue Norman, Cathy Tummonds, Yuri Kasuda, and Kent Ford were my paddling buddies. We all became friends at MKC, where they came to take courses. In our teenage years we were inseparable, travelling together, training together, running rivers, paddling first descents, designing boats and making up new moves.

Linda Harrison, a US slalom racer, was our mentor. She was older than we were, and paved the way for us girls. It took us a few years to catch her on the racecourse and she helped us each immensely. Linda published a monthly, womens paddling newsletter, keeping us in touch with her training, and the latest nutrition, strength, flexibility and paddling moves. In the 70s when we raced, the East Germans were the best followed by the West Germans, French, British and Austrians—a European dominance. Linda broke the ice for North America when she won a bronze at the 1978 World Championships. That's when we knew we could do it too.

**Age:** 41

**Weight:** 140lbs

**Marital Status:** Married

**Birthplace:** Toronto

**Home:** Ottawa ON

**Sponsors:** Used to be 'Johnson & Daniel Realestate in Toronto and many thanks to them

**Favourite Food:** Swiss raclette

**Favourite paddling spot:** Technical rivers like the

Petawawa, Upper Yough, West River, Jonquiere, Modi Kosi in Nepal & Merano in Italy

**Boats paddling:** A Barcelona slalom boat and a Necky Jive

### What are your thoughts about opportunities for women in paddling?

I have always felt whitewater paddling is a great sport for women because it demands technical skills. You can't fight the water; you must learn to use it. Women learn this quicker, because they need to!

### It must be busy running a full-time paddling centre. How often do you get on the water to paddle? How many courses do you teach in a season?

Busy, but fun. At least once a week, often twice, but I don't teach classes anymore. Instead, I'm connected to all students through videoing, and giving personal feedback on the water—more of a coach now myself.

### How do you balance your life outside of paddling?

My biggest enjoyment is having been able to take the success of my paddling career and transfer it into a work career. I am able to continue doing what I love, which is especially gratifying as I am able to turn others on to this incredible sport. But, in the off-season, I do give paddling a rest, and make time to get in shape and pursue personal goals. I still compete in cross-country skiing and am competitive at the masters level. Dirk shares the same passions I do; we are great

companions on and off the water. We are also so lucky to have two amazing girls who are keen to join us everywhere. So, between September and April, we are a very active family.

**We see the future of paddling in freeboating—putting in upstream and taking out downstream, rock splatting, spinning, surfing, catching eddies and throwing down on the way down a river. What do you think of this idea; of freeboating?**

I like this! I hope it will always remain free!

**How have the fundamentals taught in courses changed to meet this playboating style of paddling?**

The fundamentals of whitewater have remained the same, but equipment has enabled students to have a steeper learning curve reaching the fun aspects of playing in whitewater quicker. When success comes quickly, so does the love for the sport.

**Ten years ago, the best paddlers were slalom competitors or grew out of a slalom background. Do you still see a role for slalom paddling in today's freeboating world?**

Slalom paddlers are the ultimate technicians of finesse and athleticism, always searching for the fastest, most precise move. Their clean and powerful technique will continue to push the limits helping them in river running as well as freestyle paddling. Some of the strongest freestylists are slalom racers. Being an Olympic sport, slalom racing will always have a strong appeal.

**How do you see the future of whitewater canoeing in the face of the flash and growing popularity of kayaking?**

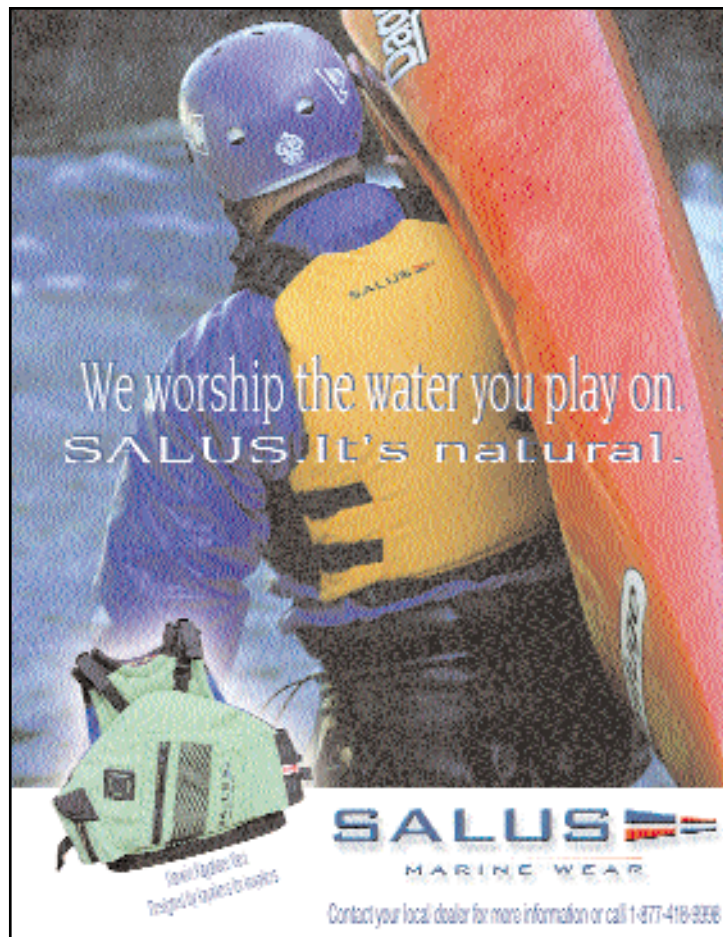
Canoeing is a Canadian tradition. The base of canoeists is broad. MKC has seen the demand for whitewater canoe courses continue to increase. People realise they should be prepared for whitewater when going on northern canoe trips—many peoples' dream—but even more, they want to be able to enjoy the whitewater they encounter along the way and not have to just portage around. Canoeing whitewater attracts a different personality than kayaking. Often canoeists do not like the idea of being trapped inside a boat—they like the freedom of sitting in it. So, I see a continuation of popularity in both boating methods.

**Last year the Madawaska Kanu Centre celebrated thirty years of teaching paddling. What have been the most significant changes in the sport over the thirty years? And where do you see whitewater paddling going in the future?**

The transition from fibreglass to plastic boats has made the sport easier and allowed paddlers to push greater limits, without having to worry about breaking their equipment.

I don't believe kayaking will ever become a mainstream sport for the masses like tennis, bicycling, or soccer. Not only for its inaccessibility, but because it has a wild side to it. Kayaking is a natural sport in a natural environment that demands courage, strength in personality and in power; a sport that is not glamorous, but hard core. It is not for everybody, so I believe the kayaking boom of having been discovered as a great activity has happened. I feel it will remain as popular as it is, but continue to draw new enthusiasts to run our natural or man-made rivers.

I think we will see a slow transition back to river running versus park and play. People will tire of the lineups and waiting. We will see people exploring new paddling opportunities including more man-made whitewater parks in urban centres.



We worship the water you play on.  
**SALUS**. It's natural.

**SALUS**  
MARINE WEAR

Contact your local dealer for more information or call 1-877-418-9398



## We Want You In Our Skirts

Brooks line of whitewater and touring skirts has a model to fit every paddlers need. Even raft guides in the far north. And we're not just blowin' wind up your skirt!



Brooks Wetsuits Ltd. Toll Free 1-888-986-3441 Fax: (604) 986-3443  
e-mail: brookspaddlegear.com www.info@brookspaddlegear.com