

# Paddlesports Business

LEADING THE INDUSTRY SINCE 1986

FROM THE PUBLISHER

OF CANOE & KAYAK MAGAZINE

TAO BERMAN:

# KAYAK

PROMOTION

# CHAMP

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# High-Stakes Huck: Tao Knows the Way

by Mike Kord

**A** number of years ago two people were looking at a front-page newspaper photo of a NASCAR crash. One car was flying through the air, a dramatic, life-threatening moment suspended in time, but one reader, a sports promoter and marketer, had a slightly different perspective, saying, "That's a hell of an advertisement for Goodyear."

Sure enough, right there in the middle of this close-up photograph that captured the peril of auto racing, and, essentially, life and death in the balance, was the tire manufacturer's name clearly printed on the sidewalls of the front and rear tires.

Imagine the thousands of people who saw the photograph and also made the Goodyear connection. Can your paddle-sports business buy that type of advertising?

There's a logo-laden paddler out there kayaking off 100-foot waterfalls who says yes.

Fast forward to April 2004. About 20 journalists are milling around Lacey Falls, a 180-foot sliding waterfall in British Columbia that pours into the Pacific Ocean. They look up, cameras rolling, and see Tao Berman riding in his Dagger Nomad, hitting a kicker at the top of the falls, sending him an estimated 30 feet from the waterfall, and reaching up to 45 mph.

The cameras catch the thrill, the fright, life and death in the balance, and, of course, sponsors' names clearly visible all over the daredevil and his boat.

Tao hits the dense, shallow, concrete-like ocean water at an angle, denting in his boat nearly a foot and comes away "a little sore." His reaction two days later? "All the shooters were really, really happy."

That's Tao's mentality. The world-record holder for *(continued on page 6)*

Tao Berman is aware of the inherent risks in each of his daring first descents. He's also aware that every time he's profiled in a magazine or on a TV show, his sponsors reap the benefits.

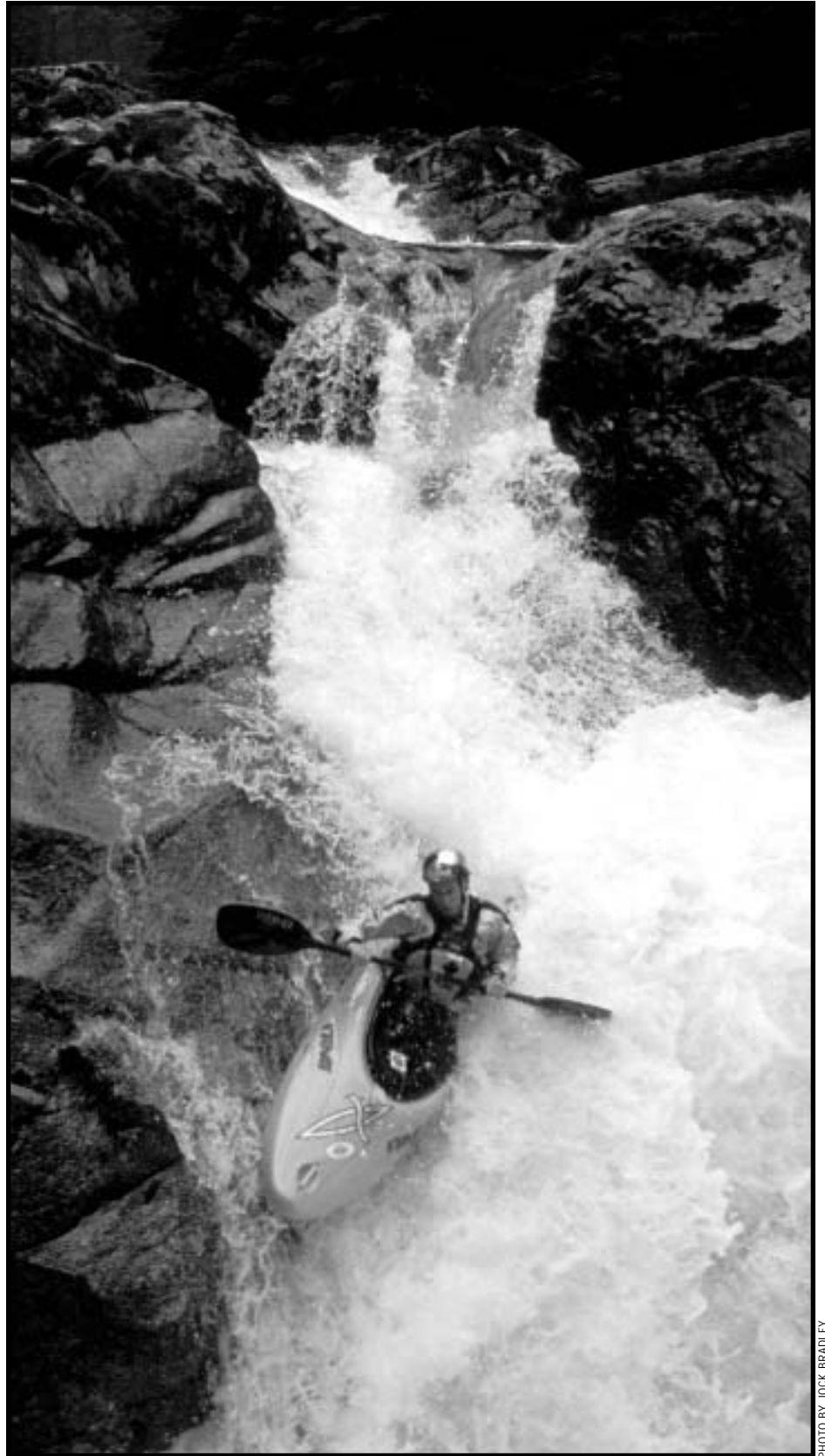


PHOTO BY JOCK BRADLEY



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a waterfall descent (98.4 feet down Upper Johnston Falls in Banff National Park) has made kayaking his business, and he knows that the more exposure he receives, the more coverage for his sponsors. He's aware of what he gets out of it, but he seldom, if ever, talks about the rush of attempting and completing such dangerous feats, instead opting to point out the benefits sponsors receive.

"The one thing that struck me about Tao is that he does have a sense for the business," said Mike Steck, director of marketing for WaterMark, maker of Dagger boats. "He can carry the brand flag, and do it in a wise manner."

Tao began kayaking in his teens, and it was quickly clear that his potential was limitless. Before long, he was bagging dozens of first descents and developing a reputation as one of the hottest boaters on the planet. The thrill for Tao, however, doesn't end at the take-out. In fact, that's where it seems to begin, and with it comes a bit of controversy.

#### DRIVEN

"A lot of people said, 'Tao, you can't make money kayaking.' But I said, 'I'm going to.'"

Mission accomplished. Tao's annual income doesn't come close to the average salaries of mainstream professional sports, but by kayaking standards, let's just say he could afford a nice, spacious apartment in New York City. Tao is sort of like a Warren Buffett amid a scene that is steeped in counter-culturism, and that rubs some of the competition the wrong way.

"I think an article (about me) in the *Wall Street Journal* would be kinda cool."

When was the last time you heard a creek-boater say that?

He promotes himself and his sponsors. Both are entities in which he is highly confident. Tao is seeking deals for book and movie biographies, as well as a new video game that has already been completed by Australian-based Torus Games, which is currently seeking a distributor in the United States.

"There are people within the sport who don't want to see the sport grow as fast as Tao would," says Paul Herschell, director of athlete management at Sports Unlimited, a Portland, Oregon-based marketing agency that represents Tao.

Google "Tao Berman Sucks" and you'll find a message-board entry so ridden with expletives it'd make a long-

shoreman cross himself. An article in the May 2004 issue of *Men's Journal* dubbed him the most controversial man in extreme sports and quoted an unnamed competitor as saying "He has no soul." A blogger in Ireland falsely signed out of a chat room as Tao Berman after bragging that he could win an upcoming competition without training.

May the future cast judgment upon Tao, but promoting the sport, and his sponsors, is his idea, which he does to the fullest extent of his ability—and he's not changing.

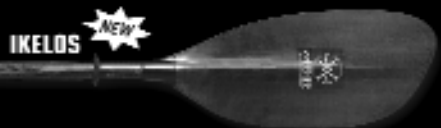
"It's easy to say I'm a sellout, but I wonder what they (my critics) would do if they were offered a good contract," Tao says. "I love what I do—getting paid to kayak and use my mind. If that's what makes me a sellout, I'll take it any day."

Love him or hate him, he's fought to get where he is.

"He's a gifted athlete," says Herschell, "but he's had to earn his stripes every step of the way."

When he first pursued sponsorship, he didn't have an agent. No problem. Tao wouldn't dwell on his compensation in his early proposals to companies. Instead, he focused on how they would benefit from aligning with him.

## 2004 Product Highlights



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- Light buoyant stroke
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"After awhile, they were convinced they'd sell more product, and pretty soon they started coming to me," Tao says.

Today, Sports Unlimited advises him and helps set up engagements around the world, keeping him very busy and a cell phone fastened to his ear. Last spring it was a morning TV talk show in Indianapolis. In the coming months, it'll be an adventure show on NBC and an article in *Sports Illustrated*. In a mass e-mail he sent out earlier this spring, Tao explained what he'd been up to with this: "There is a two-page spread of me in the current issue of *Hooked on the Outdoors*. There are some great logo shots."

"The guy's passionate about kayaking—we love that," said Steck. "But because he handles it from a business approach, we know we're going to get more exposure. I'd like to meet more folks like him."

#### TAO'S TWO WORDS

Talk to him about his business pursuits, and there are two words he'll use: *mutually beneficial*. Tao is aligned with Dagger, Stohlquist, Oakley, Teva, Snap Dragon, Grateful Heads, Werner, and Red Bull. He is also associated with Rippin' Productions' Jock Bradley as

his primary photographer and Eric Link—who shoots the highly visual *Twitch* video series—as his main videographer. For instance, Link owns all the Lacey Falls footage, which has been licensed to NBC. Bradley owns all the photos from the shoot that *Sports Illustrated* will use.

"It's the only way to do it. At the end of the day it's best for both of us. It's mutually beneficial."

Steck says it's difficult to quantify just how many boats Dagger has sold in the two-plus years it has sponsored Tao, a member of the manufacturer's Team D band of boaters.

"But I can say that with Team D in general, and Tao specifically, we're comfortable to keep sponsoring them," he said. "Tao has definitely helped sell boats."

#### FUTURE

Tao turned 25 in January. He knows he can't be a professional kayaker forever, so he has parsed his career into four phases: Introduction, Growth, Maturity, and Decline.

"I'd like to think I'm still in the growth stage."

He sees this career lasting another 10

years before he moves on to another entirely different path.

"I would never just say, 'I have enough money, so I can quit.' This is kind of a game to me, and I'm always going to be doing something."

#### GENERATION Y

Recently, the topic of how to reach a younger audience has swirled around industry events. Tao just might be the conduit that can connect kids to paddle-sports. He is a spokesman for the Natural High Foundation and Big City Mountaineers, groups that endeavor to help kids avoid drugs and become involved in outdoor activities.

He's also a motivational speaker who visited one school and convinced "hundreds of kids to write down their goals and go home to their parents and get them to write down their goals, too," he said. "That's as rewarding as my contract or my world record."

With that type of influence, who do you think would be more effective at telling kids to stay away from drugs? A dictatorial cop, or a dude with his own video game?

And one wonders, how many kids are drinking Red Bull these days? □

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