



Earl Baldwin, fighting waves and boats in the 2008 Mayor's Cup.

Earl Baldwin, a Maine Tradition

..... Priscilla Reinertsen

The State of Maine has many, many fine paddlers. But if you ask any of the regulars on the racing circuit who the “Dean of Kayaking” in the Pine Tree State is, they will all identify **Earl Baldwin** of Orrington. A paddler who knows how to navigate the trickiest of rapids and survive ocean waves whose tops are being torn off by unforgiving gales, **Earl** is known for his indomitable spirit, guts, kayak hull designs and clear opinions. He has built his strong frame with hard work, practice, practice, practice, and shoveling snow, right and left handed. At 84 (85 in May, 2009) **Earl** eschews doctors (hasn't been to one in 42 years) and refuses to accept help with putting his kayak on his van, no matter how tall the vehicle. When he skips up to the podium at race awards ceremonies, **Earl** receives a wild round of applause. **Earl** has earned it.

We all start somewhere

Earl was born in Orrington, ME in 1924. Though he has spent time in boats throughout his life, **Earl's**

first competitive boating experience was in 1967. By that time he had experimented fairly extensively with constructing recreational kayak hulls. His first design was a 14 foot, spruce and aircraft fabric model, crafted back in 1956. Built as a tandem kayak, **Earl** and his kids messed around in that boat for many years, fishing and exploring.

In 1966 **Earl** laid up his first fiberglass kayak, closely following his 1956 hull design. “When I started building, I had no idea about racing boats – I thought it was kind of foolish. In '67 someone talked me into [entering the *Kenduskeag* 16 mile whitewater race]. I did pretty well for someone who didn't know what [he] was doing”. (*Bangor Daily News*, 10-8-05). **Earl** finished a respectable 1st in his class.

Winning is a great incentive to try both racing and hull designing again. **Earl's** next design was a 13'2” short class downriver kayak. “I never designed anything better”. (*Bangor Daily News*, 10-8-05). And though **Earl** has about a dozen hull designs stored in his garage, and has built a kayak business, Baldwin Boat Co., his pride is still linked to this **Early** design. But perhaps **Earl** has updated that pride to a kayak he designed and built in four days prior to the 2008 Mayor's Cup.

The 2008 Mayor's Cup – New York City Kayak Championships

The 3rd *Annual Mayor's Cup* was held on an exceedingly blustery, nay, flag straightening day in mid-October. The wind blew so hard that it could take the lint out of your pockets. Many of the world's best kayakers, from the US and 12 other countries, assembled to run the skyscraper-lined course around the island of Manhattan – up the *Hudson*, down the *East River*, crossing fabled Hell Gate in between. (When you cross Hell Gate, the chop produced by the surging ocean current of the *Hudson River*, the confused surge of the connecting *Harlem River*, the *East River*, and the traffic of the shipping lanes in the don't-brush-your-teeth-in-this-water, you had better be experienced.)

At the urging of **Ray Fusco**, *Mayor's Cup* race organizer, **Earl** entered the race as the oldest competitor, by far. (Classes are based on length of boat, not age.) A competitor list of 33 in **Earl's** Touring Kayak class, had whittled itself down to 18 hearty and big water savvy paddlers by the morning of the race. (152 paddlers registered in this elite and well-publicized event. **Greg Barton**, **Oscar Chalupski**, **Bevan Manson**, **Joe Glickman**, and **Kaitlin McElroy** were among the many notables.)

Competitors lined up for starts, by

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class, at the south end of Manhattan, in a *Hudson River* marina. With the wind barreling from the north, all of New Jersey was headed for the start line with the racers. The tide was coming upriver. *US Coast Guard* personal, *NYC Police Department Auxiliary Police Harbor Unit*, the *NYC Fire Department*, and race officials, surrounded by media reporters, and eager spectating throngs, watched with fearsome anticipation as each heat, including Earl's, set out. Rather unfortunately, there was a hulking garbage barge tied up to the wharf, just 30 yards from the start. More than a few racers were swept into the barge, flipping, and being bashed into the hull. Racers desperately tried to avoid the barge and each other. Earl skillfully avoided collisions and made his way into the roiling seas.

Later, Earl wrote to his good friend **Glen Green**: "When I hit the first big wave and got a face full of solid salt water, and before the next wave combined with a big boat wake, I had a quick thought that almost blurred my concentration. 'By convincing me to compete in this *Mayor's Cup Race*, **Glen** finally got his revenge for me leading him in his Olympic kayak in 1987 around *Verna Island* and into the *Atlantic*, and watching him brace for over a mile to keep from flipping over in the large waves, and being dashed onto the

rocky shore.' The thought passed, and on forged Earl, upright. Half way up to the George Washington Bridge, he reported that he had figured out how to manage the waves, getting in between the uneven crests and turning into the waves by opportunities.

Two hours, 12 minutes, 58 seconds from the start of the first boats, the nervous *Coast Guard* called off the race, much to the dismay of the lead racers, who had finally gotten into better water, race director **Ray Fusco**, who had recruited the world's best paddlers and lots of prize money, and **Earl Baldwin**. "It appears (from the imbedded tracking chip each paddler carried) that I was in 11th place out of 33 boats originally registered in my class. I feel pretty good about that. If I can last another year, and if the Touring classes are not eliminated, perhaps we can do the whole race."

It must be the lifestyle

When asked about the lifestyle and diet that account for his prowess throughout the decades, Earl indicated that he eats oatmeal with blueberries every morning, along with a raisin roll, a banana and a glass of juice. He avoids spicy food, and definitely keeps away from pepperoni. "You shouldn't have to endure pain to eat", quips Earl. Though not a teetotaler, Earl is not much of an alcohol consumer, never drinking hard liquor. He sleeps 7-8 hours a day

and never smoked by habit. It "wasn't worth carrying around the materials," he stated with clarity of opinion.

Earl trains in the kayak, from ice out to ice in. He doesn't believe in gymnasium equipment. "Does more harm than good" has been his experience. Though he says that he thinks about doing more training than he actually does, Earl keeps up a rigorous schedule, filling in the winter months with the resistance training of a heavily loaded snow shovel. And though he does not like to run, he recalls that he willed himself into running one winter to beat **Martin Danforth** on the portage at the *Soudabscook* downriver race. Not surprisingly, Earl passed Martin on the carry.

And for my next trick

This April, Earl did his 40th *Kenduskeag Stream* downriver canoe race (he has now done 40 of the 43!). His track record of placing first, second or third is impressive, however this year's race will be but a prelude, one expects, to the next 27 mile *Mayor's Cup*. As an incentive to enter the *Mayor's Cup*, **Glen Green** has offered a deal to Earl. If Earl builds one of his specialty Kevlar Atlantic Sea Kayaks for Glen, Glen will race alongside Earl in his heat, "just like the good old days". There is a warning from Glen in this, however. "Just ignore me when I tell you to turn left at Hell Gate!"



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