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WHAT'S THE WORLD RECORD FOR THE HIGHEST WATERFALL EVER RUN BY A KAYAKER? IT ALL DEPENDS ON WHO YOU ASK.

■ Tao Berman practices his waterfall descent form on a routine 19 foot drop called "Balls to the Wall" on the Cheakamus River near Whistler, BC.

On July 31, 2003, kayaker Ed Lucero

plunged 114 feet off Alexandria Falls in Canada's Northwest Territories, eclipsing Tim Gross' 2002 drop off Oregon's Abiqua Falls by 13 feet. A new world record, except for one hitch—at the bottom of the falls, Lucero was ejected from his kayak, unhurt, into the churning pool. Gross' run had ended the same way. Although both stunts have gained the "record" status, they also have ignited a debate: Should a kayaker have to successfully stay in the kayak to claim a world record waterfall descent?

"Where is the line drawn?" asks Corran Addison, founder of Montreal's Riot Kayaks. "If this is acceptable, the record goes to Jessie Sharp."

On June 5, 1990, Sharp, a 28-year-old Tennessee resident, paddled over the lip of Niagara's 170-foot Horseshoe Falls. Friends who filmed the descent reported that he didn't wear a helmet, so that his face wouldn't be obscured in the video. He also skipped his lifejacket, thinking that if he were to swim, it might impede his ability to escape from the hydraulic. Sharp's body was never recovered, though his kayak was—fully intact.

Controversy is nothing new to the waterfall record game. In 1999, Tao Berman ran, and successfully paddled away from, 98-foot Upper Johnston Canyon Falls in Alberta. But the apparent record was challenged when Welsh paddler Shaun Baker argued that Upper Johnston isn't completely vertical (Berman touched rock during his fall) and should therefore be considered a different category from his own then-record 64-foot descent of Aldeyjarfoss Falls in Iceland. Guinness agreed and split the category into waterfall descent and freefall descent.

If all that is now required to gain the world record is to paddle off the lip of a falls, then Jessie Sharp indeed holds the record, as no one has attempted a higher drop in a kayak. The majority of the white-water community, however, agrees that a kayaker should have to survive—or at least complete—the drop. "The way I look at it," says Addison, "you need to land in your kayak and paddle away from the base of the falls, even if only for a foot."

—Frederick Reimers

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