

STANLEY CUP FINALS
ELVIS LIVES
 Calgary's Secret Igniter
JAROME ELVIS IGINLA
 Will Make You Love The NHL

Can He Do It?

Kevin Garnett Challenges The Mighty Lakers

Garnett thwarts Karl Malone in Minnesota's Game 2 victory

MAY 31, 2004 www.si.com | AOL Keyword: Sports Illustrated

SI Adventure

Sports Illustrated BONUS SECTION

Big Splash

Daredevil kayaker Tao Berman takes his sport over the top

PLUS

- Tahiti's swell from hell *A12*
- Speed climbing's best *A15*
- Austin Murphy salutes Missy the Missile *A20*

WATER WINGS King of first descents, Berman likes to go where no paddle has been before.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOCK BRADLEY/RIPPIN PRODUCTIONS



SI Adventure

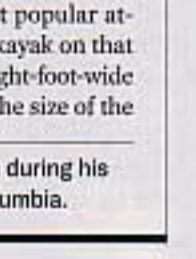
FALL GUY

Kayaker Tao Berman redefines his sport with daunting drops

BY FREDERICK REIMERS

WHILE SUBLIMELY beautiful, Lacy Falls would never strike most people as a navigable waterway. A five-foot-wide stream ricochets out of the bright tangle of British Columbia rain forest and spills onto a 300-foot-tall granite face. The whitewater cascades from shelf to shelf, eventually spreading into a four-inch-deep curtain that rushes 200 feet down the face, slotting neatly into the Pacific Ocean. It's a photo opportunity that has caught the attention of many a wandering boater. (The falls recently appeared on the cover of a boating magazine.) The fact that on this late April day there is a kayaker poised two thirds of the way up the falls preparing to merge with the torrent is startling; that the kayaker is Tao Berman suddenly brings the extraordinary picture into clear focus.

The 25-year-old Berman has made a career out of steering his plastic kayak down cascades that conventional wisdom relegates to scenic attractions. Case in point: his 1999 descent of Upper Johnston Canyon Falls, the first of three extreme kayaking world records that Berman has set over the past five years. Upper Johnston is a 98-foot-high gash set in a gorge in Canada's Banff National Park. Because the falls are an easy 1.5-mile hike from the road, they are one of the park's most popular attractions. When Berman floated to the brink in his kayak on that August afternoon, prepared to plunge through the eight-foot-wide plume into the pool far below, he was surprised by the size of the



LAUNCH SITE Berman hit a speed of nearly 40 mph during his first descent of the 180-foot Lacy Falls in British Columbia.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOCK BRADLEY/RIPPIN PRODUCTIONS 47



SI Adventure

FLIPPIN' GOOD Not just a daredevil, Berman, here performing an aerial loop, won the 2002 Pre-World Freestyle Championships.

"Women in the crowd were weeping," says Link. "THEY ASSUMED TAO WAS GOING TO KILL HIMSELF."

crowd that had gathered. More than 100 alarmed hikers stared at him from the observation decks across the gorge.

"Several women in the crowd were weeping because they assumed Tao was going to kill himself," says videographer Eric Link, who captured the stunt for his kayaking video *Twitch 2000*. Though his paddle snapped in half at the bottom, Berman penciled in the pool perfectly, then "rolled up with half a paddle in one hand and the world record in the other," Link says.

Berman has more than 50 first descents to his credit, many of them, like Upper Johnston, never attempted by anyone since. What's more impressive is this: He has never been to the emergency room as the result of a paddling accident. "I did hobble around on a tweaked ankle for six days once," he admits when pressed, referring to a souvenir from a botched 20-foot drop.

It's a good thing Berman has an assistant, who is tied by the waist to a tree, holds Berman's kayak in place while he climbs into the cockpit 180 feet above the sea. He needs a helper and the assistant agree on the proper force so he'll miss the rocks to either side of the landing zone. Without a hitch in his voice, Berman counts down from three and is shoved into the current. He slides over a lip and out of sight like a skier on a precipitous downhill course.

nothing new for Berman, whose parents were back-to-the-land proponents who raised Tao and his younger brother in a converted barn in northeastern Washington. Berman started paddling at 14 when his mother, Silver Moon, who is a massage therapist, began trading bodywork to local paddlers in exchange for their taking her rambunctious son on adventures. "It took him about two years to pass most of us up," says Paul Hodge, one of those early mentors.

Berman has just kept going. Thanks to Link's video series and television spots—the Lacy run is being filmed for NBC's *Jeep World of Adventure Sports* and footage from his Johnston run appeared on *Dateline* and Fox News—Berman is the best-known kayaker on the planet. And, in a sport in

which most guys are lucky to scrape together \$20,000 annually in winnings and endorsements, the kayaking huckster from Monroe, Wash., cleared six figures last year.

With acclaim, however, has come controversy. Many in the pro kayaking community turn sour at the mention of Berman, whose self-promotion would fit right in in Hollywood but is sorely out of place in the laid-back kayaking counter-culture. "I think he enjoys the business side of it as much as the paddling," admits his sometimes kayaking partner James Mole.

Berman knows that if he can pull off running Lacy Falls on national television, it will be very good for business. Before that can happen, however, on this spring day, he has a problem to solve—the tide is out.

While photographers were setting up and Berman was planning his run, the tide receded from the base of the falls, leaving barnacle-encrusted rocks and exposing the landing zone a mere three feet deep. The obvious solution: Wait for the tide to rise. The descent should take all of 10 seconds, after all, and this far north in late April daylight lasts until 8 p.m. So Berman waits, is interviewed and further scouts his line with friend and adviser Josh Bechtel.

Then, in the late afternoon, a call comes over the radio from the base of the falls. The photographers are concerned that they'll

lose their light. They want Berman to make a test run from partway up so they can get sharp photos. Because video can be shot in lower light, he can save the complete descent for when the tide comes in. Berman agrees, confident that he can manage the landing even in shallow water. He plans to nose his kayak into the ocean at a 45-degree angle. Landing too flat could crush his vertebrae. Landing too steeply could slam his chest into the water's surface, breaking his ribs and his sternum and even severing his aorta. He could also hit the bottom and fracture his femur. It's a bit like planning a car wreck.

If anyone can pull it off with a degree of certainty, rather than luck, it's Berman. In addition to 98-footers, he is known for paddling long, cascading slides like Lacy, staircases of broken rock that few others would dare to attempt. "Tao Berman really raised the bar," says world champion freestyle kayaker Jay Kincaid. "For a while he was running things harder than anyone else." Kincaid points to Berman's competitive drive and unshakable confidence as secrets to his success, a sentiment echoed by women's champ Brooke Winger, who notes that with few exceptions "[Berman]'s never really screwed up a big drop, so his confidence has never been challenged."

Berman's confidence and competitive drive have helped him silence his critics, who earlier in his career charged that he was a one-dimensional kayaker, capable only of risk-taking. In response he trained for three years at freestyle paddling, eventually beating Kincaid at the 2002 Pre-World Freestyle Championships. It's a discipline he has since dropped.

He'll need every skill he can muster to survive Lacy, though, and is probably feeling some pressure to get it done. Kincaid notes that Berman hasn't "done anything lately that has surpassed him from the crowd." It's Berman's line of work, that simply won't do.

So an hour before the tide turns, an assistant, who is tied by the waist to a tree, holds Berman's kayak in place while he climbs into the cockpit 180 feet above the sea. He needs a helper and the assistant agree on the proper force so he'll miss the rocks to either side of the landing zone. Without a hitch in his voice, Berman counts down from three and is shoved into the current. He slides over a lip and out of sight like a skier on a precipitous downhill course.

TAO'S FAVE FIVE

Berman recalls his top falls, all in the Cascade Mountains

- 1 Lag Choke Falls**
 May 1999, 30 feet
 "I had to rail slide on a 40-foot-long log. If I had lost my balance, I would have hit a rock and ripped my face open."
- 2 My Little Friend**
 May 1999, 200 feet
 "No one has repeated this descent. The falls are cascading, so you're sliding the whole way down. If I'd gotten pushed too far left, I would have crashed into a huge rock at the bottom."
- 3 Chenius Falls**
 May 2001, 690 feet (world record)
 "This was dangerous because it was so big and long. If anything had gone wrong, there was no way to stop."
- 4 Dingford Creek**
 May 2001, 100 feet
 "I was going over five falls, and the water was about three times its usual level. I did the descent in 19.38 seconds, a world record for five waterfalls."
- 5 Robt Canyon**
 November 1996, seven miles
 "This was a long, narrow canyon. The water was at twice its normal height. No one else wanted to go, so I did it by myself. It probably wasn't the smartest thing, but it seemed like a good idea at the time."

When Berman reappears below the hump, it's as if someone has sped up the film. He's halfway down the falls and accelerating, a rooster tail pitching behind him. To keep the kayak straight, he chops at the rock behind him with paddle thrusts fast enough to impress Jackie Chan. Suddenly, 30 feet from the bottom, he is airborne.

It may be the first time in his life that Berman is uncomfortable with speed. He has said that if he weren't a kayaker, he

would be a rally car driver, and he brags about the tickets he talks his way out of, including "an 85-in-a-35 where the cop walked up, my radar detector was going off and there was a copy of the book *How to Beat Speeding Tickets* on the passenger seat." But here, near the base of Lacy Falls, he's going much faster than he anticipated.

"When I hit the depression in the rock," Berman will say afterward, "I felt the kayak load up under me and accelerate." The kayak launches, and the tail kicks around so it is flying sideways, like a flicked cigar. It lands at the desired angle, 30 feet away from the falls in shallow rocky water. A plume of water lashes the air, and the kayak stops with alarming suddenness.

Because its slide has cavied in, the boat tips over, but Berman rights it instinctively. He capsizes again, and again rights himself. While the entire entourage holds its breath, he sits stunned in his kayak, his sunglasses knocked askew beneath his helmet. After a full minute he makes his way over to the video crew on shore.

"It was great," he says, shyly buoyant. He admits, however, that he may have made a mistake. "I may have been taking a risk there," he says, referring to running such a steep slide with so little water to control his descent. "I was really hoping there'd be a higher flow." Almost anyone but Berman, whose tight wrestler's build of 5' 5" and 155 pounds is ideally suited for taking such shocks, would have broken something. There will be no run from the top.

Still, the television people are happy. "Great TV," they say, packing their cameras for the boat ride home. So Berman is happy. He is not satisfied, however. What's next? Berman plans to continue his extreme kayaking all summer, filming for Link's upcoming *Twitch V*, which will include footage of first-run steep creeks in Idaho, Washington and Canada. Berman also has scouts searching the world for his next big falls. "I'd like to run a vertical drop over 100 feet," he says, noting that no kayaker has landed a drop of that height. He won't divulge where his scouts are looking, but next time you're checking out a towering scenic falls, don't be surprised if you see Berman at the brink.



VIEW FROM THE TOP In the laid-back world of kayaking, the self-promoting Berman has occasionally rolled the waters.

48 SPORTS ILLUSTRATED