

# Sports

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CITIZEN PHOTO BY JAMES DOYLE

**With muscles burning, Tony and Wendy Fiala dig deep for the last ounce of strength, as they paddle their way across the finish line Sunday afternoon in the Northern Hardware Centennial Canoe Race. The Fiala's placed second in the Simon Fraser 35-km class.**

## Paddlers tame mighty Nechako

### Regina couple sets new record, wins Centennial Canoe race

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When you've paddled all over the world in a canoe at racing speeds, you learn a thing or two about how to conserve energy to survive a long distance race.

Mike and Fiona Vincent of Regina put that knowledge to work Sunday in the Northern Hardware Centennial Canoe Race. For most of the way in the 67.5-kilometre race, they took advantage of the drafting effect, floating in the wake of the two lead boats, before they made their move just before they rounded the bend off the shore of Cottonwood Island Park for the homestretch run down the Fraser River.

That strategy made all the difference and they won the Alexander Mackenzie Class race from Isle Pierre to Prince George in a record time of three hours 39 minutes 43 seconds, edging second-place Pat Turner/Greg Blackburn (3:40:03) and Chris Cupp/Harry James (3:40:12).

"It was a fun race, the water is spectacular and the scenery is fantastic, said Mike Vincent, 50. "The other (Northern Hardware) race finished (in 1984), just when I started to race canoes so I never got to come out here so I pretty excited to come. What a beautiful place to paddle.

"I've raced canoes a lot more than Pat or Greg have. These guys (Turner and Blackburn) took off several times and we were hanging on for dear life a couple times. Harry and Chris know the river really well and they were always able to catch back up again and I think that took a lot more out of Pat and Greg than we anticipated."

Fiona Vincent, 51, made her first visit to Prince George and had never paddled the Nechako before but did go through the top section of the Whitemud rapids on Friday, so she knew what they were in for in the race.

"We were pretty fortunate to have Pat and Greg and Chris and Harry as the tour guides down the river," said Fiona. "Our strength is not our drop-dead speed, it's more being strategic and being able to capitalize when someone makes a mistake and goes the wrong way. It's not the fittest and strongest people who win, it's the people who can read the situation. The water's awesome and there are so many opportunities to make up time on people."

Blackburn admitted he and Turner were no match for the experience of the Vincents and they had had no answer for the final kick the Regina couple made in the mad dash to the finish buoy.

"We were all together in a group the whole way down and they were right behind us drafting and something happened and we got caught in the current and ended up behind two boats and we couldn't recover," said Blackburn. "I think we went out too hard and didn't have enough to recover."

Nikki Kassel and Catherine Hagen were the only all-women team in the longer race, finishing eighth overall out 28 in 3:58:07. They pulled off some bold moves in the rapids just east of Isle Pierre and in the two Whitemud rapid sections of the Nechako River, which improved their position.

"We dialed the rapids," said Hagen, 52. "There were a whole bunch of boats



MIKE AND FIONA VINCENT

clustered up above the first rapids and Nikki and I sliced in, we just knew where to go. We're a light team and we hardly took on any water (into the boat). Some of the heavy guys plowed into the waves more and we were able to ride up over them. We paddle well together and we don't have the power of some people but we have a fast tempo."

"It was super-fun," said Kassel, 41. "I thought we'd be closer to five hours. The rapids were the highlight, we just shot through. We passed three or four boats going the rapids each time."

Kassel and Hagen signed up for the Vincents' canoeing clinic on the Nechako in May, which gave them a few ideas which they put to use in the race. They kept hydrated using two-litre pop bottles fitted with long hoses and stuck to the boat with duct tape, an equipment setup the Vincents had showed them.

The Simon Fraser Class race started from

the Wilkins Park boat lunch in Miworth, 90 minutes after the Mackenzie race began Sunday morning.

Randy Brooks of Salmon Arm and Chris Nicholson of Sun Peaks set the pace, covering the 35 km route in 1:26:30. Tony and Wendy Fiala were second in 1:25:31 and Bonnie Hoogie/Craig Evanoff finished third in 1:26:30.

Brooks, 63, and Nicholson, 46, are gearing up for a three-day, 220 km International Classic canoe race in September from La Tuque to Trois Rivieres, Que. The Centennial race was a reenactment of the Northern Hardware race that was as annual event from 1960-84. They hope to return to defend their title in 2016.

"The Northern Hardware race is one of the iconic races within Canada," said Nicholson. "It's the biggest one in British Columbia and congrats to P.G. for putting it on."

Brooks came up twice to train on the Nechako before the race and couldn't get over the beauty of the scenery he encountered each time.

"The fast water, the curves of the river, it's just beautiful going through there, although I'm not supposed to be looking at the scenery when I'm racing," he said.

The Mackenzie class drew 28 boats, while the Fraser class had 31 boats entered, including a voyageur canoe powered by an all-women crew from Carrier-Sekani Family Services.

The rapids caused problems for several paddlers in the longer race which kept swift water rescue volunteers from Prince George Search and Rescue busy.

THE PRINCE GEORGE CITIZEN

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