



TELEVISED ON 250 CHANNELS IN 200 COUNTRIES, TOTALLING ALMOST 6,000 TRANSMISSIONS AND OVER 1,500 HOURS

Above Oetz, a footbridge is anchored to the steep gorge walls. The bridge, known as the Wellerbrücke, has existed since 1911, allowing travellers to pass over the treacherous gorge and peer into the rapids that roar below. This section of class 5 whitewater takes on the namesake of the bridge, dubbing it the infamous Wellerbrücke Rapids.

Each October, the rugged landscape of the Ötztal undergoes a transformation. Logo-covered banners are draped over the bridge itself and on the rock outcroppings within the gorge. A tower is erected at the start of the rapids. Broadcast cameras filter their way down to river level, and hundreds of spectators gather into viewing areas along the rim of the gorge.

Then, one by one, kayakers seal launch below the footbridge into the Ötztal, careening down the maze of boulder-strewn rapids shaped by the powerful glacial waters, negotiating features like the 'TNT Rapids' and 'Champions Killer'. The fans and cameras follow every move as they barrel their way through the steep, technical

section of whitewater toward the banner marking the finish line.

The Ötztal has shifted form. It is no longer just a mountain valley occupied with water and stone. It has now become an arena of sport. This is the Adidas Sickline. The unofficial World Championships of extreme kayaking.

Extreme races like the Sickline have grown in popularity through recent years. As extreme kayaking continues to evolve, stretches of river thought to be impossible are now being run often, and the idea of what it is possible to race evolves with it. Many events are still grass-roots – just a gathering of kayakers wanting to see who is the fastest; the only prize being the bragging rights.

The Adidas Sickline has become much more than that. It is part of an increasing number of strategically produced events, with major sponsors, and television and internet broadcasts. In 2013, the Sickline finals were shown live in forty-three countries and were available in eighteen languages. Edited programs of the event were televised on 250 channels in 200 countries, totalling almost 6,000 transmissions and over 1,500 hours of TV broadcast. From a production standpoint, this makes the Adidas Sickline arguably the most

successful extreme kayak race to date.

Professional paddler, Olaf Obsommer, originated the idea of what would become the Sickline. In 2006, he organised a race on the upper Ötztal near the town of Sölden. There was a hidden purpose behind this event. A dam had been proposed in the Ötztal watershed, threatening to alter the pristine beauty of the river valley. The race drew Austrian media attention and acted as a vehicle for Obsommer and others who opposed the dam's construction. "We did the race and used the media to show the beauty of the river, and in the interviews we tried to say something about the nonsense of the plans for the dam," says Obsommer.

The success of the upper Ötztal race convinced Obsommer to try it again. Looking to the Wellerbrücke Rapids, Olaf decided this would be the place for the next great race. He put the concept in front of sports brand, Adidas. "They were stoked about the concept to have an extreme race on the Wellerbrücke, as was the tourism board from the village of Oetz," says Obsommer.

The first official Adidas Sickline was held in the autumn of 2006. It was a small-scale event compared to its current state, but concluded as a great triumph, convincing the company to go a few steps further. They declared the

following year's race (which would subsequently be cancelled due to flooding) the unofficial World Championships of extreme kayaking, and hired an events consulting agency, Planet Talk, to organise and produce it.

Today, the Sickline draws expedition kayakers, freestyle champions, and international slalom racers from around the world, all fighting annually for the crown of Sickline Champion. A title accompanied by the award of €3,000, the Adidas title belt, and fans from around the world.

Watching kayakers battle the rapids of the Wellerbrücke is a visually spectacular experience. These athletes have a different kind of stadium. A coliseum that has been erected over the course of earth's existence. When they enter that stadium they are not just racing each other, but confronting the unforgiving elements of the earth itself. Being able to witness this struggle over a live broadcast opens a window, bringing viewers from around the world into the realm of grandeur and danger that is the environment of extreme paddlers.

Even with increasing prize money and exposure, what really draws participation in extreme races is the purity of it. According to racer Mike Dawson, "It is a raw part of the sport". Dawson is a perennial powerhouse at the Adidas Sickline. Though he has not yet won the race, he has been on the podium four times. He has also raced and won at numerous other places around the world, and is a member of New Zealand's national slalom team.

Dawson believes the secret to extreme racing's success is its independence from structure. "There's no governing body to inundate it with rules and formalities – leaving it to be an athlete-driven event. It's a straight up whitewater race between the ramp and finish line, and just comes down to who can or is willing to go that fast down the rapids." Dawson says that what extreme racing offers him is the chance to have fun. To experience the feeling of racing pure whitewater,

with nothing else, and the opportunity to share time with his fellow paddlers. He believes that these races have been a source of great success for the overall sport of whitewater, and to continue that success it should remain true to its identity.

"It needs to stay core," Dawson states. "Few rules and epic venues. Events that are designed for the athletes, and getting them on the most extreme whitewater to race." ■

Top Ten Extreme Race Venues

With the rise of extreme kayak races, impressive stretches of river around the world are now home to these events. They are all unique, and judging which are the greatest is an impossible task. Here are some of the highest quality race venues of today – worth travelling to, not only on race day, but anytime they are running:

- 1 The North Fork Championship – North Fork of the Payette River, USA
- 2 The Adidas Sickline – Ötztal Ache River, Austria
- 3 The Green River Narrows Race – Green River, USA
- 4 Extreme Sports Week – Brandseth River, Norway
- 5 King of Asia – Chuya River, Russia
- 6 Alseseca Kayak Race – Alseseca River, Mexico
- 7 Eporedia Active Days, King of the Falls – Ayasse River, Italy
- 8 Rey del Rio – Agua Azul, Mexico
- 9 Little White Salmon Race – Little White Salmon River, USA
- 10 Outdoor Mix Festival – Guil River, France