

Triumph in Thailand: Team Canada senior world champion paddler Dave Hunt brings home the gold



Aurora's Dave Hunt returned from the 2023 World Paddling Championships in Thailand with a necklace of gold medals.

The retired high school teacher and acclaimed international track and field coach played a pivotal role in the national team's scintillating performance on the world stage.

Team Canada won 52 gold medals and the Senior Cs contributed 13 to that illustrious golden total. Not only did Team Canada rack up impressive results in southeast Asia as the Number One team in the world, but they also enjoyed the charms of Thailand in a trip of a lifetime.

Hunt's inspirational results captured our attention at The Auroran, especially given that he only took up the sport six years ago. It is a tale we like to tell about local athletes whose diligence maximizes their athletic acumen in international competition. Mix in like-minded colleagues and a national will to win as recently exerted at the World Championships and it's a recipe for success on the water.

Hunt and his veteran paddling teammates provided a new meaning to the great Canadian athletic battle cry of "Own the Podium."

We caught up with Aurora's latest gold medal winner on his dock along the Georgian Bay archipelago—an island and paddling paradise that is clearly Dave Hunt's natural habitat.

The Auroran: Why did you turn your athletic energies and focus to paddling in your late-fifties and what were the steps you took to qualify for the Team Canada Senior C 60+ Crew?

Dave Hunt: The short answer is that this journey has been a love-hate relationship with a new sport.

On the one hand, we get the thrill of being on a team with like-minded senior athletes competing against the best in Ontario, Canada, and the World. On the other, there are the hours training in cold damp gyms, grinding out rep after rep, or thrashing about a freezing

pool at 7 a.m., trying to keep pace and perfect a technique you just can't figure out. I've loved canoeing all my life, but always just for fun exploring or tripping. It wasn't until 2017 that a colleague and multiple world champion paddler and coach encouraged three of us at school to come out and help his team qualify for the Club Crew Championships to be held in Hungary in the summer of 2018. So, in January 2017, the three of us, including Julia, started training Sunday morning in a paddling pool in Scarborough with 22 other rookies and veterans. It wasn't until the Canadian Championships and a second-place finish for our team "LNQR", an affiliation of smaller clubs ? and a qualification to race in Hungary, did I start taking the sport seriously. As our team had more than 25 men trying for 20 spots, I realized I didn't want the coaches to have any doubt that I should be in the boat, so from that point on, I took training seriously.

Fast forward to 2022 ? after a difficult but successful post-COVID CCWC (World Club Champs) with my "Great Lake Paddlers" crew, I needed a change. After much consideration, I joined a long standing and successful club, down at the Toronto Sailing Club, called CSDC (The Canadian Senior Dragon Boat Club) to start the 2023 season. Although my former coach and some veteran paddlers had mentioned that I should try out for Team Canada, I never really wrapped my head around the thought and all that it would take to make such a team. It wasn't until in the middle of my first pool practice with the new club, when one of the Team Canada coaches, Brad Bridges, asked if I was planning on trying out. The thought of competing as an athlete for Team Canada stated to sound pretty cool. Having been a track and field coach on 10 National teams over 30 years of coaching, but never as an athlete really got me thinking. I did well at the selection camp in April where we were matched against paddlers from across Canada, this time battling on the water for the coveted 22-24 spots available in the Sr. C (60 PLUS) crew.

To get here required many garage sessions on my paddling ergometer and rudimentary weight set, countless pool sessions, and biweekly strength and circuit training at the Leisure Complex and Mississauga Canoe Club gyms. When the weather improved, we added open water paddling in Dragon boats, outrigger canoes and paddleboards, often 5 on-the-water workouts a week.?

The Auroran: When did you realize you had the right stuff to paddle in international competition and to seek Team Canada membership?

Dave Hunt: I never believed I had what it took to compete for Canada until I committed to completing the testing protocols that all Team Canada paddlers ? no matter the age group ? needed to complete. During the winter, we were required to submit adjudicated pre-selection testing (Max Bench Reps, pushups, sit-ups, bench rows, and a two-minute and four-minute maximum distance paddling ergometer tests as well as video of our paddling for the coaches' evaluation. Then, if selected for Phase 2, we were asked to do "open water" testing in one-person outrigger canoes and also paddle in the 20-person Dragon Boats, under the coaches' watchful eyes. At each step, I scored near the top of all tested, high enough that I was ultimately invited to join the Team Canada Senior C (60+) preparing for Thailand. It was only then that I was convinced I could compete at the international level.?

The Auroran: In which other international paddling championships have you competed?

Dave Hunt: Up until this summer, I had only competed at the Club Crew Championships in Hungary in 2018 and again in Sarasota, Florida in 2022.

The Auroran: What's the most satisfying aspect of being a member of Team Canada and a World Champion Masters' athlete?

Dave Hunt: Without a doubt, it was the journey of the last six years, with both my first club, The Great Lake Paddlers, and now the CSDC. A journey of hard work, commitment to all aspects of being on a team, and the fact that I was doing it with like-minded competitive athletes over 40 years of age. Going to the World Championships with a team of 60-plus men and women, who, until Thailand, had only practiced twice together, and with no idea if we could compete against the likes of Team USA, Australia, Germany, Hong Kong, Taipei, and many others. And then winning almost every single race over distances of 200m to 2,000m over the course of six days was truly remarkable.

The Auroran: What was the athletic highlight of your adventure in Thailand?

Dave Hunt: The very first races on Day 1, over a distance of 1,000m, with no idea of we could compete, and then winning two gold medals, and then standing on a podium watching the maple leaf flag being raised in honour of a team you were representing and then singing your guts out with your teammates. That were unimaginable moments.

The Auroran: What was the cultural highlight of your adventure to Thailand?

Dave Hunt: Our tour company did an excellent job providing us with opportunities to explore Thai culture, so I wisely took in an ethical elephant sanctuary, a "floating market", multiple temples and palaces, but without a doubt, the cultural highlight came on my final days, after the competition, when we spent four hours tearing around Bangkok on an authentic food tour in Thai TukTuks. That was a cultural event like no other, and took us down back alley and side streets to "street foods" and restaurants that I could never would have imagined if on my own.

The Auroran: What would you say to other 50+ members of our community to encourage them to pursue their Masters' Athletic dreams?

Dave Hunt: I have to think the level of competition we few strive for is unique and certainly not for everyone. However, in so many athletic endeavors, it should be more about getting out there and having fun, doing whatever activity or sport interests you, is my best advice. It must be about participation for life. I and my teammates are fortunate that we found a sport that provided us a little bit more, but for most senior athletes it should be about just doing it for the love of playing.

The Auroran: What will be the enduring memory that you will take away from these International Paddling Championships in Thailand?

Dave Hunt: Witnessing the success of all of Team Canada crews, from the Premier paddlers ? essentially these are the pros! ? and all the age group open, mixed and women's crews for six straight days. Team Canada won 52 gold medals (the Senior Cs won 13 of those golds!) and paddled to team titles in every category, including the Nations Cup, as the top country at the World Championships, was special. However, the most enduring memory will be of our last warmups as all the Sr C women and men came together for one last time. The joy and singular focus on preparing for those last 500m races showed we were now a team. We were no longer just 60 paddlers from all across Canada, but now we were one team, with no pressure, and just one joyful purpose, to be the best team on the water that day. The fun we were having revealed an overwhelming confidence and led to dominance that final day on the water, with the Canadian Senior C crews winning all three gold medals. That warmup, one last time as Team Canada was truly my most enduring memory.

The Auroran: What are your future Masters' Athletic goals for Fall 2023 and upcoming events in 2024?

Dave Hunt: I'm taking a break from paddling for a few months, to focus on home life and a little side trip to cycle the entire length of the UK in September ? just for fun! Then the focus will be to help my club team prepare to be the best club in the world at the next CCWCs to be held in Ravenna, Italy in September 2024.

By Jim Stewart