

# Making Waves

TOP-RANKING SPRINT CANOEIST PAM BOTELER KNOWS THE SECRETS OF BALANCE, THE VALUE OF SIMPLICITY, THE IMPORTANCE OF DETERMINATION — AND HOW TO USE THEM ALL TO HER ATHLETIC ADVANTAGE.

By JOEL HOEKSTRA

**M**ost of us tend to think of canoeing as a tame and relaxing pastime. But canoeing, particularly sprint canoeing, is not an entirely risk-free endeavor. True, it almost never results in the sorts of injuries and accidents associated with, say, rugby, cliff diving or demolition racing. But paddling a sprint canoe can still be plenty perilous, according to Pam Boteler, the top American woman in the field.

This is a sport that requires equilibrium in the extreme. For starters, an Olympic-style sprint canoe is 17 feet long, but just 14 inches wide and 11 inches deep. That makes for a tippy ride. To make matters trickier still, the paddler must deliver fast, carefully controlled strokes while perched on one knee — as if being knighted — and must steer without switching sides.

“You’re essentially paddling on a balance beam in the water,” explains Boteler, 37. “Every time you lean over to put the blade of your paddle into the water, you risk falling out of the boat. It’s a humbling sport. You need a lot of patience and humility.”

Boteler, the most decorated female canoeist in the United States, is clearly not in it for the glory. In fact, she’s well aware that most Americans are unfamiliar with her sport, which is considerably more established in Canada and Europe. Still, Boteler believes passionately in her sport’s athletic merit and personal appeal. As a result, she works tirelessly to promote sprint canoeing in general and, in particular, to encourage women’s participation in the sport.

Not surprisingly, she’s a role model among female canoeists: In 2000, just a year after taking up a paddle, she became the first woman to compete in sprint canoe at the USA Canoe/Kayak Sprint National Championships. (Women were permitted to race in the event, but they had to compete against men. Even so, Boteler proved her mettle by winning a bronze in the single 500-meter Men’s Intermediate, and a gold, with Canadian Heather McNie, in the two-person 500-meter competition.)

Boteler, who works as a program analyst for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in Washington, D.C., places a great deal of value on maintaining a healthy work-life balance. She strives to leave professional concerns at work and is especially careful not to let stress or current events distract her from her training. She also prefers to maintain a relatively simple lifestyle — one where conscious choices deliver their own rewards. “Some people relax after work by going out to happy hour, and they wind up spending a lot of money on food and drinks,” she says. “I’d much rather be on the water.”

That dedication is evident in her schedule. Boteler trains six days a week, often putting in an hour or two on the Potomac River after finishing a nine-hour workday. She spends most weekends traveling to competitions, where she paddles in 200-, 500- and 1,000-meter contests. Off the water, she lifts weights three times a week, putting special emphasis on building a powerful core by integrating Swiss-ball exercises, ab crunches and pull-ups into her routines.

Solid nutrition has also been a key to Boteler’s success. “In high school, I was a runner, so I grew up on carbs, like bread and pasta,” she says. “But my taste buds have changed over the years.” Nowadays, she eschews processed foods for simpler fare: “I’ve learned a lot about the benefits of raw foods,” she says. Her diet includes ample portions of fish, young coconuts, spirulina, and fresh fruits

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and vegetables, eaten whole or put through a juicer. She makes her own salad dressings and mixes her own energy drinks before competitions, blending frozen durian, bananas and other ingredients.

"I've found that once you start giving the body the nutrients it needs, you crave the good stuff more and the bad stuff less," Boteler says. "Plus, the nutrient levels of whole and raw foods are so high that the body becomes satisfied more quickly. Your cravings for junk food naturally diminish and eventually go away."

"This is a challenging sport. You're out there by yourself and you have to stay focused."

## PAM BOTELER



With quick strokes and single-minded tenacity, Pam Boteler paddles her way to a win in the 500-meter event at the 2003 Canadian Masters National Championships in Welland, Ontario.

Tall, strong and clear-spoken, Boteler is a force to be reckoned with, both on and off the water. But her own success hasn't blinded her to the fact that women still face an uphill battle for recognition in paddling circles. The Olympic Games have featured men's sprint canoeing since 1924, for example, but a parallel event for women has yet to be developed and officially sanctioned. To fight such inequities, Boteler has teamed up with McNie and fellow Canadian Sheila Kuyper to create WomenCan, an organization that lobbies for full gender equality in international events and that advocates the development of race opportunities for women canoeists.

Boteler was heartened in July when officials with the Pan-American Championships voted to make women's canoe events permanent starting in 2006, with a goal of medaled women's competitions beginning in 2009. "The more opportunities there are, the more likely coaches will be willing to give a girl a paddle," she says. "Right now, there's still some resistance."

But canoeists, who regularly fight wind and waves, know something about overcoming resistance. "This is a challenging sport. You're out there by yourself and you have to stay focused," Boteler says. "But you also have to adjust to conditions. You have to relax. If you're too forceful, you risk falling out of the boat. You can't fight the water. You have to work with it."

Joel Hoekstra is a senior editor at *Experience Life*.