

Through the eyes of an Olympic champion, paddling is for girls!

Come down to Wausau Whitewater Park and you will see many different paddlers. People of all ages from children aged 9 to experienced paddlers aged 70 plus. They paddle different types of boats, from freestyle to open canoe to slalom. They are competitors and recreational paddlers. You will certainly see both male and female paddlers.

In 2007, two new women's classes (C1W and C2W) will be added to both Junior Slalom Team Trials and Senior Slalom Team Trials. They are exhibition classes this year but should they pass the test, they could be Olympic classes in the future. In the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Greece, Rebecca Giddens won the Silver Medal in Women's Kayak. Originally from Green Bay, Rebecca grew up as Rebecca Bennett paddling the Wausau course and training with Ray McLain.

Today, Rebecca lives in Kern River, California with her husband, Eric Giddens, who paddled for USA on the 1996 Olympic Kayak Team. Together, they can be found managing Kern River Brewing Company, which they own with another partner.

Asked how Rebecca views the role of women in the sport, she said, "I've always loved being a girl. Some called me a Tomboy because of the obvious; however I've always loved the color pink, wore bows in my hair, and painted my toenails. I've always, and still do, completely embrace the girl in me. On the other side, it never occurred to me that "true ladies" were not supposed to climb trees, play



in the dirt, and participate in sports with the boys. I'm well aware of the physical difference between men and women however I've always known that gap just isn't as far apart as most believe. I love pushing myself!"

In other sports, claims are made by females that they aren't given the same training or opportunities but Rebecca says otherwise, "I did. But I really did believe myself that the opportunities were the same. My parents, teachers, and coaches never lead me to believe otherwise. I was young when I became very active in sports and had a real passion for sports. Looking back at it now, I think others saw that passion and never "crushed" any dreams for me, they only supported me which helped me also believe that all the opportunities



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in the world were all in front of me and all that I needed to do was put my mind to it.”

Asked to evaluate the changes that adding classes will make to the sport, Rebecca said, “This is a hard one for me to answer. I really would love to see all girls have all of the same opportunities in sports/ life as guys. However as a competitor in the sport of slalom, I don’t want to have any advantages because I’m a female. If more classes evolved in slalom, as a competitor my competition would become small if C1 and C2 were available to females. There is already a small number of women competing in Women’s K1 slalom. Right now it’s just right; in an international race there are as many C1 participants as there are female. If we had C2 and C1 I just feel like our classes would be so small, therefore, the competition not very deep. However I also realize that if you build it they will (hopefully) come. Maybe I’m just being short-sited and the opposite would happen - more women would start to compete in our hard core sport!”

Rebecca explained the effect of more classes will have at the Olympic level. The number of women competing in K1 W slalom at the 2008 Olympics will not change. However the quality of the competition will. At the past Olympics, four countries were able to qualify two additional boats. What that meant to me as a competitor is that there were an additional four boats (women) that were really good internationally (the Czechs, German, French, Slovaks, Brits, were at least four deep) and therefore, made my chances of medaling that much harder. Now, more countries will be competing at the Olympics (which looks great for the media) however the quality of competition will go down because some of the countries further down the line are not as good as the countries mentioned above. Rebecca said, “I’m bummed about that, and I’m sure all “true” competitors are. To say that you’ve won a medal at the Olympics sounds amazing, but all competitors know deep down that to have won a medal at the World Championships really does mean “the world” even if the rest of the world never hears about it.”

What is Rebecca’s advice for young females thinking about getting into the sport? She says, “It’s an amazing sport that can take you around the world,

teach you life changing experiences and prepare you for anything in your future. Whether you do it for two months, or 40 years, the knowledge you’ll gain from it and use for other phases in your life will be priceless. It’s such a challenging sport: many things are out of your control (judges, wind, health...) and others, completely in your control (you’re mind-set, attitude, how much you train/prepare....). Kayaking has been the best teacher I could have possibly had in my life, medals, or no medals!”

Anyone who wants to move forward in the sport has to train. To prepare for the Olympics, www.daveyhearn.com reports that when home, Rebecca employed a brutal cross training schedule working out at the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista and Rio Bravo, and training on the Miracle Hot Springs on the Kern River east of Bakersfield,

California. Asked where her favorite training place, Rebecca says “My favorite place to train is anywhere that I had others to paddle with. I did a ton of my training on my own, so anytime I had a partner; it made it fun no matter where I was. If you want to stay competitive, you have to train year-round; there was never an option. Slalom is a physical sport for sure but it is also incredibly technical. No matter how good I got, I still had more to learn. There are many variables to whitewater, you can never know too much.”

Whitewater paddling is growing throughout the country. More courses are developing each year. Last year, Charlotte, North Carolina opened its new course and this year, the Adventure Sport Center International in McHenry, Maryland will open. Other courses have been proposed in many areas of the county. Few sports make families travel cross-country just to compete. The courses will help draw more people, which will inevitably increase the competition pool. Rebecca says, “I can’t wait to see the effect! These courses will make it that much easier for a kid to get involved and thrive in the sport of kayaking. If a kid becomes good and has that much passion for the sport, some parent/ coach/friend will gladly take him/her cross-country to compete, how could you say no? Once you get to a certain level in a sport, travel is a norm.”

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Rebecca concludes, “I think the biggest thing that I’d like other paddlers to learn is ‘to take from the experience.’ Winning medals totally rocks, don’t get me wrong, but learning the ability of living happily and freely is way more rewarding than a medal.”

Asked if she can bring what you learned in the sport into the rest of your life, and does the discipline and willingness to try hard things affect how you see challenges, Rebecca answers, “Let’s just say, it’s not a waste of time.”

Females considering the sport will do well to listen to Rebecca, who set the bar far beyond the normal paddling experience.

About the author – Julie Walraven is the Operations Coordinator with the Wausau Kayak / Canoe Corporation. At other times, she is a professional resume writer and freelance writer.

