



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Christmas has come early at our household. It came in the form of a bright blue canoe—a gift to my children from their daddy who's wanted a canoe ever since he attended summer camp in the mountains as a youngster.

Made of fiberglass with built-in flotation, it is to be used on the lake behind our house and on more adventurous trips down canals. We might even want to explore those mysterious islands in the river on a calm day.

We've already started lessons in water safety. J-stroke techniques and how not to abandon ship. We've learned something else: one nine-year-old boy at the helm of a featherweight canoe is no match for the elements on a windy day—at least when he's using a 5½ foot paddle.

Timmy (age nine) took his first solo cruise this afternoon while the four other children, his parents and 13 neighborhood gang members cheered him on from the backyard. He wanted to use his short four-foot paddle, but I insisted on his using the long stern paddle. His arguments that it was taller than he was made little difference.

He did fine as long as he stayed in calm water near the shore. However, as soon as he glided into the ripples where the wind was blowing toward the opposite bank, he was in trouble. Try as hard as he could he couldn't paddle against the wind. He wasn't strong enough to make the canoe turn and wasn't heavy enough to make the boat settle in the water and keep it from being blown toward the far shore.

He paddled frantically while the assembled spectators shouted encouragement and instructions toward the middle of the lake. "Backpaddle! No, other side! Now forward! Change sides!" All to no avail. The canoe skimmed merrily across the water—sideways, toward the far shore.

At last he began to make headway—crosswind. He was heading toward the south shore. The crowd of kids broke and ran toward where it looked like he might land. He was losing ground and finally the wind kicked the bow around and he headed toward the north shore. The stampede was on again as more neighborhood kids joined the screaming melee.

Finally, in spite of our shouted instructions, he found he could paddle into the wind if he went backwards. Having to change sides of the boat after every stroke, he finally managed to back into the beach amidst the cheering throng of well-wishers. Chagrined but still spunky, he looked up at me and said, "I'd have made it but you made me take this long paddle and my arms got tired."

"No, you're just too little to battle the wind," I said. Relieved he was back safely, I turned to the house. As I reached the back door I heard a great shout go up from the mob of kids. Turning, I saw Timmy paddling back out into the lake—this time using a short paddle. I gritted my teeth and headed back toward the dock. I stopped short in disbelief as I saw him swing the canoe into the wind and paddling furiously, bring it gallantly back to shore—bow first.

Completely exhausted but victorious, he stepped ashore and said, "See!" I saw. And next time I won't try to outfit a David in Saul's armor when he goes out to do battle. A slingshot and five round stones are plenty for a boy with grit.