

# THE TWO SECOND DESCENT Where Kayaking Ends Falling Begins

Whit Deschner



Philchuck Creek, located in the northwest corner of Washington, spends the first half of its existence weaving itself over and around boulders before it comes to a 15-foot ledge known simply as Philchuck Creek Falls. It is a natural barrier which excludes salmon from the creek's upper reaches. Through the years the water course has carved down the left side of the ledge where the flow delivers itself into a frenzied rumble. Only in high-water winter months does the creek spill over the center and right side of the ledge.

The falls had never been run. Every time I had seen them they looked so god-damned scary. But one day I observed the falls and the route seemed surprisingly simple. In the center of the ledge was a slot approximately four feet wide where the water plunged unobstructed into what appeared to be a deep pool below. To the left of the landing was a large crag jutting out from the base of the ledge. After what seemed like hours of contemplation, I knew the falls could be run; it was only a matter of being my own guinea pig.

I decided to run.

But when I crammed myself into my boat, my body began waging a small mutiny against my brain's decision; I wanted to throw up, I couldn't hawk a spit, and my legs felt like jello in an earthquake. I pretended I wasn't scared. I pretended that I was tough and that I was a conqueror of rivers.

I pushed out and the current swept me towards what appeared to be the edge of my

world. Only a boat length separated me from the unknown. I lined up. There was no turning back.

I could not see the landing until I dropped over the lip. I held the paddle shaft with a death grip. I gasped. The froth pulsating on the rock below appeared only for an iota of a second but cemented itself into my memory forever. In that 15 vertical feet of gut-dropping awe my confidence was ground into nothing but a faint hope. All of my boating skills were relinquished to gravity. I had surrendered myself to nature. I was at the mercy of the river, which did not care whether I was there or not.

The boat entered the water vertically. My momentum did not stop until my body was submerged—slammed back from the impact. My boat flipped forward, leaving me upside down. The convulsing water banged my helmet against the jagged crag to the left. My knuckles were bloodied from it as I tried to roll. Finally I let go of the paddle, clung to the rock, pulled myself up-right, then grabbed my paddle.

Dazed but happy I shook the water out of my head and looked up at the falls. It was then I realized I was not a conqueror of rivers after all. To conquer is to beat into submission and the falls were still there—as powerful as I'd ever seen them. I was only and simply a conqueror of my fears. I raised my paddle above my head, not in triumph, but in jubilation. I let out a yell.

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