

Out of the water: Paul Shol takes on the race of a lifetime

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When one hears the phrase canoe race, the image is most likely of racers in boats gliding across the water's surface, making a wake behind them. This is not the race Paul Shol is preparing for. In fact, there may not be a paddle in sight when the eager crowd toes the start line and begins on the course. Their feet will be planted on solid ground.

On Sep. 20, in Ely, Shol, of Fergus Falls, will add something to his running resume that very few can. He will be competing in the Ely Marathon Portage Race. That is, he will run a whole marathon while carrying a canoe on his shoulders.

While not out of the ordinary for those who are avid canoers, the notion of racing with the vessel on your shoulders is pretty novel.

"When you go into the Boundary Waters, you portage your canoe from lake-to-lake, so you put it on your shoulders and hike through the portage to the next lake. It's something that people there are familiar with," Shol said. "But one guy took it a step further and said he wanted to run the whole marathon like that."

Although Shol doesn't know how many years this has been done in Ely, he explained that now there is a whole division for women and men racers and their canoes.

Running has long been part of Shol's life, starting with track and football in high school then continuing in college. "It was all sprints and short distances, fast and quick, but there was this endurance component I wanted to explore after college, so I started doing a couple 5ks and 10ks, and then eventually did a half marathon," he explained.

Once he was comfortable with that, he went on to run full marathons followed by 50k races — 30 miles. "That really sparked my interest in running trail races. I guess there's shorter trail races too, but there's a whole series of trail races that are 30, 50 and 100 miles distances, and that's what I run now," Shol added.

Even Shol, a seasoned runner, recognizes this is something completely different and training has been an adjustment for this race. First, the right canoe had to be used.

"I'm borrowing my friend Katie Olson's canoe. She's got a 26 pound canoe made of Kevlar, so it's the lightest material you can find a canoe made of. That's made a big difference. If I was doing it with a big aluminum canoe, there's no way I'd be able to do it," Shol said.

A yolk was added to the canoe and it sits on Shol's shoulders with pads, although he quickly admits even then it isn't the most comfortable thing in the world, explaining, "My muscles in my

neck and shoulders have gotten more used to it but the first few weeks it was pretty painful. At first I didn't know if I was going to be able to do it, but now I feel I can."

Spectators would imagine that just making it the first mile would be a feat, but Shol sees a goal even beyond finishing the whole marathon. "I have a goal to beat the world record," he states with a smile. That would mean completing the race, with the canoe, in under four hours and 11 minutes. And does he think that is a real possibility? He smiles again and says, "I think it's totally doable for me, I do. I think I'm capable of breaking it, and if you do, you get \$5,000."

There are obstacles that are out of anyone's control when it comes to competitions, particularly ones that take place outdoors. While training, Shol has had to learn ways to adapt.

"I did a 20 mile practice run a couple weeks ago on a Saturday and there was thunderstorms that came through with heavy winds, and boy, that canoe is like a sail on top of you. If you're going perpendicular to the wind, it'll pull and push you right to the side. You get a gust and you hang on while your whole body gets moved."

To compensate for the wind conditions, Shol is learning ways to get through it. "When it's windy I will actually turn my upper body into the wind so the bow of the canoe doesn't catch so much of the wind. I'll actually run sort of twisted—my top half going sideways and my legs going straight."

Other things, like different muscles being used to hold onto the canoe, running without using arms and ways to take care during the race have also had to be discovered.

Shol shared one technique he has applied to help get the most efficient run he can during the race. "As I practice the longer runs, I practice using my energy gels. I have to run one handed because I have them duct taped inside the canoe. I have to grab one with one hand, rip it open with my mouth, eat it and stuff the garbage in my waist pack. That gets tricky to balance."

A road race, an unfamiliar course, a little bit of gravel road, some ups and downs, the will of the weather, and remembering to shift the canoe's weight periodically all make this race one-of-a-kind.

Along the race route, Shol will likely hear some familiar voices. His parents and friends will be there to encourage him with cheers that will echo under the body of the canoe and propel him to the finish line.