

The Women of Westfield

Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of a Historic First

by Eric R. Jones

The Westfield River Wildwater Race is the second oldest continuously held whitewater race in North America.¹ It was first run on May 2, 1954. In the beginning, there was only one race (what is now known as the expert race), and for the first eleven years, it began on the West Branch of the Westfield River, starting at Wildcat Springs in Chester and finishing at the Whipperton Club in Russell. It was a problematic course, featuring three portages and an always uncertain water level.

In 1965, the race organizers relocated the race to the river's East Branch, starting just below the Knightville Dam. The new course was a little shorter, but it was considered to require more skill to navigate and to be more interesting for spectators. And, thanks to the Army Corps of Engineers, it would have a controlled flow of water. Fifty years later, the expert race continues to start in the same location.²



Sterling Brightman & Cathy Gosline circa 1965
Picture courtesy of Carl Gosline

It would be tempting to conclude that the new course is the most important legacy of the 1965 race. In fact, something even more historic happened in 1965. In that year, fifteen-year-old Cathy Gosline paddling with Sterling Brightman won the Westfield race. As of 2015, Cathy remains the only woman ever to win the expert race.³

In celebration of the 50th anniversary of Cathy's achievement, this article introduces some of the remarkable women paddlers who have made their mark on the Westfield race.

“Canoe Race Won By Girl”

Cathy Ellen Gosline was born January 23, 1950 in Springfield, Massachusetts to Lucille & Carl Gosline. When she was three, her family moved from Agawam, Massachusetts to Columbia, Connecticut. It was here she grew up, attending Horace Porter School and then Windham High School. She was an excellent student, regularly appearing on the honor roll and scoring in the top 2% of students nationwide on the National Merit Test. She was also active in student government, the debate team, the school gymnastics club, and the Columbia Canoe Club.

Her racing career began in 1963. Throughout that year and 1964, Cathy raced both kayaks and canoes, but exclusively in flatwater races. At some point in late 1964 or early 1965, she decided to give the Westfield race a try. Cathy likely received encouragement from Sterling Brightman, a member of the Columbia Canoe Club and a friend of Gosline family. Thirty-five-year-old Sterling was at the beginning of a distinguished racing career, and he had already made a name for himself by winning the Westfield race in two of the previous three years. He was also president of the Westfield River White Water Canoe Club.

Cathy and Sterling trained for weeks before the race. They were part of a group who paddled the new course on March 13. The water level was low for this first practice run, and things went smoothly, if slowly. However, Cathy's brother Carl remembers the

- 1 The FIBArk Downriver Race on the Arkansas River in Colorado, which was first held in 1949 is older. FIBArk is almost exclusively a closed boat race.
- 2 In 1973, the finish line was moved downstream from the Whipperton Club to the Woronoco Dam. The course has remained unchanged since that time.

- 3 From 1973 to 2009, the expert race offered multiple canoe classes. This article, like most newspapers, treats the winner of the expert race as the fastest boat down the expert course.

pair making a much less successful practice run a few days before the race. For that run, the Army Corps of Engineers provided an aggressive water release, and Cathy and Sterling ended up stranded in mid-current on a rock around which their aluminum canoe had wrapped.

This high water debacle may have been a blessing in disguise, because there was certainly nothing low-flow about race day, April 4. The Army Corps of Engineers provided a release of 1200cfs, which was eight times the flow for the March 13 practice run. Of the 37 boats that started the race, 16 failed to finish, and the safety crews were kept busy fishing unsuccessful teams out of the river as well as rescuing some spectators whose chosen viewing location turned into an island when the water rose.

Cathy & Sterling had a good run. They attributed their success in part to fact that they took kneeling positions close to the center of the canoe, much like a tandem slalom team. Their time of 1:17:42, put them just 18 seconds ahead of Stephen Hopkins and Robert Crane, and a mere 23 seconds ahead of the third place team of Bruce Spencer and Tom Foster. It was the closest finish in the twelve-year-history of the Westfield race; only two races since (2005 & 2006) have been closer.

The history-making nature of the event was news throughout the area. The pair's victory made the front-page of the Springfield Union, complete with a picture of the smiling Cathy Gosline posing with her partner above the headline "Canoe Race Won By Girl First Time." The Hartford Courant, Willimantic Chronicle, and Berkshire Eagle (which saluted Cathy's achievement in an editorial note as well as in an article) all carried the story as well.

Cathy raced with Sterling again on May 9th at the Hudson River White Water Derby. The pair finished the downriver race in 1:03:53 – once again the fastest tandem open canoe time of the day. It was probably Cathy's last whitewater race. In late August, Cathy competed in the flatwater National Championships held in Washington, D.C., finishing 4th in women's K-1 and 3rd in women's K-4.

Despite her success, 1965 appears to have been Cathy's last season racing. Although paddlers from

the Columbia Canoe Club, including her brother Carl, continued to be successful at races, Cathy's name doesn't appear among them. She graduated from high school in 1968, and later received a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. She lived in Wisconsin for a time before returning to Connecticut in 1985. On April 10, 1993, at the age of 43, Cathy died from breast cancer, unaware of how enduring her legacy would be.



Jane & Stewart Coffin (far left) - 1961 Westfield Race
Picture courtesy of Stewart Coffin

Making History

Cathy Gosline was not the first woman to race the Westfield. That distinction belongs to **Jane (Lewis) Coffin** of Arlington, Massachusetts. Jane raced with her husband Stewart Coffin in the eighth Westfield race on April 9, 1961. At the time, many endurance sporting events prohibited women from competing, but Westfield race officials seem not to have shared these prejudices. Stewart doesn't recall any question being raised about Jane entering the race. Indeed, she received a standing ovation upon her 8th place finish, and she was later awarded a special plaque for being the first female participant. Jane was two-months pregnant at the time she made her historic run.

It would have been surprising if anyone had questioned Jane's participation. At the time, she was literally helping to write the book on New England paddling. Jane and Stewart traveled throughout the region documenting rivers and streams for the first edition of the Appalachian Mountain Club River Guide. Some of their runs were probably first descents by an open canoe. Jane passed away from breast cancer on February 25, 1991. She was just 59.

Missed It By That Much . . . Twice

Cathy's position as the only woman to win the Westfield expert race has had a few challengers over the years, but no one has come closer to matching her feat than **Bird (Beck) Stasz**. Racing with her husband Tom in 1977, she finished just 19 seconds behind Mike & Robert Waddle. The Staszes were on pace again in 1980, finishing 31 seconds behind William Tingley and Nic Osborn. Bird's 1980 time of 1:13:47 makes her the fastest woman ever in the expert race (since the course was lengthened in 1973), and part of the twelfth fastest team of all time.

Lorrie Drake, who, racing with Brad Helfer, finished 56 seconds behind the leaders in 1990 is the only other woman to finish within one minute of the fastest boat in the expert race.

Women's Tandem Teams

Records for the early years of the Westfield race are incomplete, so it's uncertain when the first women's tandem team participated in the expert race. The first women's team that can be definitely identified is that of **Michelle "Mitch" Lavigne & Sue Szczesniak** who finished fifth in the mixed class in 1975 (38th overall).

Mitch & Sue were seniors at Lewis Mills High School in Burlington, Connecticut. They were introduced to racing by their history teacher and champion paddler Schuyler Thomson. A 1974 Hartford Courant profile identified them as "the only women's racing team in Connecticut," but for several years in the mid-1970s they had a spirited rivalry with **Sandy & Patty Cooley**, sisters from Athol, Massachusetts. The Cooley sisters were about the same ages as Mitch & Sue. Despite a number of close finishes in other races, the two teams never went head-to-head on the Westfield. The Cooley sisters paddled the novice race in 1974, making them one of the first women's tandem teams to compete in the Westfield race. They competed in the novice race again in 1976. In 1975, the year Mitch & Sue paddled in the expert race, the Cooleys finished second in the family class in the intermediate race (9th overall).

Mitch & Sue were both beginning long racing careers. They also experienced the only reported in-

stance of discrimination against women paddlers that I came across in researching this article. In 1974, they finished third in the mixed class in a race on the Hudson River. The judges refused to give them a trophy because they didn't believe two women qualified as a mixed team. As there was no women's class offered, it was unclear what category they were supposed to have entered, but as of the July 1974 Courant article they had still not received their award.

In 1978, the Westfield race offered a women's tandem class. The only entrants were the yet-to-be-identified **D Walsh & P O'Donnell**. That same year, **Poppy Thacher & Sandy Andrews** finished eighth in the mixed class on the intermediate course. It was Poppy's first race. Sandy, who was the daughter of Westfield race director Merritt Andrews, was familiar with the course. The two paddled a beat-up alu-



Poppy Thacher & Sandy Andrews – 1979 Westfield Race
Picture courtesy of Poppy Thacher

minum canoe using handmade paddles.

Poppy remembers the spectators in 1978 encouraging them to return the following year . . . with a better boat. This they did, finishing first in the mixed division in the intermediate race on Saturday, then returning on Sunday for the expert race where they finished third in the mixed class (40th overall). Thacher & Andrews raced together for many years, winning gold medals at the American Canoe Association Open Canoe Downriver Nationals ("ACA Nationals") on the Youghiogheny River in 1983 and the Nantahala River in 1984.

The closest a women's team has come to winning the Westfield was in 2003. That year **Lisa (Tambussi) Salvini & Abby Kingman** finished 584 seconds behind the leaders (13th place overall). Their time of

1:28:42 is the best ever for a women's tandem team. It's not surprising that Lisa and Abby hold this record. They had already set the women's tandem record for the novice race in 1997 at 52:05 – a record that also stills stands.

Double Bladed

From 1966 to 1970, the expert race included a solo kayak class. The only woman known to have raced in a kayak is **Cathy Dugan** of Wayland, Massachusetts in 1969. Cathy was only fifteen, but she had already been racing for five years. In 1968, she won the women's kayak class at the Hudson River Water Derby.

The temperature on March 30, 1969 was barely above freezing, with snow flurries and wind gusts above 45mph – a “very low fun factor” Cathy remembers. Cathy had never been on the river before, and she flipped in the Westfield Gorge section of the course. While she kept hold of her paddle (which was borrowed), the swift current carried her kayak out of sight. By the time she hiked out to the road and was picked up by her coach, she was battling hypothermia, barely able to take off her wet clothes. Cathy recalls one of the mothers from the Cochituate Canoe Club grabbing a heavy blanket, but not to keep Cathy warm. She held up as a screen while Cathy changed. “I was beyond caring much about my modesty,” Cathy says.

The Springfield newspapers reported that Cathy's kayak was stolen. At the time, fiberglass boats were fairly rare and generally custom-built. Cathy's yellow kayak had been made by two Dartmouth students for \$150 (around \$1000 in 2014 dollars). After Cathy's boat went missing, sightings of boats being cartopped were reported back to her, and she could often identify the owner by the boat's color. Some weeks after the race, Cathy's kayak was mysteriously returned to her.

Going Solo

From 1975 until 1996, and again in 2005, the expert race included solo canoe classes. Only two women are known to have paddled the expert race in a solo canoe: **Lorrie Drake** in 1985 and **Susan Kallerges** in 1993. Susan was probably practicing for the ACA Nationals, which were held on the same course the following weekend. Susan finished fifth in the Westfield race, but won two golds racing solo at the Nationals.

The Short Course

In 1971, the Westfield race introduced the short expert course, encompassing the first five miles of the expert race. Awards are given out by class, and generally no special recognition is given to the fastest boat. No woman has ever been the fastest down the short expert course, but kayaker **Mary Hawkes** has come close. In 1987, Mary finished 13 seconds behind Carl Lafreniere. Ten years later, in 1997, she finished 30 seconds behind Guy Flatley. Mary is also the fastest women down the short expert course, finishing in 29:55 in 1996; that year she was fifth overall.

The Novice Race

In 1968, the Westfield race introduced the novice course, which bypasses the first five miles of the expert course. In terms of participation, the novice race has eclipsed its older sibling. Awards are given out by class, and, other than bragging rights, no special recognition is given to the fastest boat on the novice course. The novice race rules also prohibit any person that wins a class from paddling in that class again with the same partner. An open class instituted in 2013 allows teams otherwise unable to compete to race the course for a time, but not for awards.

Women have been in the fastest boat down the novice course seven times. It first happened in 1993 when **Gina Campoli** and John Broadhead finished in 50:30. That time makes Gina the fastest woman ever in the novice race (since the course was lengthened in 1973). In fact, only eight boats have ever run the race faster.

Four years later, **Lisa (Tambussi) Salvini & Abby Kingman** became the first women's team to record the fastest time in the novice race. It was a feat Lisa repeated in 2008, this time racing with Amy Solak. Lisa is one of only seven paddlers to be the fastest down the novice course more than once. Indeed, Lisa nearly accomplished the feat three times. In 1993, paddling with Tom Salvini, she finished just 9 seconds behind Gina's record-setting pace.

Below is the list of women who have had the fastest time on the novice course. All the women were part of a canoe team. As of 2015, no woman kayaker has had the fastest time (even among kayakers). The names listed here are the names under which the paddlers raced in the year indicated:

1993 0:50:30 **Gina Campoli** with John Broadhead
1997 0:52:05 **Lisa Salvini & Abby Kingman**
1999 0:51:56 **Sue Slowick** with Tom Warner
2002 0:54:52 **Gloria Wesley** with John Defeo
2005 0:54:31 **Terese Galvin** with Travis Wheeler
2008 0:56:48 **Lisa Tambussi & Amy Solak**
2012 1:09:38 **Sara Dorsey** with Jim Sullivan



Lisa Tambussi & Abby Kingman - 1999 La Classique
Picture courtesy of Abby Kingman

The Monarchs of the River

No woman has raced the Westfield more than **Julie Marcoulier**, who has been in the race every year since 1994. Julie has participated in the expert race nineteen times, more than any other woman. She has been part of the novice race eighteen times, a number that includes nine first place finishes – more than any other novice race paddler. All of her first place finishes in the novice race have been in the women's tandem class, and due to the aforementioned rules, each of these wins has come with a different partner.

Kayaker **Sue Vollrath** holds the women's record for most novice races at twenty. She has also participated in short expert race twelve times. Her thirty-two total Westfield appearances is second among women paddlers.

Lisa Tambussi has been in the novice race twelve times and the expert race seventeen times. Her twenty-nine Westfield races are third among all women paddlers. However, her twenty-three years of racing is a record for women paddlers.

No women's team has raced together at Westfield more often than **Kathy Engwer & Julie Marcoulier**. Their eleven appearances include ten expert races, which is also a women's tandem record. Kathy is also a member of the women's tandem team that holds the novice record for appearances, but her partner is a different Marcoulier. **Kathy Engwer & Jessie Marcoulier** have raced the novice event together eight times.

Conclusion

An article of this length can't do full justice to the achievements of the women who have participated in the Westfield race. The women who will paddle the race in the future, some mentioned here and others now unknown, will only add to that legacy. And perhaps one of them will join Cathy Gosline as the fastest in the race.

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