

'MORE THAN HALF

by Jamie McEwan

Half of life is showing up, my former doubles partner Lecky Haller used to say, in his typically obscure Zen-koan way. After the Punch Brook slalom, I feel uniquely qualified to elucidate.

The day began with a cold rain that turned to sleet and then into a heavy, wet, unrelenting, wind-blown snowstorm. Heavy flakes plopped into uplifted eyes, making us all gaze down at the ground or water as we walked or paddled, looking up in quick glances only. Snow weighed down bushes and the branches of trees. Wires broke, slalom gates fell into the water. The knots that held our boats on the car were stiff, unyielding. Somehow our memories of the day before's-count them, 72 blessed degrees Fahrenheit, it had been-made the wind and snow and cold the harder to bear.

I alternated my huge puffy down jacket and insulated pants with my full fleece suit plus paddling gear, and really wasn't too badly off. Klaus Renner, barefoot and in shorts, seemed completely unfazed, and most of the other competitors stayed warm enough in their cars between runs. But Devin. . . My son Devin, fifteen-years old, was racing C-1 for the first time, still not omitting to race kayak as usual, and also C-2 with me. He came out of the starting line on his first run of the day, in C-1, paddled into gate one, turned out-and flipped upstream. Roll, I muttered, roll.

Roll he did, on that run, and later in the morning he rolled again on his other C-1 run. And then, that afternoon, in kayak, he flipped once more.

Usually Devin pops right up in kayak-even his hands-roll is pretty solid-but this time long seconds passed, and two gates were underpassed, before he struggled up.

I was gate judging near the finish, and after his run Devin came up, his face red and lined with cold, and related that he had begun to set up on the left, the side he rolls C-1, had become confused, and had finally switched to the side he rolls kayak.

"I don't think I'm going to take my second run, Dad, he added. "I had three fifties, so I'm out of the race, anyway. And I'm so cold.

You certainly don't have to, I told him. But, I added, go back to the car and warm up; you might change your mind later. Of course, I wouldn't be writing this if he hadn't rallied to take his last run of the day, through the thickest snow squall yet. And, though Devin finished in fifth and last place among the kayak juniors, he went away knowing that his second run was good enough to have placed him second under the old rules.

We packed up. We drove off. And then it came over us.

Let us invent a new word to denote that special euphoria, that divine nonalcoholic drunkenness that comes at the end of a long, active day on and in cold water and snow, when you are driving home through the blizzard with the car heater blasting, eating a sandwich or energy bar and drinking a hot drink, trading stories from the day's racing while your fingertips throb with the flush of renewed blood flow and your face shines red and your toes can wriggle once more. Warmth! Life! Food! And that boundless superiority you feel over the inhabitants of every house you pass, those poor pale spineless creatures who spent the day in overheated rooms, watching the shadows of real life in the flickering glass of their televisions. First or last, we'd been there. We'd shown up.

In a synchronicity too perfect not to mention, that same day, 750 miles south-west of us, that same former partner, Mr. "Half-of-Life-.is-Showing Up" Lecky Hailer, raced with his new partner

Matt Taylor in the third and final day of the Olympic trials. Trailing after the first two days of racing, Lecky and Matt won the trials with that last day's effort. (Check out their photo in the April 24th issue of Sports Illustrated.) And yet - and I mean not the slightest disrespect to Lecky-and I think that of all the people in the world, he will understand - I doubt that their sense of personal victory that day was any greater than ours. Half of life is showing up. Maybe even more than half.

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Jamie (bow) and Lecky at the '89 Worlds on the Savage River