

In Over His Head

Willie Stewart had no business kayaking the Colorado River. But he went for it anyway.

BY DOUG COLLIGAN

WILLIE STEWART LOVES TO TELL the story of his first day kayaking through the Grand Canyon. He carried his brand-new purple-and-blue plastic boat to the water, strapped on his helmet and life vest, slipped into the cockpit and shoved off. In a matter of minutes, he was getting bounced around in the roughest white water he had ever seen. But there was nothing the river threw at him he couldn't handle. A quick flick of a paddle blade here, an



executed turn there, and he glided through the churning waters with ease.

Pleased with himself, he turned to his buddies—experienced river rats all—and said, “Great run.”

They looked at him, totally baffled. “What are you talking about?” someone said. “We haven’t gotten to the rapids yet.”

“That was the biggest stuff I had ever seen,” Stewart laughs. “I remember thinking: I’m dead.”

He’s the first to admit that his situation was crazy; there he was in a 40-pound boat, with only a few months of training—and one arm. Strapped to his left shoulder was a prosthetic limb that he’d had for just about a week. The plan was to paddle for 20 days over 227 miles of some of the roughest white water in the United States. What took place was one of the most remarkable adventures the Grand Canyon has ever seen.

It started with a casual phone call in the spring of 2005. A good friend, Mike Crenshaw, finally got a permit from the National Park Service to lead a private party of 16 boaters down the Colorado River that coming August. He had a slot open for Willie. Was he interested?

“It was the chance of a lifetime,” Stewart says. He had been waiting years for this trip to happen. “How could I refuse?”

But before they shoved off, he had a couple of things to take care of. He had to get a white-water kayak, learn how to use it, and get an arm.

FOR MOST OF HIS LIFE, the rugged 45-year-old has lived with only his right arm intact. He lost the left in a horrible accident when he was 18. Fresh out of high school, Stewart was working a summer construction job in Washington, D.C. The trailing end of a rope he was carrying got entangled in an industrial fan. Before he could react, the fan reeled in the rope taut and severed his arm just above the elbow.

He became a bitter young man, angry at the unfairness of what had happened, getting into brawls. When asked if one story told about him is true—that he got into a bar fight the day he got out of the hospital—Stewart looks off to the side. “A lot of fights, but it’s nothing to be proud of.”

In time, he learned to channel his rage into sports. He joined a rugby team, established a reputation as a fearless player and eventually was elected captain. He became a medal-winning Paralympic skier, a marathon runner and a triathlete, even an Ironman competitor (he’s done seven of them). Stewart discovered that his intensity and tremendous stamina made him a natural for endurance competition. His days of rage long gone, he found peace and purpose in his life. As he explains, “Sports makes me whole.”

THE TRIP WAS STILL about four months off and Stewart figured he had time to master the needed skills for white-water kayaking. As for the arm, he had a friend who could hook him up.



The Colorado River flows 1,400 miles, winding its way from the Rocky Mountains through the Grand Canyon, all the way to Mexico. For kayakers like Mike Crenshaw and his wife, Lynn, who invited Stewart to run the rapids, it can take up to 25 years to get a permit.





Dwarfed by the killer rapids of Lava Falls, one of the river's roughest stretches, Willie

Stewart and his buddy Timmy O'Neill fight their way through tons of icy water.

Michael Davidson runs the prosthetics lab at Loma Linda University Medical Center, where Stewart coordinates a sports program for the disabled called PossAbilities. Davidson's team built Stewart a prototype prosthesis, basically a length of plastic pipe laminated with carbon fiber. After watching Stewart practice with it, they crafted a second, shorter carbon-fiber-and-resin limb with an extratight shoulder strap to hold it on in the punishing rapids of the Colorado.

Stewart spent hours practicing in the university pool and in a creek down the road from his house. Over and over, he flipped himself upside down so he could work on his Eskimo roll—a self-rescue technique in which he uses his paddle and a little hip action to flip himself upright. Finally, figuring he was as ready as he'd ever be, Stewart headed for the Grand Canyon.

Even with all his training, he was barely prepared for the adventure. At the first significant rapids, a middling run of white water called Badger

Creek, Stewart was thrown out of his boat. He recalls how demoralized he felt as he swam to shore. Farther downriver at a place called House Rock, he was knocked over four times. He made it through mostly because he'd mastered one good move: the Eskimo roll.

At another set of rapids, Horn Creek, he got sucked into a violent implosion of water that held him in a swirling maelstrom for several terrifying seconds. At the next, Hance, which was full of rocks, Stewart says, "I was upside down, backward—basically, I was bounced down the river like a rubber ball." He was figuratively, and literally, in over his head.

Stewart decided that to even pretend he knew what he was doing would be pure suicide. From then on, he followed more experienced paddlers through the thundering waters and relied on his Eskimo roll for emergencies. "I can't tell you how many times I was saying, 'Guys, I'm not really good at this.'" The rugged out-

doorsmen who had watched Stewart battle his way through figured he was just being modest.

Up until now, even after his injury, Stewart had dominated just about every competition he entered. Here in the canyon, he realized, he might have met his match.

THE COLORADO can be a brutal adversary. It flows at the rate of anywhere from 10,000 to 30,000 cubic feet—that's as much as 950 tons of water—every second. It has roughly 100 named, or significant, rapids and a dozen smaller ones, all more than capable of trashing Stewart and his little plastic boat. And then there is the cold. Water temperature seldom gets above the high 40s. Some stretches are so chilly, hikers and boaters are warned not to swim in them at all. The shock of immersion can cause muscle exhaustion and drowning, even a heart attack.

After about a week and a half, Stew-

art had made it 90 miles. "I couldn't believe I was still alive," he admits. "It was pure luck." His luck was about to change.

He had been dreading the huge rapids called Crystal. Rapids in the Grand Canyon are rated one to ten in degree of difficulty, ten being the meanest. Crystal was a ten, so terrifying some who survive it have ABC—Alive Below Crystal—parties. Stewart began his attack by dodging an enormous whirlpool. Paddling frantically, he slipped past a wall of waves powerful enough to flip a boat twice the size of his, and skirted what one guide called a "raft-ripping rock."

But he still wasn't finished. There was a second half to navigate, a treacherous, boulder-strewn run euphemistically called the Rock Garden. To Stewart's relief, he wove through it all without getting tipped over once.

Shortly afterward, the river took a sharp left turn where he had to negotiate a little set of white water, coincidentally called Willies Necktie. The



“One-Arm Willie,” as he likes to call himself, with his wife, Lynnsey, also an Ironman athlete.

danger here is the way the current drives boats into the crook of the turn on the right side. The way to avoid it is to stay on the left. Stewart knew that, but he dropped his guard, making a deadly mistake. He drifted right.

Before he could make the correction, his boat slammed into a boulder and flipped. Tons of rushing water pinned him against the canyon wall. He tried to do his Eskimo roll, but his right arm—the one he always used to pull himself up—was jammed against the rock. Somehow he had to get himself vertical using his prosthesis.

Stewart fought hard, pushing up again and again, each time getting a few gasps of air before being submerged. Exhausted, freezing, running out of room to breathe, he thought he had one more try left in him. Gathering his last bit of energy, he lunged for the surface. This time, his paddle blade caught just right, and he pulled himself upright.

After a little less than a minute, the

current spun him around and slammed him into a rock. Before he'd even caught his breath, Stewart was underwater again.

Luckily, this time someone saw him go down. Timmy O'Neill was an experienced kayaker on his fifth Canyon run. He quickly paddled across the river to help, arriving just in time to see Stewart's kayak pop to the surface. Several long seconds later,

Stewart bobbed up. As he reached for O'Neill's kayak, they were both sucked into a hole of churning water—“getting Maytagged,” kayakers call it.

Finally, the river spit them out, and Stewart discovered he had a new problem. His paddle, strapped to his prosthesis, was acting like an anchor, dragging him toward the next set of rapids. He had to decide: Keep the arm and drown, or cut it loose.

Frantic, he clawed at the tight straps, finally getting them free. Then he felt the current drag everything away. “My arm,” he gasped. It was gone.

“I was devastated,” Stewart recalls. Here he was at the 100-mile mark, less than halfway, and for all practical purposes the trip was over. How much more can you take before your luck runs out? he'd wondered. Now he had his answer.

Eerily, just the day before, his wife Lynnsey had asked him to quit. An athlete and Ironman competitor herself, she had joined the group for the

first half of the trip, riding on one of the support rafts. She had to return to her job as a physician at Loma Linda, and as she turned to say good-bye to her husband, she urged, “Don't go back. You're going to die down there.”

Stewart was jolted by her plea. “She's seen me do a lot of dumb things,” he says, “so maybe she was right.” Then he remembered the other arm. As an afterthought, he had tucked the prototype into a bag, thinking it might come in handy for parts.

For the next couple of days, Stewart worked on it, rigging a makeshift shoulder harness from duct tape and spare straps. He spent a day on the river, fussing and adjusting and tinkering, fully aware that he had to get it right. Finally, he decided to try it out at the next big stretch of rapids.

He remembers the moment well, as he headed toward the roaring water: “I felt like I was paddling to my suicide.”

To Stewart's relief, the arm held. And so, every morning for the next 127 miles, he would strap it on and set out to battle the Colorado, with

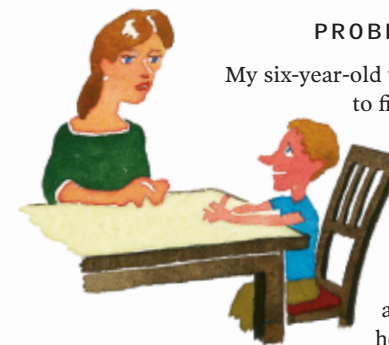
Timmy O'Neill guiding him through the killer rapids. The trip became an ongoing workshop in adaptation. Stewart learned that to get a tighter fit, he could slip the prosthesis over a waterproof shirt called a “dry top.” When one of the straps pulled free, he drilled holes through it with a Swiss army knife and used string and duct tape to reattach it.

The arm, like its owner, took a beating but never quit. When Michael Davidson heard that the prototype worked beyond expectations, he refused to take credit. “It's a tribute to the guy who wore it,” he says. “Willie probably could have made it with a broom handle.”

On the very last day of the trip, Stewart paddled off by himself, not truly believing he had made it. He'd been beaten up, suffocated in water cold enough to kill, come close to drowning at least twice, was terrified almost every day, and lost an arm.

“Right up to the very last 20 seconds, it was stressful,” he admits. “And, boy, was it fun.”

PROBLEM SOLVED



My six-year-old was having a tough time adjusting to first grade. At least twice a week,

I received a note from his teacher outlining his latest infraction.

Finally, I sat him down and laid it on the line. “I don't want any more notes from your teacher!”

“All right, Mom,” he said. Then after a pause he asked, “Are you going to tell her, or do you want me to?” JENNY DEREIS