

people to know ON THE RIVER

A bridge designer puts his endurance, strength and mental toughness to the test as a kayak racer.

DURING THE DAY Travis Konda designs bridges. In his free time he kayaks under them.

A structural engineer for HNTB's Minneapolis office, Konda began kayaking recreationally in 2002 while at Iowa State University. He began racing in 2006 and since then has been involved in several different types of kayak races, from triathlons that swap swimming for paddling to a 340-mile nonstop race across Missouri on the Missouri River (known as the MR340) to numerous shorter races in the 50- to 90-mile range. He's kayaked in Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi, Missouri and South Dakota, as well as Lake Superior, the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. During races his wife, Ursula, serves as his ground crew, driving ahead to meet him at checkpoints with a new bag of food and water.

Konda explains that unlike sanctioned canoe racing, where the boats have very rigid geometric requirements, the paddle races he participates in are less structured. While some races have divisions based on experience, most are open-class, divided into men's and women's solo, tandem and team (more than two paddlers) categories. Racers must use paddles, either single- or double-blade, and fixed oars aren't allowed.

"Age isn't as large a factor as you might think," Konda notes. "Some of the best paddlers are in their 40s and 50s and even beyond. This is an activity where experience, efficiency and the ability to manage pain and discomfort are more important than pure physical prowess."

These races are, for the most part, nonstop—and grueling. In the 2009 MR340, Konda took third place in the men's solo category, with a time of 51 hours, 5 minutes, sleeping a total of four hours for the entire race. He's done his favorite race, the South Dakota Kayak Challenge—a 72-mile affair from Yankton, S.D., to Sioux City, Iowa, on the Missouri River—twice, once even taking second place with a time of 9 hours, 38 minutes.

"There were rolling checkpoints every 20 miles, where I wouldn't stop but simply throw the used supply ashore and grab a new one on the fly," he says. "Often, you are neck-and-neck with someone and if you fall behind, you can't catch up."

Besides testing strength and stamina, races can also strike a bit of fear into the hearts of the paddlers.



▲ Konda in his Sitka sea kayak.

"I've been terrified a few times and have ended up in the emergency room after a race, but fortunately nothing too serious," Konda says. "Some of these races go day and night, which means paddling on an unknown river in the dark in changing weather conditions, including fog or high winds. Sleep deprivation, dehydration, getting sick due to exertion and blisters are just some of the challenges that a paddler faces on a long race."

"With my wife's help, I have been able to avoid most of these pitfalls, but it is still frightening paddling on the Missouri River at night, with its wing dams, gurgling water, swirling eddies and exploding boils. With a combination of experience, judgment and providence, I have personally remained unscathed."

While kayaking is something Konda came upon in graduate school, he was drawn to engineering at an early age.

"I wanted to be an engineer before I even knew what they did," he says. "As a South Dakota farm kid, I was constantly fixing and constructing all manner of buildings and equipment. While working through my undergraduate studies, I became interested in bridge engineering and have continued with that line of work."

In his eight years with HNTB, Travis has spent four years in the Kansas City office, contributing to the design of bridges such as the under-construction Stan Musial Veterans Memorial/New Mississippi River Bridge in St. Louis and the Amelia Earhart Bridge in Atchison, Kan. (see "Replacing Amelia's Bridge" in the 12/2012 issue). The rest of the time, he's been in the field working as a construction/erection engineer. He's currently working on-site in Hastings, Minn., on a steel tied arch spanning the Mississippi River.

And kayaking has helped him appreciate these bridges from another angle.

"A kayak provides you with great access to view bridges from the underside—be they old, new or under construction," he says.

Konda owns multiple boats, but he's spent the majority of his time in three of them. A used Dagger Sitka sea kayak was his racing boat until he purchased a used Fenn Mako XT surf ski (a surf ski is a swift, specialized sit-on-top kayak designed to ride ocean waves). The vessel that he has the most seat time in is a Cobra Kayak Expedition, which he uses as his training boat. In general, he says, there is a balancing act between boat speed (long and narrow) and stability (wider).

Training regimen depends on the race. With the MR340, for example, Konda started training six months prior, paddling three to four times a week—sometimes for just 45 minutes (sprints) and other times enduring slogs of eight hours or more to test equipment and gain the necessary muscle and mental toughness.

"Kayaking is subtle; one can coast along with minimal effort," he says. "Technique and boat fit-up is important; very small changes can be the difference between being comfortable and efficient—seat position, hand placement, etc.—or being miserable and ineffective."

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