

DO YOU REALIZE WHAT YOU'RE GETTING INTO

"Consistency just can't be achieved
in a short time."

Jon Lugbill, 1979 C1
World Champion

Many people become intrigued with the idea of competing in a World Championship without realizing that it entails a great deal of work over a long period of time. It may take two to three years of year-round training to make the team, and twice as much to win a medal. Can you afford to make a commitment of one to four hours a day, almost every day; two-a-day workouts in the spring and summer; three-a-day workouts for brief periods; and other amounts of time for weight lifting, running, and other exercises?

Some people think they can make it, but drop out after a few months. How many times have I been told that somebody has great potential? "He learned to roll in half a day," they'll say. "And ran gates after a week. He's going to be great someday!"

Well, maybe -- if he goes the distance and sticks with it for half a decade. Going the distance is probably more important than having great natural ability. In my experience, relatively few people will make the staggering commitments of time and emotional energy required.

Some people delude themselves into thinking they are doing the necessary amount of work. They go through the motions, train a lot, and become deeply involved in the sport. But to win the Worlds, you have to do more than that. You have to approach paddling as something more than a job with defined hours. You have to constantly think about how you can get in more practice time. Maybe you can go out four times today. Maybe you'll feel like a midnight paddle on flat water just for the hell of it.

In short, you have to love it so much that you are willing to schedule everything else around your paddling. Even then, you must constantly think up new ways to get in more paddling; and not just for a few months but over many years.

Are you like that? Can you make yourself like that?

Motivation

If by now you feel that I am describing a fanatic, you're beginning to get the picture. The cold, hard truth of the matter is that to win the Worlds, you have to be a fanatic. But being a fanatic, especially with others who are doing the same thing, can be great fun -- which brings us to an important question: why do you want to win the Worlds?

If you're looking for "glory", forget it. It's not worth the effort. Relatively few people will notice what you've done. Rather, I have found that the best motivation is simply a love of paddling. You get the greatest enjoyment of your life from paddling and always will. You want to be with other people who feel the same way.

There's something about running whitewater that gets hold of you and won't let go. The river's undulations communicate a message that only you understand. And gates: you love to run gates, because there's even more speed, more action. You swoop into an eddy, sneaking your bow under the pole with a twist of the waist, blast up through the poles and turn downstream as soon as your back passes them. You won't hit the poles, because you subconsciously lean back and sneak the stern.

Or you ride out a huge hole on the way to another gate. You lean downstream until your shoulder is in the water. You jab your paddle a few times on the downstream side and shoot across -- right into the gate, stuffing it up to your chest. For you, there is nothing like slalom. You're fast, you're good. You know it. Your friends know it. And maybe even the river knows that you are the master.

Beyond that, you just want to get as good as you possibly can. You start out at a young age. If you don't win this time, there's always next time. You don't get the feeling that it's now or never. You keep paddling hard year after year, not really noticing that it's work because you love it so much -- the water, the gates, training, racing. Non-paddlers don't understand, but it's not important for them to understand. You know this is important. For you, nothing else matters.

I believe such thoughts and feelings are what motivate the champion. In his love for his sport, he learns all there is to know about it, actually becoming a great expert. As Cathy Hearn, three-time World Champion puts it:

Whenever someone talks about the sacrifices they have to make to train at a world class level, I think of all the things that people usually say, like 'I couldn't go out and party as much' or 'couldn't stay up as late' or 'have to go training every day.' I kind of think so what? I really enjoyed doing it. I like to train so I don't really feel that I made any great sacrifice to do it. I feel I was just doing what I wanted to do.

The whole idea of seeing what you can do with your body and trying to get better at it, that's the reason for paddling. It's the reason for competing in any sport.

Besides the paddling itself, there are other aspects of training that make it one of life's greatest experiences. First, there is the joy of winning and realizing that the hard work paid off. But there is also the camaraderie with the other individuals who share your attitudes. There is the excitement of traveling to new places and meeting new people. In short, paddling becomes a life style.

In the long run, the hardest thing of all is to redirect all these feelings towards a career or other life's work when the racing days are over. By becoming a great racer -- a World Champion -- one learns at an early age the secrets of success in almost any endeavor:

- o Know your subject thoroughly.
- o Associate with other people who do, too.
- o Orient your life around the subject, always coming up with new ways to pursue it.
- o There's no defined number of hours you put in; you can never do it enough to suit yourself.
- o Get as good as you can. If you're not the best, you're one of the best.

How appropriate it is for a young person to learn these truths through sport! Besides teaching habits of physical fitness -- an invaluable lesson itself -- sports offer the young person perhaps his only real chance to be the best in the world at something.

But when the athletic contests are over, the athlete would do well to remember these words of Cicero:

The great affairs of life are not performed by physical strength, activity or nimbleness of body, but by deliberation, character, expression of opinion.

The message, then, is clear: start young and when the time comes to quit, do it. You don't have to stop paddling or racing. It's just that the sport is no longer the big thing in your life. Your career now becomes more important.

If you want to win the Worlds, it's likely that there are certain things that you won't be able to do, such as becoming a doctor, for example. Perhaps a more realistic goal for you is simply making the National Team and competing in the World Championships. Of course, this isn't the same as being the best. Only you can decide what the proper trade-off is. But it is wise to think about these matters before you start serious training so you are not unpleasantly surprised later on.