

It Takes Experienced Navigator To Go Full Speed Tanana River

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In the winter Alaskans race their sled dogs. In the summer they race their riverboats.

I entered my first official race on Memorial Day, the Fairbanks Businessman's Race. Although my husband Milton and I have gone as far from Fairbanks as Tanana by river, racing turned out to be a horse of a different color.

All of the crew members, except me, were experienced racers. It was a good thing.

One of the chief differences between racing and simple cross-country traveling is that you can't stop for foul weather. When a hard rain hits you in the face at 30 miles an hour, it feels like

little pellets of ice.

If you have glasses, it smears and you can't see. If you don't have glasses, it gets in your eyes, and you can't see.

It takes an extremely experienced navigator to plunge full speed up the tricky Tanana River without being able sandbar, he's almost sure to hit snags or driftwood.

Another difference in racing is that you simply cannot afford to have mechanical trouble. Everything has to be perfect—or you have to be able to make it do anyway.

At the last minute before the start we discovered we didn't have a gas tank. The motor did have a fuel pump, however, so Olive Anderson

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spent the entire trip on her hands and knees, holding the gas line into the gas in the jerry cans.

The throttle had been rigged only minutes before the race also—and it fell off halfway to Fairbanks from Nenana. And there were no tools in the boat!

The pilot managed to get the throttle put back together, but we lost a valuable 15 minutes. In another race, that might have been serious.

The real thrill of racing is, of course, trying to beat the other boats. The excitement reaches its highest peak just when you pass or get passed. This is also a time when the water is apt to be extremely rough. A little too much excitement just then could easily flip a fast boat.

To gain speed an experienced pilot uses many tricks. One is to use all the short-

cuts—the sloughs, where the water is dead. This can be dangerous. If the water is not deep enough a boat may get stuck, or may damage the propeller. And some of the sloughs are longer than the main channel.

But experience proved its worth in this race, when all native crews who use the river regularly won the race. The real test will be the Yukon 800, a marathon from Fairbanks to Ruby and return.

The Yukon 800 is only two weeks away now (June 18 and 19), and the Class B boats may carry women in their race to Minto and back. I wonder how many sandbars there are between here and Minto? . . .