

TWO TRIPS TO THE TOP

By
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This is a two-part study of the careers of two kayak slalom World Champions, Germany's Oliver Fix (who was also Olympic Champion) and the USA's Rebecca Giddens.

It has often been said that in slalom there is no one way to the top and this study seems to confirm it – at least at one level. On the surface, these two stories seem quite different – Fix growing up in the center of slalom, surrounded by coaches and tradition on a daily basis, establishing himself as a Junior, advancing up the ranks without set-back, winning the Worlds just after turning 22, and the Olympics one year later. He then abruptly stopped racing at age 23, two years younger than Rebecca was when she won the Worlds.

Giddens's path was more indirect, with set-backs along the way, and she had to travel a lot to get really good whitewater gate training, spending a lot of the rest of the time out of the gates. She won the Worlds later in life, at almost 25, and, of course, her career is still going on.

But there are striking similarities in their careers, as well. For instance they both had:

- An early start in the sport, Fix at age 8 and Giddens at 10.
- Parents who separated but still strongly supported their kids' sports involvement.
- Coaches/supporters starting at an early age. Fix had several coaches on a daily basis finally culminating in Helmut Handschuh, while Rebecca had Ray McLain and several others at a young age and finally her husband, Eric, when she was older.
- Training partners starting at an early age.
- Spouses who competed in the Olympics. This was probably different for each paddler. Rebecca probably got more technical coaching from her spouse than Oliver did, for example. But overall, the important point was probably the same: they both had extraordinarily supportive spouses.
- A lot of training in Costa Rica.

- Good grades in school. In fact, both speak of how paddling and going to school at the same time taught them good time management skills.
- To drop out of university to train full time. Even though they were good students in high school and learned to manage time well, by the time they reached the university level, both Rebecca and Oliver felt they could not go to school and simultaneously train at a high level, so they dropped out of school.
- To learn how to “feed off the environment,” as Rebecca puts it, or “surf the wave of hype,” as Oliver puts it when dealing with the mental aspects of the Worlds and especially the Olympics.

I often have thought about success in slalom (or anything else, for that matter) as being a question of advantages and disadvantages. What list of advantages do you bring to the table compared to the list your opponent brings? What can you do to add to your list of advantages and shorten your list of disadvantages? And the ultimate question: what can you do to move something off the disadvantage list and onto the advantage list -- turn disadvantages into advantages?

In Oliver Fix’s case, he clearly had a lot of advantages, chief among them being able to live and train in Augsburg, an advantage that Giddens’s chief opponent, Mandy Planert, also had and which Giddens did not have. But Giddens seems to have had an advantage in her phenomenal physical fitness. Maybe that advantage was so big that it offset her disadvantage.

And then when you look at the other aspects of her training – the fact that she started paddling young, had people willing to help her with logistics and coaching, had access at training camps to some really good paddlers, had training partners, had her husband as a live-in coach, was able to train full time and travel a lot to good training camps -- you begin to see that maybe she didn’t have so many disadvantages after all.

So the moral of the story is: if you’ve got some obvious disadvantages to start with, how can you be proactive in minimizing them and then creating some advantages of your own? Rebecca Giddens seems to be a case study in this point. So much for the philosophy. As with the other case studies I have written, I hope that readers will take what works for them from these stories, realizing that not everything works for everybody. You have to pick and choose. And finally, I hope the reader will find as I did that here are simply two fascinating tales.