

IN THEIR WORDS

Andrea McQuitty tells her story - The 2009 International Canoe Federation (ICF) Wildwater World Cup - Tasmania

Andrea McQuitty, Development Officer for Canoe Tasmania and international canoe competitor, had long cherished the aspiration of holding a World Cup in Tasmania. Andrea's aspiration came true in November 2009 and this is the story of how it all went.

Tell us about your motivation to do ICF 2009?

The idea of holding the ICF Wildwater World Cup in Tasmania had been with me for many years, since I was travelling the World to compete in races and wishing that just for once I could have the advantage of racing at home without the expense, loneliness and travel problems always associated with competing in foreign countries. I think that the thought first popped into my head in Heathrow Airport when they were refusing to put my kayak on a flight to Japan where I was heading for a race and I was all alone in a big city trying to sort it out. As time went on, my motivation increased but for different reasons.

Having been to so many World events, I wanted to run an even better World Cup than the ones I'd been to and to create an international event for Tasmania by bringing the World's fastest white-water paddlers here. I also wanted to show-off our rivers and the wild parts of Tasmania, showcasing to the World the incredible natural environment of Tasmania and how it can be enjoyed in a very low impact, yet spectacular manner. I also felt it was an enormous privilege to be able to organise a World Cup on the home rivers of the paddlers I coach and give them the opportunity to race at home – the opportunity I always dreamed of.

Another motivation for me was the opportunity to build international friendships based on our mutual love of rivers and paddling within this unique environment. I really like bringing people together.

Luckily, all of my motivation was shared by John Borojevic, Chair of Canoe Tasmania

What were the best aspects of the whole thing?

People came, the timing system worked, the rivers and racing were fantastic, the weather was perfect, the media coverage exceeded expectations and people went home very happy!

In organising any event, there is always the fear in the back of your mind that no-one will come. It was a huge relief when the first entry came in, followed by delight with the full field of competitors and then amazement at the number of other family members who came to support their paddlers.

The atmosphere around the World Cup was unique. It was like three weeks of paddling with a bunch of good friends. This aspect of the World Cup set a fantastic example to our young paddlers and the general public and will also have an ongoing legacy for the sport itself. The atmosphere was helped by the amazing weather. Somehow, we timed the event for the sunniest, warmest, calmest, two weeks in spring that I can ever remember. We sent the international teams home thinking that it's 25 degrees C, sunny and windless every day in Tasmania!

The real highlight of the whole event for me though was the incredibly positive feedback from the international competitors and the ICF Officials. One Italian Team member (who had been World Champion in 2004) said to me at the end of the World Cup that he had "fantastic memories to last a lifetime". Nothing meant more to me than to have happy "customers"!

Tell us about any unexpected, "dark moments" and what you did to work through them.

We "lost" an International Canoe Federation official, Aleix, when he arrived. His flight from Spain arrived late into Melbourne, so he missed his connecting flight into Launceston and had to wait for 5 hours before he could get onto another flight. The person organised to meet him at Launceston Airport gave up and went home. When Aleix arrived in Launceston, there was no-one to meet him, so he tried phoning me but I was out of mobile range, in the middle of

World Cup Race 3 that was being run at that time. Aleix ended up catching a taxi to his accommodation at Gowrie Park, however we had no idea of where he was and it took until that evening to track him down. After 36 hours of travel, he was not happy with what he obviously thought was poor hospitality on our part. The look he gave me when we first met was one that made me wish the ground would swallow me up. However, after a bottle of good Tasmanian wine and many apologies for not having a better reception for him at the airport (even if we didn't know when he was eventually going to arrive), he gradually warmed to us. Had we "lost" any of the other ICF officials, they would have dealt with the situation with good humour and understanding, but Aleix was a very serious character. We lost the wrong ICF official!

Were there any humorous things that happened in the planning or during the event?

The Irish Team!

They had a team leader who was Super Organised...or so he thought. He was so organised that he knew more about Tasmanians than the locals because he'd done all of the research, particularly on Irish Immigration in the 1800s to Tasmania. He kept dismissing offers of help with local information, like how to get to the race course. He didn't need that sort of assistance because he had SAT NAV! Unfortunately for him, Google Maps doesn't yet have the World Cup Race courses specifically marked. In fact, the dot for "Brady's Lake" actually appears on the far eastern side of the lake down a dirt track. They were only lost for about 3 hours!

The Irish Team were actually all magnificent and provided some of the best quotes of the World Cup, particularly in relation to our more remote and wild venues...

"On Irish Rivers, you're never more than 5 minutes away from a Pub. It's a bit further here."

How did being a high profile participant and organiser work out?

There were good and bad aspects to being a competitor and organiser. The worst part was that I didn't get enough training time because I was too busy organising. The day before the World Cup Final, it took me half an hour to get from the car park to the water for my practice run because people kept stopping me to ask questions...and when I finally reached the river, the water had been switched off!

The good aspects were that it was just wonderful to be on the water with the other competitors. This is where I really came to know the people. It was through the conversations that I had on the water that I really found out how people were enjoying Tasmania, received feedback about the event and heard about problems they might have been having.

Organising the event also kept my mind off my racing so that I didn't have time to get nervous. I just turned up to the start line and switched into a competitor. It must have worked well because I got my best ever results – including a sixth place at Brady's where I was trying to sort out accommodation issues for the River Rescue Team between runs!

What's the best advice you can give to a prospective event organiser?

Value your volunteers and provide personalised attention to participants, anticipating their needs.

The atmosphere around our event was largely set by the relaxed, good humoured volunteers who soon knew the name of every competitor. Small touches made the difference in making every participant feel welcome and this made a difference to the event overall. For example, we wanted the arrival of the teams to be as easy and stress free for them as possible. This included obvious things such as helping them organise accommodation, car hire, kayak transport etc. It also included having volunteers with Welcome Bags of Tasmania goodies meet every team as they arrived. It also included less obvious things such as ensuring smooth passage for their equipment through Quarantine. We worked with Quarantine prior to the event to ensure that they were aware of what would be arriving and so that the correct information was sent out to teams ensuring that they were aware of bio-security issues and all equipment arrived clean and dry.

What do you think might be the legacy from the event for Tassie as a destination and adventure sport location?

This event turned the eyes of the paddling World towards Tasmania. It was like we had a large neon sign flashing over Tasmania for 3 weeks, and this has continued.

The most effective means of continued post-event promotion will be the word-of-mouth feedback from the competitors and international officials. In this day and age it is the social networking sites such as Facebook, personal blogs and Twitter that connect so many people. The ICF Wildwater World Cup brought to Tasmania 100 of the most high profile and influential international paddlers and officials who are currently passing on rave reviews of the event and Tasmania through these on-line networks. Virtually all of these on-line reports of the event talk about both the paddling

and Tasmania as a destination. For every photo of a paddler in action, there is one of a paddler holding a wombat or walking in the mountains. Tasmania could not be receiving better promotion than this!

The YouTube highlights of the events, that was produced to show the Tasmanian venues as much as the action, have achieved over 9000 views in the first few post-event weeks.

The legacy of the World Cup will be undoubtedly be increased visitors to Tasmania for both paddling and general tourism. It has been a hugely effective marketing tool for Tasmania.

One of the Board of Directors for Australian Canoeing, a professor at ANU, summed up the legacy of the World Cup saying that “Tasmania is now a Hot Spot for paddling in the World”.

.....and there are still 4 competitors here training and another is coming back in February to train as well.

Any future plans for follow-up events?

The International Canoe Federation officials who came to Tasmania have already started talking with us about running a World Championships here. However, we want a good rest first!