

Cataract Canyon at 53,000 CFS

By Werner Catsman

As many of you know, I took what has to be one of the top two or three greatest floats in the lower 48 (never done the grand, probably never will given the current situation.) My partner, Chris Whaling, who some of you have boated with, and myself launched at the base of McPhee on the Dolores (not Bradfield, at the dam, dammit) at 5:30 pm on May 19th in two 16' jags. We floated from there to where Lake Powell used to be, taking out at the "new" takeout below the Dirty Devil. On the way, we had more fun than can adequately be described. We pretty much followed the peak of the Dolores all the way down and hit Stateline at 9,000 cfs on Friday 5/27/05, boy was that fun.

Alas, I digress, this story is supposed to be about Cataract.

Let me begin almost at the end of the trip, with what turned out to be our favorite quote from the float:

Chris Whaling to river guide: "How much further to the big drops?"

River Guide to Chris and Werner: "You just ran 'em!"

Classic.

Anyway, as we ran down the Dolores, we kept hearing rumors that "there's no takeout at Cataract and there's a class 6 ledge hole before you can get to the Bullfrog, you guys can't run Cat." So, once we got on the Moab daily stretch, we chatted up a few river guides who told us that there had been a slide and that takeout had in fact disappeared for a time but it was back. I asked if it was a "decent" takeout and got the "depends on what decent means, we think decent is where you can back your trailer all the way... Bla bla bla."

So, with that reassurance, we continued on our merry way, and asked what the flow was...-somewhere over 50,000 cfs. As we were turning the corner, getting close to the Cat put in, I sullenly turned to Chris and said "F__K, nobody is here, not even a commercial trip." Suddenly while wondering if we were making a good decision, a bronco came flying up to the boat ramp and a young guy jumped out and started yelling "Werner, Werner!" We rowed over and sure enough, here was Bo Christensen.

Ahhh yes, here is what we were looking for, there was in fact, somebody else out there who is at least as stupid as we are. Bo and a couple of his commando buddies had a grand plan to run the whole thing in 24 hours-my guess is that there were some young maidens in Price expecting to see these boys later that weekend. Anyway, we talked for a while and then meandered on down stream knowing that these kids would certainly out row the two of us, especially considering the fact that we had totally given into river time and were not pushing very hard. Sure enough they caught up and we all floated together,

hoping to get to the camp at little bridge, which of course had a bunch of canoers already there.

With one of the only camps taken, we ended up floating until dark, when we fortunately found a semi dry sand bar in the middle of the river without too much goose shit on it and we set up camp. Bo and crew ate dinner with us, borrowed a couple of celebratory river sodas and launched, at about 10:30 pm. Their plan was to float through the night and hit the rapids in the AM armed with GPS coordinates of the big drops. I asked Bo if his dad knew about his plan and he shrugged his shoulders, I thought, about it and realized that Steve probably came up the whole idea.

We woke up in the AM and continued on down, camping just above Spanish bottom. Oh yeah, that morning, while cleaning my boat with a super soaker, I managed to "lose" our Cataract river map. I had run Cat three times, once at 33,000, once around 8,000 and once at 12,000, but not in four years, so the memory was shaky. Oh well, the guide book was gone.

After 17 days of perpetual sunshine, we awoke to cold rain and hail. Those who know Chris and I would expect nothing less of our weather karma. We had to get fleece out for the first time all trip and as we floated up to Brown Betty, I was wishing I had brought my neoprene gloves...

Having run Cat at 33,000 CFS and having had it totally blow my mind, I was pretty sure I remembered everything. A map would have been nice, but what could we do. For starters, in the 30's, rapid #8 was gigantic! I ran right into the middle of it on that trip and it was like having a full sized dump truck back up with load full of water and dump it in my lap. I surfed that hole and barely climbed out upright. So we were watching for number 8. I saw it coming, we scouted and made it through no problem.

Wonderful. Here we were at Y canyon, with the first 12 rapids under our belt. We scouted mile long for some time and, because we lost the guide book, decided to count rapids, and try to pull out before rapid 18 for a breather and to scout the button hole, rapid #19. In the 30's, the button hole was simply the biggest hole I had ever seen. It was about the size of a double wide trailer, sitting right in the middle of the river and left a rather lasting impression on me.

We ran #13, I decided to test things and went straight into the middle hole, and got surfed pretty seriously, so Chris pulled off and snuck around. Next thing we knew, we were in the middle of 20' plus waves. It was unreal, you would climb up to the top of a wave, and it would be pyramidal, not a standard wave and you would slide off the right or left hand side of the wave, hit the trough and immediately start looking for where the next face was, or worse, collapsing wave and climb up again. While it was about as scary as anything I have seen on a river, it was so huge that it was also incredibly fun. As we were climbing through the chaos of these monster waves, I was counting-15, 16, 17...

We then caught a bit of a respite and pulled into a big eddy on river left, thinking we were at rapid 18. Again, my mind was totally wrapped around the button hole and rapid 19 from my trip at 30K. We hadn't seen anything close to the button hole, so we assumed we were at rapid 18. We scouted and what we saw was simply mind bending. Two massive holes (little Niagara and the marker hole in retrospect-duhhhhhhhh...) sealed off the right side and middle of the river. And I'm talking big holes - they looked like low head dams.

The only route was pretty obvious, you had to start on the left side, avoiding the hole in the middle, and then cut to the right, as there was a totally impassable hole on the left and try to make it up the face of what is the biggest wave (red wall) I've ever seen, and I have a few thousand miles of open water ocean sailing under my belt. The problem, was that it wasn't always a 25-28' tall wave, periodically, the left side of the wave would collapse into a gnarly hole. We tried to time it and couldn't find any pattern whatsoever. We shrugged our shoulders and decided that this was certainly class V, if not V+ because if you were on that wave when it fell apart you were done.

I then reminded Chris that "this is only rapid 18, wait until you see the button hole and then we get the big drops!" Needless to say, that reduced our morale considerably.

So we launched, and began the decent. I hit my line perfectly, and climbed about 2/3's up the face of the wave. Suddenly, it got incredibly quiet and dark. It was like being in a car wreck or some other traumatic experience where time slows down to a crawl. As it got dark, I heard the wave start to collapse and before I could think high side, the whole left shoulder fell apart, and flipped by 16' cat like an 11' puma sideways in Sock It To Me.

Boom, I was over. Fortunately, as I was flipping, I grabbed onto the tag end of a strap and never lost contact with the boat. I was back on it, with flip lines deployed in about 45 seconds. I immediately saw what I thought was the button hole, it was actually big drop three and I thought that if I timed the impact of the hole properly, I would be able to right the boat. As I slammed into the hole, I was knocked down and almost swept out of the boat, so I decided enough with the flip lines. I had a paddle strapped on the side of the boat, so I jumped on the nose of my pontoon and started paddling like crazy, trying to get to the left side of the river. I missed the first eddy and, seeing a bend in the river, figured that if I didn't hit the next eddy, I was going to run all three of the big drops upside down. I didn't like that idea, so paddled hard, using big draw strokes and made the eddy, tied off my boat and took a few deep breaths.

Chris, had watched in horror as I went right where we said we were going to go and was flipped like a pancake, so he assumed the worst was in store for him as well. Instead, as he climbed the face of the red wall, rather than having the left side collapse and suffer the same fate as me, it stayed true to form and he made popped over it. Of course he also assumed that the button hole was next and that we were a few miles above the big drops. He took his time, slowly hopping down until he caught up with me, by which time I had been able to lighten up my boat and de-rig a bunch of heavy items. We flipped it back over and rowed around the corner.

As we came around the corner, we saw a couple commercial jay rigs and a big camp. I thought to myself, "I don't remember a camp between rapid 19 and the big drops. That's when Chris yelled, "how much further to the big drops?" and we got the classic reply, "You just ran 'em..."

Lessons learned? Boy, 53,000 CFS was a lot different than 33,000 CFS and counting rapids in gigantic waves simply doesn't work. We should have looked up more, and seen the canyon as we might have figured out where we were, instead we focused exclusively on the river. Big water Cat trips are unreal and I can't wait to get back next year and climb those monsters...

One more thing, I am fortunate to have flipped a boat every single year since 1993 and feel that it is really important for all boaters to get some flips under their belts. Especially cat boaters, a lot of whom haven't flipped. Take a light boat and surf some big stuff and practice as it is critical to be able to function and self rescue.

Other than that, GO BIG or GO HOME!

Werner Catsman