

SPORTS

Rough waters on the Arkansas River

By **SCOTT WILLOUGHBY** | The Denver Post

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Buena Vista – Before she could count to three, Amanda Sandling knew it was going to be a long day.

A 30-year-old recording industry professional from Atlanta, Sandling was on the second white-water rafting trip of her life, bouncing down “The Numbers,” an unimaginatively named stretch of the Arkansas River north of Buena Vista.

“It started out pretty shaky,” Sandling said of the July 5 commercial rafting trip with friends and family. “I fell out of the boat in the second or third rapid, me and another girl. Our raft hit a rock, and it just launched us.”

Suddenly immersed in the cold river, Sandling did not know then that three others had already died downstream on the Arkansas this season. Nor did she know that the water flow that day was at an above-average 1,100 cubic feet per second, highest of the month. Sandling had no idea what “cfs” meant, but she knew she had to escape the river’s icy clutch, fast.

“It was shockingly cold,” Sandling recalled. “And I am not a strong swimmer. If it had not been for my mind-set saying, ‘I’m not going out like this,’ anything could have happened. I hit the water and thought, ‘No way,’ and immediately did everything I could to get out of the middle of that river.”



The drowning deaths of Lynn Marks, 52, and Bea Kovich, 55, have rekindled the river-safety debate over the measures commercial outfitters take to screen and prepare customers for the inherent dangers of the sport. After five drowning deaths on the Arkansas River this year, some believe more should be done.

Although official accident reports still are pending in the deaths of Marks and Kovich, who were rafting with Camp Hale-based Nova Guides, the rare double drowning and unusually high death toll on the Arkansas this summer have placed commercial outfitters on the nation's most-rafted river under increased scrutiny.

According to Colorado boating- safety coordinator Keith Kahler, Charles Bointy, 52, of Boulder drowned May 19 at the "Wall Slammer" rapid downstream in the Royal Gorge while rafting with River Runners outfitters. Nine days later, Brian Kirkwood, 47, died during a swimming exercise at "Pinball Rapid" in Browns Canyon while training as a raft guide with American Adventure Expeditions. And on June 16, 36-year-old Raquel Stiles of Omaha drowned in a dam drop south of Buena Vista known as "Silver Bullet" while rafting with Arkansas Valley Adventures.

"I think a lot of these deaths are really preventable," said Kit Davidson of Gunnison, a four-year river guide who quit this season over frustration with inexperienced and often physically unfit clients. "It's a tough call on how to make the tourists understand the power of the river and respect it without insulting them by telling them they are not allowed to go.

"But I believe the companies need to turn down a lot more customers. It's almost our duty to be a little judgmental."

"Swimming is a moot issue"

White-water rafting falls into the "must-do" category for many summer tourists in Colorado. The Colorado River Outfitters Association counted 510,304 commercial rafters in 2006. It's a reasonable assumption most of them didn't train for the experience. Indeed, it's likely many do not know how to swim.

At the start of every trip, most rafting guides tell customers the same thing: If you find yourself in the river, immediately assume the lounge-chair "white-water flotation position" with feet up and out in front of you to ward off rocks and other potential hazards. With the benefit of life jackets and wetsuits, rafters are



Some guides say the technique renders standard swimming skills unnecessary.

“In a river situation, you don’t need to know how to swim,” said Nova Guides owner Greg Caretto. “If you put yourself into a swimming position, you are exposing yourself to more hazards than if you get into the lounge-chair position. Swimming is a moot issue.”

Others aren’t so convinced, however. The white-water flotation position is a good starting point, they say, but once you have your bearings in fast-flowing ice-cold water, it’s time to roll over and swim back to the raft or to shore, in order to avoid hypothermia and “flush drowning,” where the cold water saps victims’ strength to rescue themselves.

“That’s just the first step,” said Mike Mather, a professional swift water safety instructor whose 17-year résumé includes training Navy SEAL teams. “First and foremost, your feet can’t touch the bottom. But when somebody goes into the water, they are ultimately responsible for their own rescue. You can’t just wait for someone to scoop you up.

“The longer you are in the water, the greater the chances of you getting into trouble.”

The challenge, in Mather’s eyes, lies in educating customers beyond the basics of wearing sunscreen and proper shoes. Because there is no template for a river accident, the same holds true for rescues. Training certifications, safety kayak support, swimming tests and on-shore spotters with throw ropes are all good ways for outfitters to help their cause, he said, but the volatile nature of a river can be difficult to convey because of fluctuating water levels. Low water flows may have contributed to a sense of complacency in recent years.

In 2001, the busiest rafting season on record for the Arkansas River with 303,618 commercial trips, two deaths were recorded – one shy of the historical average of three, according to rangers at the Arkansas River Headwaters Recreation Area, which regulates commercial use on the river. In the drought years of 2002-04, there were none. Each of the past two years saw one commercial rafting death.

“The white-water industry has an average of 14 fatalities a year nationwide,” said Greg Kelchner, whose Timberline Tours raft company regularly paddles the Arkansas. “That sounds like a lot to me, but last year there was one incident in Jackson Hole, Wyo., where three people were killed on Class II water. Rapids are



"I think it has kind of come home to roost on the Arkansas this year. That trip Nova had with two fatalities is a sort of flashy item that focuses attention on what outfitters do."

Mather, who spent nine of his 19 years as a guide in Colorado, thinks it's about time there's more focus on safety issues.

"Profiling the guests in the office is very hard, and a lot of them are flat-out not honest. But I don't think a lot of companies are profiling as hard as they should," he said. "They need to stay in business, and it's becoming an ugly business in terms of who is going to survive. Even when you feel like someone doesn't belong on the river, you almost need to bring them in just to stay in business."

Caretto insists that was not the case on July 5, pointing out that at least one client was sent away by a guide merely because of her reaction to the pre-trip safety speech. Marks and Kovich were among a group of four that split off from a larger wedding party and moved at the last minute from the Class V trip through the Pine Creek rapids upstream to the Class IV Numbers trip, although it is unclear whether the move was made because of client screening or simply because the trip was oversold.

"My guides look for all kinds of red flags. They are professional guides, and if they see a red flag, they pull the customer aside and question him," Caretto said. "The customers are on vacation, out having fun, not thinking, 'I could be in a serious situation today.' I don't know what you can do besides sit them down in a classroom and show them pictures of dead people. And you can't do that."

A bad feeling, then tragedy

Maybe it was her early swim. Maybe it was the unfamiliar group dynamics. It was something felt but not seen, but the vibe that day never felt quite right, Sandling said, as if a "weird energy" pervaded.

"From the time I fell out to the next 20-30 minutes, it went from bad to it couldn't have gotten any worse," she said.

The six sequentially named rapids of The Numbers may just as well have served as a countdown to catastrophe for the three Nova Guides rafts. As the second raft reached the crux move at rapid Number Five, tragedy struck.



From her inflated perch on the lead raft now beneath the technical Class IV rapid, Sandling looked on as the next boat in the lineup “dump- trucked.” Six passengers dropped into the frothing white water, feet overhead in a stew of orange life jackets and yellow paddles. Unable to reach the swimmers by hand, Sandling extended the handle of her paddle to two of them, she said, pleading with them to grab hold. They casually bobbed on by, however.

As Sandling’s boat gathered the other rafters and equipment, the third Nova raft ran through the tricky rapid. By the time her boat rounded the next bend, she said, that raft too was upside down, six more passengers in the river and the guide clinging to a tethered bowline from shore with a broken finger.

“We were all mixed up, and one of the guys in our raft was really freaking out because his wife was missing at that point,” Sandling said. “Later on, we found out that the third raft caught up to one of the swimmers – I don’t know who – and tried to pull her in. But too many people reached over to help and they wound up flipping.”

With assistance from Arkansas River Adventures guides and others witnessing the calamity from shore, the Nova boats eventually caught up to the swimmers. Most had reached the riverbank on their own, waving on rafts to chase down people still in the water. They found them about a mile downstream, by Sandling’s estimation, and the frantic husband was reunited with his wife. Her good friend Marks, however, was dead.

A day later, Kovich died in the hospital as a result of the same accident.

“Those ladies were so close to the shore, so close to everyone. We were all reaching out to them, but I guess they thought they were doing the right thing,” Sandling said. “I was probably 10 inches from Lynn and she didn’t even reach for me. She had a vise grip on her life jacket and just floated on by.

“Maybe they were in shock. I don’t know what they were thinking. They should have been in survival mode, but they didn’t know what to do.”

Staff writer Scott Willoughby can be reached at 303-954-1993 or swilloughby@denverpost.com.



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 Author **Scott
Willoughby**

