

THE ESSENTIALS

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It may seem superfluous to talk about the basic elements of slalom, but I have found that many people have an imperfect understanding of them, which hampers their development all the way along.

The first essential is that whitewater canoe slalom is primarily a hand-eye coordination sport. To have good hand-eye coordination, you have to have good vision. Glasses will not do in this sport; if your eyes are not good, you'll have to get contact lenses. Soft lenses are best.

Furthermore, if your eyes are not good, you have to realize that you've probably not had ideal hand-eye coordination for a long time. You have some catching up to do. Wear the contact lenses a lot, not just in the boat, and force yourself into various hand-eye coordination situations outside of paddling. It takes time to maximize the potential of your new eyes.

Secondly, I believe there is no substitute for training in the boat, in gates. Many people overemphasize weight training and other exercises. They feel that additional strength or stamina is the most important thing to work on. In my view, nothing is more important than familiarity with the boat in gates. Whenever you have the option, you should be in the boat.

Perhaps the best illustrations I can give of this are the results of physical tests on CCA paddlers taken during the years 1978 and 1979 at the University of Maryland under Dr. Paul Vaccaro. We found that our paddlers -- who went on to become World Championship medalists -- did not score mightily on these tests, with one or two exceptions.

Scores on the treadmill, to measure oxygen uptake, were only fair compared to other trained athletes. Percent body fat levels were pretty low, but again not unusual. Strength tests showed only good, but not phenomenal upper body strength (and poor leg strength).

These results strongly suggest that the reason our people medaled in the Worlds was not because they were physical supermen, but because they were tremendously skilled in the boat and in gates.

Another important basic is that it takes a long time to get really good. There use to be a tendency, especially in the U.S., to view the years in between World Championships as rest years when you don't paddle very much. I believe that at the top levels of whitewater, you cannot afford to take any long breaks. Yes, training goes in cycles, easy periods followed by hard ones, but there should not be prolonged periods (several

months) of no activity. The cumulative effect of two to three years of quality year-round training is what makes an excellent boater.

The boater, then, must start to think in long-range terms: two to three years. The first year he goes through a vigorous cycle for the first time and gets accustomed to working hard. The second year he steps up the activity to the point of overtraining. Then, after a short rest in the third year, he works very hard, but this time guarding against overtraining. Control during the third year is very important to make sure that he peaks just right and turns in his best performance in the big race, which is in the third year.

This long-range method leaves the boater sufficient time to get in a tremendous volume of work, avoiding a crash (four- to six-month) program. This way he is properly rested, both mentally and physically. He always feels on top of things and never comes into the big race feeling "Oh, if only I had another month or two of training!"

There are no real short-cuts. As you can see, following such a plan takes a great deal of commitment. I believe that in mastering a sports skill, especially a highly technical one like canoe slalom, the athlete has to teach himself first-rate habits. You don't have time in a race situation to think your way out of a jam. The athlete must make decisions in a second and be able to change them in a split second. Good habits and instincts have to be relied on. These take time to cultivate, and repetition is the key.

I. Facilities.

To train properly, one needs a number of good facilities, not necessarily all year round (although that certainly helps) but at least during the racing season. Below is a list of these facilities, in order of importance. If you are serious about doing well in the Worlds, you should move to a place that has them if you don't have them where you live.

1. A group of highly motivated boaters.
2. Moving water - a canal, for example - where you can set up many gates.
3. A place to run gates and stamina workouts in the winter.
4. A coach.
5. Opportunities for river running.

6. A place to practice whitewater gates in the spring.
7. A chance to train at new sites from time to time.
8. Lots of races for experience.
9. A supportive environment.

Let's look at these in more detail.

1. Train in groups.

You may say to yourself this isn't really necessary for top success. Albert Kerr, for one, doesn't train in a group, and he has won many medals. Maybe so, but he is the exception, rather than the rule. Group training forces each individual to push harder and pushing harder is what it takes to get better. Also, members of the group learn from each other. We'll go into this in more detail in Chapter 10, but in my experience, there's no substitute for group training: most champions come out of groups.

2. Gates on moving water.

The crux of slalom is training in moving-water gates, so you'd better have an excellent place for them. It should be wide enough (20-30 yards), deep enough, and long enough (400 yards) so there is plenty of variety -- you'll be spending a lot of time there. The current should be as strong as possible, but not so strong that paddling back up is a real chore. There should be eddies. If there aren't any, make some by throwing rocks in the canal. Little white caps are good, if possible. The course should allow for about 30 gates with ample spacing between them (10-20 yards) so that the whole thing more closely simulates race conditions. The value of the moving water course is that you can do a tremendous amount of paddling without the mental and physical fatigue you get from whitewater. Moving water gates are an absolute must. Training on still water is not good enough in the spring and race season.

3. Training in winter.

Most people don't get good boat training in the winter because it is too cold outside. They put a few gates in a swimming pool but I believe this is not adequate for someone who is trying to improve his technique. There simply isn't a realistic distance between the gates. Furthermore, waves rebounding off the pool's walls back into the water create an unnatural feeling. Consequently, paddling in a swimming pool causes jerkiness and other bad

habits. The pool is fine for teaching beginners and it is even all right for limited periods for the elite slalomist who is simply trying to maintain a certain degree of proficiency. But it is not adequate for someone aspiring to become elite.

Secondly, during the winter, one should be building up stamina and endurance. Most people do this through running and weight lifting, because they can't do it in the boat outdoors. In reality, it should be done in the boat. There are two reasons for this: the first is that the best way to target the muscles used directly in paddling is to paddle -- weight lifting doesn't get them directly. Secondly, besides the conditioning, one learns more about boat skills, which after all, is what this sport is all about.

Paddling on still water at this stage has certain advantages. It's like running with weights on your ankles. The eddy turns are a little harder because there is no current to help move the boat on the turns. All of this builds strength.

Therefore, one should look for a space of 500 meters or more where paddling during the winter is possible. If you can do this, you will get almost another whole season of paddling.

An important point to remember is that it has to be warm enough: paddling below 50 degrees loses value because the boater is too worried about staying warm to really go full-out and risk splashing himself.

I realize that there are very few places in the northern U.S. that fit my description. We happen to have one of them in Washington, D.C: the David Taylor Model Basin, a half-mile-long indoor pool that the U.S. Navy uses for testing ship design models. In the evening after work, Uncle Sam lets us in for a little "research and development" of our own. People not having access to this sort of facility might think of moving down south for the winter so they can have a good place to train.

4. Coaches.

There is a whole section devoted to coaches (Section 5) so I'll hit only the highlights here. I have found that slalomists need an objective observer, not only to count penalties and time workouts, but to look at the long-range development of the athlete. With a group of athletes, it is the coach who sets up the experiments, notes the best way of running gates (by looking for the fastest times on

his stopwatch) and compares the boaters, keeping long-range developments in mind. I have found, both from paddling experience and coaching experience, that this sort of objective analysis is very hard for the individual to do himself: he has the problem of not seeing the forest because of the trees. In addition to being an observer, the coach advises on technique. Finally, the coach is a sort of manager. He handles some administrative chores and sets up and runs practice sessions. In essence, he makes sure the group runs efficiently.

5. River Running.

Tackling new rivers permits generalizations from specifics to classes of whitewater techniques. When faced with new slalom sites, the boater with wide river running experience has the edge on practice runs and thus gets off to a better start on race day.

6. Whitewater gates in the spring.

I believe that no one world-wide does enough practice on real whitewater gates. The site used should have large waves (class 3-4) where 10-20 or more gates can be hung. But the important thing is to be able to paddle back up to the start. It's inefficient if you have to get out of your boat and walk back up. The coach stands on the shore and times and scores the boaters, telling them the results as they paddle back up to the start.

I predict that when more people world-wide do more of this type of training, the sport will take a quantum jump forward. Right now, not many people train this way, so it is not necessary. But it is, I believe, the best way to get a jump on the rest of the world. We do some of this whitewater training in Washington, D.C. but not as much as I would like.

7. Variety of training sites.

This isn't a must but it sure helps. It is more mentally stimulating, in addition to teaching the boater quick adaptability, an important slalom skill. If there are training camps away from home, try to attend.

8. Lots of race experience.

Race day itself is a complex situation, one which I have described in Chapter 13. The more experience you have at this, the better off you are. Unless you are in the period right before a major race, you should get as much race experience as you can. It's one thing to do it in

practice -- it's quite another to do it for real.

9. Supportive environment.

In this category I include everything that would affect the racer's emotions or his well-being. You've got to get lots of good food, lots of rest, and have no other large emotional commitments during the period of serious training. Parents, friends, peers should all be supportive, not constantly telling you what a fool you are to be working so hard on something so frivolous as whitewater canoeing.

II. Learn by Watching.

It has been pointed out to me that the best way to learn how to paddle is to watch someone else do it, not learn it from a book. I fully agree. While it may be helpful to break slalom down into its important components, ultimately the student must capture in his mind the moving picture of someone doing the whole continuum of motions which comprise, say, the upstream gate, the reverse gate, and offset gates. He then tries to copy what he sees and through much repetition, memorizes the feeling of doing it correctly, until it finally becomes a subconscious habit. Good habits are the key to successful racing because during a race, you will revert back to whatever your habits are. You do not have time to consciously think through the move while you are doing it in a race.

The real expectation of this book is not to completely teach the student correct technique but rather to sharpen his sensitivities so that he will glean more from the intelligent observation of elite boaters and thus copy them better.

I have employed a two-pronged approach here for developing that sensitivity. First, through diagrams and verbal explanations I have attempted to identify, name and explain the components of the several key slalom moves. This should be used as a check list when the student watches an elite boater. Secondly, through the use of photographs and drawings I show how elite boaters do the moves. This, I feel, is the next best thing to seeing them live.

In preparing this book, it became clear that one could not hope to discuss every single little detail in slalom, as there are just too many. One could, for example, write a book on various kinds of upstream gates and how to handle them. Instead, I have tried to concentrate on the crucial moves only, assuming that the racer will learn the rest in the natural course of his development.

Finally, I strongly recommend that the reader look at each class section in the book, not just his own. Later, on the water, he should observe the best boats in the other classes, too, and study them. Often a great deal can be learned from this.

III. Good Conditions for Learning.

Once the racer has decided that he must become a great learner, he must then address the problem of how best to go about the process. He should be sure that he has ample opportunity to observe the elite boaters, either live, through training with them (best), or from lots of movies of them in race conditions.

Another factor is avoiding boredom during the learning process. The student should have some method of temporarily getting away from his "courses" and a small part-time job might be the answer, particularly since he can always use the money.

Finally, there is a host of other factors which I have lumped under the rubric "supportive environment" elsewhere in this book. The main point is that conditions must make the student want to "study."

IV. Learning from Mistakes.

The more competitive the event, the greater the chances that top champions will lose important races from time to time. For example, in Washington between 1977-1980, there were five C1s all capable of winning the World Championships, but four of them failed at different times to make the U.S. team. While losing is certainly unpleasant, often a great deal can be learned from it so long as the racer can bring himself to coldly analyze what went wrong. Does he have a "choke problem" in the big races? Was poor boat design to blame, or was it poor race day preparation? Understanding how to correct these problems might well lead to success next time. Thus, failures need not be regarded as total disasters. Sometimes they can be the stepping stones to success.

Perhaps the best comment I have ever heard regarding defeat is this one by Gerard Cote, a French Canadian who won the Boston Marathon many times:

We must mix victory with defeat. If you have a salad that is all lettuce, it is not good. It has no flavor. So victory, always, would be flat. You must mix in defeat to gain the flavor.

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