

## WORLD MASTERS GAMES,,SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA OCT 10-18<sup>TH</sup>, 2009

By Darryl O'Brien, 2009 WMGs participant

Back in 2005 WMGs when we hosted canoe polo in the paddling events (which also included sprint), those of us in Edmonton, who participated both as organizers and participants promised ourselves that we would take in the next games in the Land of OZ (Australia) in 2009. The undertaking of the 2008 World Canoe Polo Championships in Edmonton provided further impetus to attend some event where we could just be participants.

We planned to participate in all the paddling events to be held at these Games and that included canoe polo that has intensely involved us for close to the last twenty years, whitewater slalom that engaged us for the twenty years before that, and sprint which has off and on occupied some of our water time. Each discipline has its own special attraction and was to provide us with a substantial dose of paddling over the period of Oct 10-12<sup>th</sup> (canoe polo), slalom training and race (Oct 13-15<sup>th</sup>) and sprint, from Oct 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>. Our group which included myself (Darryl O'Brien), brother Dale, Jean Leduc, and Carolyn Karasiuk all from Edmonton left for Sydney on Oct 5<sup>th</sup>. Dan Groeneveld left from Calgary to meet us in San Francisco. In Sydney we were joined by the 6<sup>th</sup> member of our canoe polo team, Alexander (Izzy) Izmailov, past member of the US Team from San Francisco. We were entered in the 45+ Recreational class (that allowed for women and men on the same team) in the canoe polo event. Our ages ranged from 47 to 62.

The paddling events were to be held in the venue of the 2000 Sydney Olympics located near town of Penrith, New South Wales about 50 km west of Sydney itself. For our accommodation in Australia we had rented a 6 person motor home (just like old times) and traveled first to Sydney Olympic Park from the airport to get ourselves registered and pick up accreditation. We had reserved a parking spot in trailer park about 20km from Penrith. Since we had no paddling planned on our first day, we decided to visit downtown Sydney and take a tour of the Sydney Harbour.



Two landmarks of Sydney: the Harbour Bridge on the left and the Sydney Opera House on the right. We boarded a tour boat from this point for a very nice 3hour harbour tour.

We spent most of the second day in Australia trying to get our rented boats; polo kayaks and slalom boats, arranged through the WMG Organizing Committee. The polo boats

were rented just for the competition days, but we wanted the slalom boats to be able to train on the whitewater course for a few days before the race. For Dale and I, it had been close to 20 years since our last slalom race and even longer since racing in a kayak. However, our canoe polo activities gave us plenty of time in kayaks and we were more comfortable now in a kayak than we would have been in a C-2 on this powerful whitewater course at Penrith. On the 9<sup>th</sup>, we were hoping to get on the slalom course, but the boats we had rented were not available. Also the weather was around 12° C and the wind was blowing around 25 knots, so we just hung around the paddling venue watching the set up for polo and the activity on the slalom course. Jean and Carolyn did try out their rented polo boats. The next day polo started. We had five teams in our division and played two games on the 10<sup>th</sup> and two on the 11<sup>th</sup>, winning all. We had a couple of close games winning one by 3-2 and a second by 1-0. This was followed on the last day with one playoff game which put us in the final, followed by the final which we won 4-2.



The EWP Crunch:WMG Canoe Polo Team: Carolyn Karasiuk, Dan Groeneveld, Darryl O'Brien, Alexander (Izzy) Izmailov, Jean Leduc, Dale O'Brien.



Medal ceremonies beside the canoe polo pitch. Crunch receiving the gold in the 45+ Recreational Division. There was also 35+ Rec class, a mens only division and a women's only division. Within each division were two age classes, 35+ and 45+, for ~30 teams in all.



One of the highlights of this event was, for Dale and I, to renew our acquaintance with ICF President, Jose Perurena from Spain who was in attendance at the 2008 Canoe Polo worlds in Edmonton last year. It was pretty neat to see the upper echelon of the ICF attending this event.

Pleased with our results in the canoe polo event, we turned our thoughts to slalom on the 13<sup>th</sup> to prepare for the race on the 15<sup>th</sup>. We were able to finally pick up our boats that were called “Spin FX” by Kayaks Plus. We chose these boats to match our 90kg weight, while Dan Groeneveld went with a smaller boat. On the first day in a slalom K-1 for some time, we went out just to get a feel for the water and the boats. Jean and Carolyn who were not racing slalom joined us just to “run the course”.



We saw one paddler with a facial abrasion received when his face was rubbed on the bottom of the course which was abrasive. This convinced Carolyn and Jean to wear their polo helmets with protective masks. We had the opportunity for another practice on the

course on the 14<sup>th</sup>. This turned out to be official practice after the course was set and forerun. The competitors were allowed to run in bid order. We were getting a bit of a feel for the course and our previous experience served us very well, but another day of practice would have been nice. This was not to be and race day was the 15<sup>th</sup> and included both individual and team runs. Dan was going to race team with Dale and I, but felt a little shaky on the water, not unlike the rest of us. However, he deferred and Izzy took his place. After the first individual runs, Dale was in first place and I was in third in our age class of 60+. He was displaced by 2 sec in the second run and I was able to maintain my position for third. There were some well known slalomists in this event in other age classes including Richard Fox (4x World Champion in K-1) and Mike Druce (former Canadian National Team Coach, now coaching in Australia), Jean Yves Prigent from France, Miryam Fox (previously from France) and Danielle Woodward (from Australia) silver medalist in K-1W at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, along with many other paddlers from other nations with international race experience. The level of the competition combined with this amazing facility made for a great competition.



The above photographs were taken during the slalom event. On the left, Dan Groeneveld enters the centre piece rapid of the course, that was actually located about mid-way down the course. It featured a rooster tail wave in the centre of the drop with powerful eddies on both sides. The race course featured a ferry from both sides of this drop. In the right picture, I work to get gate seven, that is actually just above the feature in the left picture. Interestingly, if you look to the top of the course in the right picture, Dale, who followed one number behind me is just entering the course at the first drop.

If we had any idea that the difficulty of the course would somehow be modified to take in consideration the age of competitors, that idea was washed away on the official practice day. The course was running a full throttle and the gates were set to make it challenging for even the best (and youngest) paddlers present including past world champions and medalists. It was definitely a challenging course for us, especially after a long hiatus from slalom, that said, it was most satisfying to have placed 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> in our age class 60+ in this very competitive event against 8 or so others..



In this picture, Dale makes the ferry from gate 9 on the left, having just come from 8 on the right. Gate 10 was a downstream necessitating a second ferry across the face of this large wave.

Each slalom run was quite demanding physically and my forearms were extremely tired after both individual runs. Dale and Izzy felt likewise and so we decided that we would only make one slalom team run if we had a good run the first time. This turned out to be the case. Except for a flip right at the end of the course that almost put me upside down over the finish line, it was a best run by each of us and earned us the silver in the Team event 55+ (Izzy was 57) and 8/22 among all teams. We were pretty happy about this, not just because it was a good run, but because it spared us the energy expenditure for another run, given the ominous thought that we had to sprint the next day in the the 1000m events, the most physically demanding compared to the 500m and 200m events. We had entered K-1 and K-2 events at 1000m.

The slalom facility was a magnificent venue, probably ranking first or second of the six artificial courses that I have now had the opportunity to paddle in the world. This venue was the most compact of any I had seen previously. Water was sucked from the adjacent lake that was also a sprint training lake and pumped to the top of the course in five large

tubes. It took about 15 minutes to be up to full flow. Water flowed in a U shaped course back to where it started. It was well utilized for rafting and rec whitewater as well. The course was also quite clean and free of algae or slime accumulation which did make it somewhat abrasive on the walls which were sloped to eliminate surging. Large plastic inserts could be moved around when the course was empty to easily change the rapids.



Receiving the accolades of the crowd and the medals in the individual event as well as the team event, was a most rewarding benefit of slalom participation in the 2009 WMGs. But perhaps the greatest delight was to meet and renew acquaintances with many of those against whom we had previously competed or had met during our international careers as slalom and wildwater paddlers. And of course, many new friends were made.

Sprint was a different event. For one thing, there was a huge number of competitors and races in a myriad of classes and age groups ran from 9 in the morning until 4, for all the three days of the event. They had trouble keeping on time and the processing of results was slow. Medal presentations were scheduled to run shortly after each event, but this didn't happen and in the end they did not actually have awards for many of the races. In this case people just had to pick up their medals at the registration headquarters in Sydney. Because we knew that there would be no time for us to acclimatize to the real sprint boats, we opted to enter the TK (meaning training kayak). These were much like a sprint boat, but a little more stable. This turned out to be the right choice for us, as on the first day, it was windy, a carry-over from the rowing, making us appreciate that we had a stable boat. Even a real sprint K-2 would have been difficult for us in the wind. I had entered the K-1 1000 60+ event. There were two heats, so I had to place 4<sup>th</sup> or better to make it to the final. Unfortunately, I got stuck with quite an old boat for this heat could only muster 6<sup>th</sup> of 8 competitors in this heat. At this distance, the boat can make a huge difference. It may not have been totally the boat in this case, because after 500m I was feeling pretty beat. The next event of the day was the TK-2 1000m 60+ event for Dale and I. This was a final and we had rented a very nice new boat, so our chances were good. We held our own until about 750m, being pretty solidly in third up until that point. Then the gas started to run out and we were clipped by about half a boat length for third, to finish fourth. We were not totally disappointed as we had worked pretty hard to finish where we did out of 8 or 9 boats in this race. It would have been pretty hard for us to exceed the effort we put into this race. More training would have helped.

The next day, the 17<sup>th</sup>, Dale was entered in the TK-1 event at 500m. But he decided to withdraw, opting to rest for our TK-2 500m event where we thought we might have a chance for a medal in sprint. Back in the 2005 WMGs in Edmonton, we had raced K-2 at 1000 and 500m, finishing 4<sup>th</sup> in both events. This was a chance to redeem ourselves.



We knew there were boats that could beat us over 1000m in this race, but we also knew that if we got a good start and kept in time, we could probably be in a good position (in the medals) at 500m. We had a good start and got out in front initially, but slowly the lack of time in these boats took over and we started to get tired. Fortunately we were able to hang to the finish and won the bronze by about 1.5 seconds over next boat. This was good, because with this medal, we had won medals in all three disciplines at the 2009 WMGs... canoe polo, slalom and sprint. Dale, racing with Carolyn in the mixed K-2- 200m 45+ category on the last day, capped it off with a gold in this event. Carolyn also picked up the gold in the K-1 200m 45+ category racing in a brand new TK-1 boat that I wished I could have used in my first race. She also raced K-4 at 500 and 200 with a combination of Saskatoon and Adelaide paddlers winning gold both times.



Receiving the bronze medal on the same podium that Canadian sprint paddlers got gold in 2000 facing a huge grandstand on edge of the sprint course was a neat experience. At these WMGs, we felt privileged to participate in all three disciplines and would encourage anyone to gain experience in other disciplines beyond your own. We had a great group and made a good team that helped to make this a most enjoyable trip. Now we are thinking about Turin, Italy in 2013.