

## IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 28, 2005

OTTAWA

### **1<sup>st</sup> Day Results: Canadian National Whitewater Slalom Team Trials 2005**

When: 28-29 May 2005

Location:

Madawaska Kanu Centre

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[Barry's Bay, Ontario] Eight out of eighty nine kayak and canoe athletes from across Canada earned themselves a place on the 2005 Canadian National Whitewater Team yesterday, on the first day of team trial competitions on the Madawaska River, west of Ottawa on 28-29 May, 2005. They will be representing Canada at World Championships in Europe this summer.

The challenging course set on the rapids at the doorstep of the Madawaska Kanu Centre in Barry's Bay, Ontario had some of the top athletes miss the direct combination gates 9-11 in the middle of the course. This widened the gap, on the first runs. Second runs saw faster times and cleaner results as the athletes became familiar with the course. 20°C weather held out, with the sun shining most of the day.

Three of the first-round winners, the two senior Olympians kayaker David Ford and canoeist James Cartwright, as well as junior women's kayaker Sara Potvin-Bernal, successfully defended the first-boat positions they held last year. Five other athletes won the top positions in their categories for the first time, senior kayakers Jennifer Gratto, junior kayaker Paul Manning-Hunter, and junior whitewater canoeists Jamie and Adam Cutts, and Julian Potvin-Bernal. The remaining athletes have a second chance on Sunday to make the team.

Ford, 38 years old, has been a National Team member since 1984, and has represented Canada in four Olympic Games. This past winter, he was considering retirement from official competition. But he's found that's pretty hard to do when you're still at the top of the world. Finishing fourth in the 2004 Athens Olympics, he was also overall winner of the 2003 World Cup Championship Series. That was a return to the top after his 1999 title as World Champion. In 2003 Ford was named Canadian Male Athlete of the Year. His decision to stay in the game at least another season kept the pressure on second boat Pierre Levesque of Quebec, whose time on the first run was just three seconds behind Ford, and Mike Holroyd of B.C. who actually clocked the fastest single run of the day, a second inside Ford's best. Top Ontario kayaker John Hastings was disappointed by an error that forced him to return upstream to take gate 11.

James Cartwright, 28 years old, demonstrated the most outstanding consistency among the paddlers on Saturday, clocking both of his runs on the complex course at exactly 100 seconds. Dominating Canada's single slalom canoe category for close to a decade, Cartwright finished 9th place in Athens in 2004, and seventh in the 2002 World Championships. He's still heading upwards in his paddling career though, looking towards the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Competing hard for the second senior canoe position on Sunday were Tom Hewitt of Ontario, and Craig Allen of B.C.

Top boat in the senior womens' category was a three-way race among contenders from across the country: 30 year-old Saskia van Mourik of B.C., 22 year old Sarah Boudens of Ontario, and Jennifer Gratto, 29, of Quebec. Too close for anyone to call ahead of time, Gratto finished with a solid 10-second lead on combined runs. In addition to being the fastest women's slalom boat in Canada, Gratto is the coach for twelve young athletes in the Ottawa-Gatineau region, some of whom were also competing this weekend.

In the junior women's category (15-18 years old), the three leading challengers for National Team placement were also from different provinces. They included the 2004 Canadian Champion Sara Potvin-Bernal of Quebec, Anna Williams of B.C., and Celeste Corkery of Ontario, each 17 years old. Potvin-Bernal raced to an 18-second lead in her category on the combined runs. Based on her time compared with David Ford's pace-setting combined time on this course, she also earned a coveted spot on the Senior Development Team.

The junior men's kayak category this year was dominated by 16 year-old Paul Manning-Hunter from Alberta, with a 16 second lead in his category. His percentage of Ford's time also qualified him for the Senior Development Team. A surprisingly strong performance was put in by 15 year-old kayaker Ben Haywood of B.C., who only recently switched to slalom competition from canoe-polo.

A very close race was expected in two-man canoe category between the Cutts brothers, Jamie and Adam of Ontario, and the Purcell brothers, Thomas and Daniel of Alberta. Since Daniel turned 19 this year, the Purcells were classed in the senior category, while the Cutts are still junior. That contest was decided by the difficult maneuver between gates 10 and 11, which the Cutts managed in both runs. On both of their runs, the Purcells swept past 11, and had to paddle back upstream to get it.

In the junior single canoe category, 15 year-old Julian Potvin-Bernal (Sara's brother) of Quebec took first place with both the fastest time, and the cleanest runs of his class. His first run on Saturday morning placed him fourth among the senior canoeists, and with his combined time, he came within three per centage points of qualifying for the Senior Development Team.

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## **Backgrounder**

### **A Short History of Kayak Racing**

Kayaking originated more than 4000 years ago among the Inuit, who developed and refined kayak designs unique to each region, based on their hunting knowledge and environment. In 1825 an Inuit hunter from Greenland was taken to Scotland with his kayak, where he won a race against a 6-man whaling boat at Leith Docks. Inspired by this, a Scotsman named John McGregor adapted the kayak concept with his own design. He named his boat the “Rob Roy”, and took it on tour throughout Europe. <http://www.eldritchpress.org/jm/tm.htm> This was the start of recreational and sport kayaking, going beyond its origins in transportation.

Slowly over the next hundred years, kayaking grew as a sport in Europe, and less rapidly North America. In 1924, delegates from national canoeing associations met to establish an international body, and to formulate rules for competition around the globe. That year, canoe/kayak sprint racing on flat water made its first Olympic appearance in Paris with an exhibition regatta. During the following decade, leaders in the sport petitioned the Olympic Committee to add canoe/kayak as an official event. In the 1936 Games in Berlin, canoe/kayak races on flat water were included as an Olympic medal competition. It was German athlete, Heinz Poenn, who brought whitewater canoe/kayak back across the Atlantic in 1956. When whitewater slalom appeared in the Olympics in 1972, Poenn represented Canada. But it was not until the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona that whitewater canoe/kayak slalom competition began to appear as a regular Olympic sport, and by this time, Poenn had helped train Canada's first generation of home-grown world-class slalom paddlers, including David Ford and Claudia van Wijk.

In modern whitewater slalom, eighteen to twenty-three numbered gates are hung over a 500 to 800 metre long section of whitewater. Each racer is timed paddling through the gates, being careful not to touch or miss any, as a touched gate adds two seconds to the final time, and a missed gate adds fifty seconds. A race consists of two runs down the course, each run taking about two minutes, and the times are added together. The positions of the gates are set only the day before the race, and competitors are not allowed to practice on this course. They have an opportunity to watch one or two good non-racers demonstrate the course the day before, to better analyze the position and layout of the gates, and choose their fastest line. But each course is unique, with gates, obstacles, and the complex flow of the river to plan for and remember. Therefore, these athletes don't rely on strength and agility alone; they also need lightning reflexes, focused precision and a mastery of a whole set of skills and strategies. This makes whitewater slalom one of the most challenging sports. A slalom kayaker can be thought of as an alpine ski racer whose hill has suddenly melted to become a raging river.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, whitewater canoe/kayak competition has grown around the world through local, regional, national and international events. Open canoe whitewater racing has traditionally been more popular in North America, while whitewater slalom racing has been predominately European, especially in Germany, France, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Italy and Austria. Since the late 1980s, slalom racing has gained more enthusiasts in both Canada and the United States, and clubs have also been growing in Brazil, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, China, Argentina, Chile, and Costa Rica.

On-site audiences have been growing at national and international whitewater competitions. High-profile races are televised, and millions of viewers are now sharing the intensity and excitement of the world's best paddlers at a close range.