

Photo: Nancy Wiley

LARS HOLBEK

Whitewater legend

Lars Holbek is one of the most accomplished whitewater explorers of all time. Futaleufu, Stikine, Fantasy Falls, Golden Gate, Hospital Rock, these titles conjure some of the world's most difficult, top-quality whitewater, and Lars was the first to paddle all of them. In total, he has logged over seventy first descents worldwide. Despite his impressive achievements, Lars is a paddler's paddler, laid back, fun-loving, and independent. Dedicated to pushing the limits of whitewater paddling, for decades Holbek exemplified the concept of a lifestyle paddler, and led the charge in one of the greatest periods of exploratory kayaking the sport has yet to see.

Words Tyler Williams

Photos courtesy of Nancy Wiley, Eric Jansen, Dave Anderson, Harry Patsch, Chuck Stanley and Lars Holbek



Lars shoots Chuck Stanley running the crux exit drop of the Crucible on Devil's Postpile, San Joaquin River, CA in their 1986 descent in Perception Dancers.

A trio of kayakers stood atop a sculpted boulder, looking downstream. The river at their feet tumbled through a maze of giant rocks, stair stepping its way into a deepening gorge. Smooth granite slabs rose from waters edge. Somber overcast skies blended with the cold gray rocks of the canyon, and a chill breeze blew upstream. The river was higher than expected. Conditions were hardly ideal for a first descent.

The most experienced kayakers of the trio, class V luminary Richard Montgomery and racing champion Chuck Stanley, agreed that returning to the nearby put-in was the most logical thing to do. The third member of the group, Lars Holbek, wanted to push onward. He was mesmerized by the rushing water, compelled to enter the mysterious canyon. In short, he was obsessed. "I'm gonna keep going," he proclaimed flatly to his partners. Richard and Chuck looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders. Apparently, they were going too. Stanley later wrote of the decision, "Once again, democracy failed, and we entered the canyon with a tremendous foreboding."

The team picked their way through the gorge, paddling from eddy to eddy, scouting, portaging, keeping a constant eye for canyon escape routes. At one point, they found themselves trapped between vertical walls, with an unrunnable waterfall below. Their only escape lay in making a delicate ferry across the river at the brink of the falls, with a precarious portage on a narrow ledge along the opposite shore. All three of them made the move, and by dusk they were exchanging high fives below the last rapid of the day.

The story might end there, but fourteen miles of logjam-riddled reservoir remained before reaching the take-out, with a hitchhike shuttle to follow. It was midnight when the tired

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El Capitan

Holbek at a hanging belay, Mescalito, El Capitan, Yosemite.



Photo: Eric Jansen

paddlers finally pulled ashore and made a fire out of nearby road signs. Only Stanley had bothered to pack a sleeping bag. They huddled around the toxic fire until daybreak, when Holbek flagged a ride back to their stashed ten-speed, and rode several miles of dirt to retrieve the vehicle.

It was March, 1980, and the run the trio had just completed was Bald Rock Canyon on California's Middle Fork of the Feather. It would be the first in a string of high quality, difficult first descents; a string that ranks as perhaps the greatest exploratory episode in the history of kayaking.

Lars Holbek began his love affair with the Sierra Nevada as a child, when his family went on camping trips to the "Range of Light." Weekend getaways found the entire Holbek clan - Lars, brother Suren, mom Mimi, and dad Erik - camped along streams that Lars would later explore by kayak. Athletic pursuits were never a staple of the Holbek household, but original thinking and steadfast determination were. Lars' father, Erik, immigrated to the USA from Denmark. An architect, he was designing avant-garde solar buildings in the 1950s and 60s, long before "green" construction was even a term. Mimi taught special education.

The Holbeks lived in Santa Rosa, California, a small city north of bustling San Francisco. Coastal mountains surround Santa Rosa, where miles of vineyards produce top shelf wines. In winter, steady two-day rains soak this rolling countryside, sending small streams over their banks. During high school, Lars would sneak away on extended lunch breaks to paddle the local floods. Kayaking, however, wasn't his first outdoor pursuit.



Lars' adventure lust was first directed toward rock climbing, a skill he initially learned through his local Sierra Club chapter. At age thirteen he landed a job at an adventure gear shop, where a staple of climbing partners waited.

By age sixteen, Holbek had honed his skills enough to take on the big walls of Yosemite. One hindrance was his lack of expensive gear necessary for the multi-pitch climbs of the valley. That all changed one day when a hiker alerted Lars and his climbing partner to a sleeping bag hanging on a cliff high above the valley. On a lark, the duo climbed up to the mysterious object to investigate. As they approached, it became clear that it was not a sleeping bag, but an abandoned haul bag full of gear. The teens were ecstatic. Lars remembers, "We were like, man we've gotta use this gear!" The two headed directly to El Capitan's Dihedral Wall and started up the 30-pitch, 5-day climb. Things soon turned epic.

Lars dropped the lid to one of their two water jugs on day two, forcing them to drink half of their allotted water then and there. Four uncomfortable sling-hanging nights,

His main paddling partner was Michael Schlax, a high school friend who approached the sport with nearly the same vigor as Holbek. They paddled at every opportunity (including school lunch breaks), and slowly developed their skills on the rivers of California's north coast; the Eel, Salmon, Mad, Trinity, and Klamath.

On his first trip, Lars wore no lifejacket, no helmet, and no paddling jacket. He did have a wool sweater, and a great time.

Following high school, most of Lars' classmates headed to college. Lars headed to Yosemite. When money ran low by summers end, he migrated north to Washington State with a posse of climbing buddies, and picked apples for a few weeks before returning to his life of dirtbag adventuring in the Sierra Nevada. This pattern of short seasonal work continued for decades. After the fruit picking years, Lars worked winters with Schlax doing field surveys for a

ugly, perfectly shaped, perfectly deadly. After one cycle, he tried swimming downstream, but the hole's backwash had him, and he was sucked into the maw again, and again, and again. Losing strength, he knew he had to try something new. On the fifth cycle, he turned and swam directly into the hole. All went quiet, he bounced along the bottom of the river, then slowly rose to the surface, and made it to shore.

His fiberglass boat lay mangled in the rocks downstream. It seemed the "useless toy" that they had found was about to come into play. Holbek was now paddling plastic.

The timing couldn't have been better. Holbek was coming into his physical prime, a series of wet winters were poised to douse California, and Lars was about to meet Richard Montgomery and Chuck Stanley.

The Montgomery / Stanley duo had asserted the lead in California river exploration with their landmark 1975 descent of Giant Gap on the North Fork of the American. That infamous section had been known as a portage-laced, upper limits run until Montgomery and Stanley smoothly

three decades after their discovery. Later that spring, they explored upstream from Giant Gap, running the slightly steeper Generation Gap.

The following year, they probed into the wilderness of the North Fork of the Mokelumne, finding long runnable slides like nobody had ever seen. The kayak explorers dubbed the dreamlike canyon appropriately—Fantasy Falls. They were exploring tributaries that no one had imagined boatable, essentially redefining what was deemed runnable. Holbek's recognition as a top-notch paddler was spreading, bringing him opportunities for river runs outside his home state. Following the Fantasy Falls run, he got a call from eminent big water paddler Rob Lesser. Lesser, a veteran of Alaska's Susitna and Alsek Rivers, had his eye on the greatest big water challenge yet—a virtually unknown river in northern British Columbia called the Stikine.

Filed for ABC television, the descent was historic, bringing true cutting edge whitewater into the public eye for the first time. The big water of the Stikine required a different paddling style than what Holbek was accustomed to on his technical California rivers, and he was forced to

Especially disconcerting was a section of river that the map indicated would drop 500 feet per mile. Lars now says with a chuckle, "We were gripped at every horizon line, waiting for that 500 foot mile to show up." Fortunately, the huge gradient turned out to be a cartographer's error, and the famished paddlers made it to the take-out bridge in one piece.

Surprisingly, the Peru trip generated even more enthusiasm in Holbek for South American adventure. Two years later, he journeyed south again, this time to test rumors that had been surfacing of boundless mountain rivers in Chile. The posse included Californians Mark Allen, Phil DeReimer, and Eric Magnuson.

The kayakers had agreed to provide safety for a commercial rafting venture on an unrun river called the Futaleufu. When Holbek and company got to the Futaleufu Valley, they learned that the rafters had been delayed, and the safety boating gig was off for the moment. The California castaways were left with nothing to do but explore the rural mountain valley and big crystalline river themselves. They spent several days in the Shangri-La, becoming the

un-navigable. By the early 1980s the run wasn't even cutting edge anymore. It was time for an update.

Despite urgings from his co-hort Chuck Stanley, Lars was reluctant to write a guidebook. His rationale was, "Why do we need a guidebook? If someone wants to know about a run, they can just call me and I'll tell them about it." However, when he heard that other paddlers were planning to write a new guide, his motivation increased. The would-be authors were dedicated weekend boaters, but they were hardly the hard-core lifestyle paddlers that Holbek and Stanley were. Lars' competitiveness had been aroused. He and Stanley would produce a new guidebook.

Lars and Chuck agreed to each write half of the book, and when Stanley fell behind on his share of the text, Lars grew impatient. He drove his van to Stanley's house, and as Chuck says, "He camped out in my basement until the book was finished. Lars is a very results-oriented person." Still in print today, *The Best Whitewater in California* exemplifies Holbek's light-hearted approach to kayaking,



Lars relaxing outside his desert abode.

Whitewater Legend

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Lars shooting Mark Hayden on the top falls, Heath Springs, on the second descent of the Royal Gorge, North Fork American River, CA.



Lars getting close to the top, Mescalito, El Capitan, Yosemite.

numerous dicey protection placements, and one waterless day later, they topped out.

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It was 1973, and kayaking was experiencing huge growth following its inclusion in the 1972 Munich Olympics. But things were still primitive. On his first trip, Lars wore no lifejacket, no helmet, and no paddling jacket. He did have a wool sweater, and a great time. He recalls, "I remember those little class II waves splashing over the boat and thinking, this is cool!"

Lars received help making sprayskirts and building his first fiberglass boat from older paddler Jim Smith, but formal paddling instruction was hard to come by. Strategies for escaping holes, for instance, were a mystery to Lars. Lars paddled into a lot of holes, and he swam out of a lot of holes.

geothermal development firm. At \$90 a day plus expenses, he could easily save enough money to paddle and climb for the bulk of the year.

Between a couple of fruit picking gigs in the late 70s, Holbek and Schlax traveled to nearby Idaho to sample the renowned whitewater there. On a trip down the South Fork of the Salmon, they came across a pinned plastic kayak. One might think the bargain savvy Holbek would've been thrilled at the find, but plastic boats weren't yet accepted in the world of whitewater. He and Schlax freed the boat reluctantly. Lars says, "We herded it downstream like some useless toy that we didn't care about. We thought we'd trade it for a case of beer or something." Obliging, they packed it off the wilderness river and took it with them on their road trip.

The next day, they launched on the class V Golden Canyon section of the South Fork of the Clearwater, and Lars had the closest call of his emerging paddling career. "We didn't know how to boof yet," he explains, "and I just charged right into this huge hole." He swam. This was nothing new, but this particular hole was especially

ran it in half a day without a single portage. The California paddling icons of the 1960s that Holbek had looked up to; John Googins, Gunter Hemmersbach, Dick Sunderland, Bert Welti, had now passed the torch to a new generation, and Montgomery, Stanley, and Holbek would be the leaders.

Montgomery had a reputation as a bold class V paddler, while Stanley was a national champion slalom racer who had a head for the hard stuff. With their river knowledge and paddling skills combined with Holbek's enthusiasm and rock climbing ability (essential to exploring the steep canyons of the Sierra Nevada), the trio was instantly a force. Holbek freely credits Stanley and Montgomery for pushing him to the next level. "I was paddling class V before I met those guys," he says, "but I was like a kamikaze spaz." Under the tutelage of his new partners, Holbek's "kamikaze spaz" days were soon a thing of the past.

During the first week of runoff in 1980, the trio made first descents on Bald Rock Canyon of the Feather, and Golden Gate Canyon on the South Fork of the American. Both sections are still reputable class V runs today, nearly

adapt quickly. He remembers the run as being every bit as hair raising as it looked on T.V. "Compared to other runs I'd done, it was totally off the scale," he says.

The Stikine began a series of foreign expeditions that would lead Holbek to world class whitewater outside of California. In 1983, Lars shifted plans to climb Argentina's Aconcagua (yes, he was still an avid climber) so he could join a trip to Peru's Paucartambo, an upper tributary of the Amazon.

Holbek, John Armstrong, and Jerry Kaufman had a plan for the river, but it was sketchy at best. They had 200 miles of unknown water before them, their map only showed 500 meter contour lines, and they carried just three days of food. They hoped to resupply in villages along the route, but they soon discovered that native settlements were located on the rim of the river canyon, two to three thousand feet above the water. When the weary paddlers would finally arrive at a remote village, the locals usually had little to offer them. Lars remembers, "The calories we were able to buy were about as much as we expended on the hikes to get there."

first to paddle both the upper and lower sections of the now renowned Futaleufu.

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Besides the Futaleufu, Holbek and his companions explored Siete Tazas—the Seven Teacups of the Claro, the Huilo Gorge, the Volcan, the upper Maipo, and several other Chilean standards. Since that first magical trip, Holbek has returned to Chile over a dozen times to paddle, climb, and bike tour. He has recorded a total of fourteen first descents in the country.

Back home, the whitewater community was getting impatient for a California guidebook. The subject had surfaced occasionally over the past few years, beginning with Stanley and Montgomery's Giant Gap epiphany. Charlie Martin's Sierra Whitewater had listed Giant Gap as

and life in general. The latest edition displays a dorky cover shot of a color-coordinated paddler sluicing down the spine of California. An overwrought background displays a sheet of cascading whitewater. On the back of the book, half a dozen grubby paddlers crawl beneath a '65 Dodge overloaded with vintage boats, evidently trying to fix the beast of an automobile. The inside of the book is similarly filled with classic old photos, and humorous stories of the authors' escapades. Despite being last updated a decade ago, the run descriptions in Holbek and Stanley's tome are still spot on. The accuracy of the text speaks volumes about how ahead of the curve Holbek and Stanley were when they first wrote the book in 1984. The Best Whitewater in California is held with such esteem that local paddlers half jokingly refer to the latest edition as "the new testament."

The guidebook reaffirmed his status as kayak guru, but it hardly made Holbek a fortune. He continued his blissfully free existence of professional river bum through the 1980s, residing in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, dating expedition magnet Beth Rypins, and dabbling in the emerging technology of whitewater video.

th Eric Magnuson, Lars made a film featuring the American River that was coyly titled "Wild Americans." Footage of hair-raising drops in California granite was combined with a healthy dose of Holbek's trademark sense of humor to make this first-generation kayak video—an early example of what we now unflatteringly call kayak porn. Lars and Eric produced more than just fun paddling videos, however. When public access was threatened to a popular beginner's run on the American, they made a short feature that highlighted the river as a cultural resource. Holbek hadn't forgotten his first day of class II that had forever altered his life, and he now used his pulpit at the top of the sport to protect opportunities for other beginning paddlers.

Lars continued to lead the charge at the upper limits of paddling too. There were more first descents—the Merced Gorge, the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne, the Kaweah's Hospital Rock run—and there were also the "clean up" runs in which Lars' gang would re-visit the hardest rivers and whittle down the portage total. He ranks his second descent of the San Joaquin, where he and Stanley threaded the infamous Crucible Gorge in their boats, as one of his top achievements.

Holbek's climbing background certainly helped in solving rock-bound riddles like the Crucible Gorge, and climbing continued to influence his approach to river running.

Speed ascents of El Capitan and other big walls were in vogue by the late '80s, when the multi-day climbs were being scaled in a matter of hours. Holbek couldn't resist trying the same on Sierra rivers.

Lars started by racing down the well-known Cherry Creek section of the Tuolumne, but Lars' speed fever soon spread longer, more difficult runs. He and his companions ran Alden Gate—a 9.5 mile run of solid class V—in an hour

and a half. They sprinted the 14-mile North Trinity in three hours. Most impressive is Lars' fastest run of the South Merced, a 23-mile class V run that is usually done in two days, sometimes three. Holbek and partner Lee Wilhelm flashed it in 4 hours and 14 minutes!

Despite being the most accomplished expedition whitewater paddler of his time, Holbek never actively sought promotion of his kayaking. But sometimes it came to him. When Japan's Mild Seven cigarette company went looking for a kayaker to be their poster boy, Holbek got the call. Lars had hardly smoked a cigarette in his life, but his visage was just what Mild Seven was looking for. Lars suggested Chile as the perfect location to film their commercials, and the VIP tour was on.

Lars remembers the routine fondly, "We'd drive around looking for good locations all day, and eat at five-star restaurants every night." When they finally decided on a film spot, the brutal schedule continued; "I'd sit on a rock trying to look as macho as possible with an unlit cigarette in my hand," Lars laughs. The socially conscious Holbek (he currently drives a bio-diesel truck) continues with a chuckle, "I had a couple friends disown me over that gig." Following the film shoots, Lars and paddling partner Hayden Glatte would often embark on extended Chilean paddling tours.

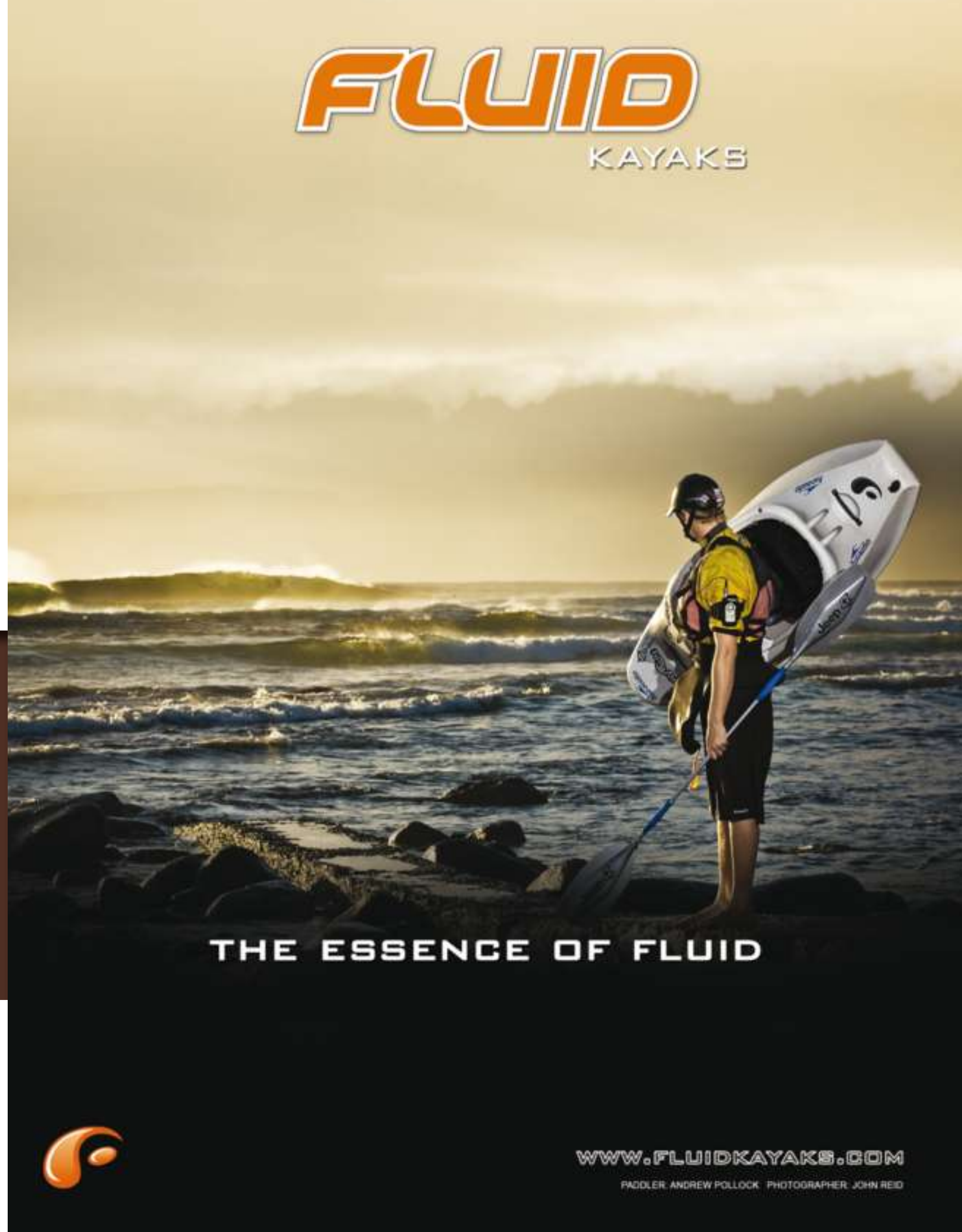
Holbek and Glatte pushed their paddling stateside too. In 1993, they made a first descent on the Little North Fork of the Middle Fork of the Feather. This convoluted nomenclature is an indication of where California boating had gone in the past decade. The golden age of Sierra Nevada exploration had passed. Classics like Bald Rock and Fantasy Falls were now being run regularly. A new generation, led by paddlers like Scott Lindgren and the Knapp brothers, were seeking steeper, smaller creeks. The

evolution is clearly illustrated by the North Fork of the American's development. In the 1960s, Carl Trost first ran the lower class IV sections. During the '70s, Stanley & Montgomery put Giant Gap on the map. In the '80s, Holbek upped the standard to Generation Gap. Lindgren pushed into Royal Gorge, the uppermost American run, in the '90s. Whitewater exploration in the Sierra Nevada is a continuing quest, with each new generation taking their piece of the pie. The lion's share of that pie, by far, was voraciously gobbled up by Holbek in the 1980s. His Little North Fork descent shows that Holbek was still in the sport's elite during the early '90s, but his focus was starting to shift.

In 1994, he took his first flight in a para-glider. Flying silently over mountain ranges soon supplanted Holbek's desire to plummet through watery canyons. By the late 1990s, one of Lars' flying partners was renowned paddler Nancy Wiley, an old acquaintance he had first met on a Peruvian expedition a decade earlier. With their mutual, independently gained experiences on wild rivers, it's no stretch to see how the couple instantly connected. Recently, they completed building a house together near Colorado's Animas River. Within view of their adobe home rise the dramatic San Juan Mountains. When the sun drops toward the western horizon in the evenings, Lars' gaze wistfully falls on the illuminated peaks. Below the snowy tops, granite canyons hold whitewater rivers, and some of them, Lars imagines, have yet to see a first descent.

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Lars on the first descent of Middle Falls (48 ft) on the McCloud River, CA in 1985.



With Kyle Marinello on the Frosted Flakes, «Tony the Tiger» TV commercial

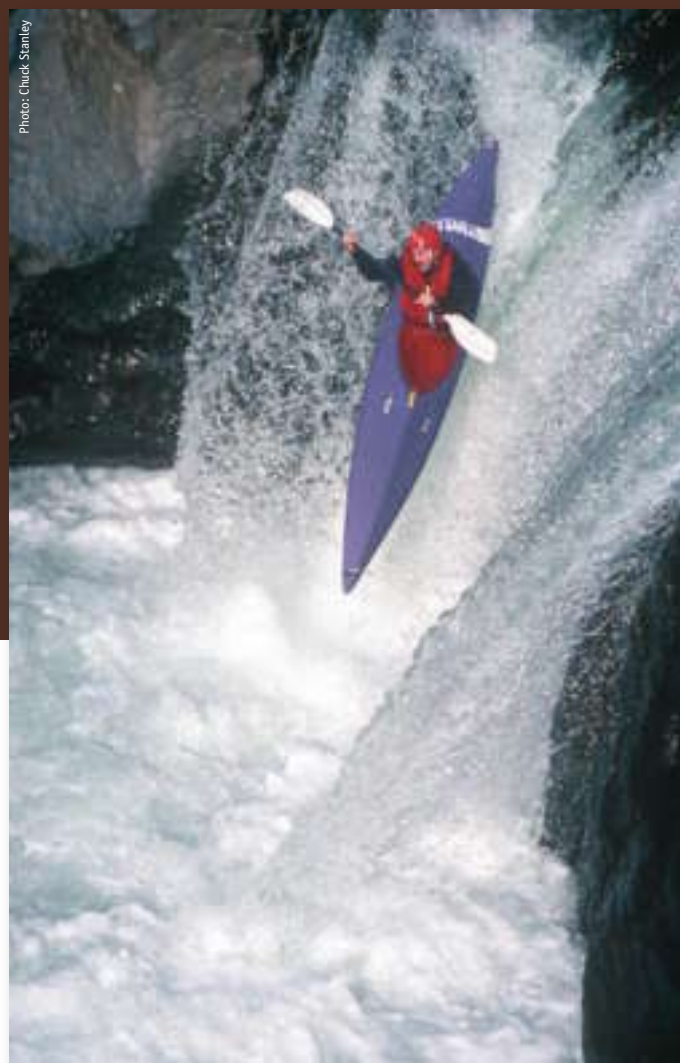


Photo: Chuck Stanley

Whitewater Legend

Posing at Rainbow Falls, South Fork Tuolumne River, CA. ▶

