

Muscles Of The Mind -- The Rebecca Giddens Story

In the fall of 2002, 60 Olympic caliber athletes were invited to the Navy SEAL obstacle course in San Diego.

There were 15 obstacles on the course and it took about 7 minutes to run it. There were straight walls you had to climb up, a 45-foot rope climb, a run across rolling logs, a tightrope walk and one place where, standing on one log, you had to jump up to a really fat log and catch it with your stomach, bend over it and then jump from there to an even higher log.

First, an experienced SEAL ran the course -- and he didn't make everything on the first try. Then the athletes had a go. Only 8 of them finished the course. Three of them were whitewater canoeists and kayakers. One was a woman.

Her name was Rebecca Giddens. She could do 31 pull-ups nonstop and bench pull 80 kilos and she had just won the World Championships of Whitewater Kayak Slalom. But not only was she physically strong, she had also learned how to be mentally strong.

A few people there knew her story. Most did not.

FLASHBACK ON REBECCA'S CAREER...

Most did not know how she started out in her sport with strong parental support, so helpful for doing well. They did not know how one person, Ray McLain, made such a difference in her early career. They did not know how far-sighted school administrators gave her time off for training. They did not know how her first training partners were women, but eventually her training partner became her husband, Eric Giddens, one of America's top K1s. They did not know how she benefited from a generation of American paddlers who had won medals in World and Olympic competition – something the country had not had before. They did not know how out of necessity she conceived of a new kind of training with a lot of time out of the boat or how she had overcome the adversities of a chronically dislocating shoulder, controversial gate judging, and an American World Championships in her own backyard cancelled because of 9/11.

An Athletic Family

Rebecca Giddens was born Rebecca Jane Bennett on September 19, 1977 and grew up in Green Bay, Wisconsin. At the time she won the World Championships in Bourg St. Maurice, France, in 2002, she was 5' 7", weighed 140 pounds and used a 200 cm

length paddle, right hand control. Rebecca keeps only a sporadic training log, so most of the information in this study is from her memory, not written records.

Her parents are Tom Bennett and Mary Joyce Knowles, and she has an older sister, Lindsey and an older brother, Todd. At age 4 her parents divorced, and a couple of years later her mother took her and the two other children to live temporarily in Williamsburg, Virginia. At age 8, however, they moved back to Green Bay when her mother got remarried. Much later, when she was a freshman in college, her father, also living in Green Bay, adopted two girls, so Rebecca also has two half-sisters.

It was an athletic family. Rebecca's dad was a wrestler, swimmer and water polo player in college and was involved in many other sports. Her mom was a diver and cheerleader in high school and after leaving school started running marathons.

Her sister Lindsey did a lot of sports, too. She was a good runner and in addition to paddling slalom with Rebecca, she raced wildwater, winning the Junior Pre- Worlds in the USA in 1993. Later, in college at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Lindsey phased out of kayaking and did crew. Another reason she did not keep up the kayaking was that she was pre-med and eventually became a doctor.

Rebecca's brother Todd was a very good natural athlete and always into sports, such as marshal arts, golf, and tennis. It was Todd who first started racing slalom kayaks.

First Paddling

Paddling started as a family activity for Rebecca. In the summer of 1987, at age 10, she and her whole family -- mother, father, brother and sister -- went to a YMCA canoe camp in Green Bay to get into open boat canoeing. Even though her parents were divorced at the time, they wanted the family to stay together and do things together.

Ray McLain

The instructor at the camp, Ray McLain, also happened to be an avid slalom racer who competed in many U.S. Team Trials and National Championships in C1 and C2.

He ran a five-day camp on flatwater. By the end of the camp, he had everyone in closed canoes and kayaks as well as open canoes. On the last day of the camp the entire class went down an easy river in open canoes.

After the camp Rebecca and her family started canoeing on Tuesday nights. They'd run a local river called the Red, about 30 minutes from Green Bay where they lived.

These activities were done through a club called the Green Bay Paddlers United, which Ray had started.

At first, they had no equipment so they'd borrow it all from Ray. They started these Tuesday night sessions in canoes, but then, two months later, they saw people in kayaks and wanted to try that. Rebecca's mom, however, was not interested in the kayaks and stopped paddling then; the other three continued.

After a while, the family got a plastic recreational kayak but Rebecca was too small and kept sliding out of it. So Ray made a small children's kayak for her. She was eleven at the time.

Rebecca gives a lot of credit to Ray McLain for his help over the years. "He was always modest about his involvement," she explained. "He never wanted to get a lot of credit for what he did. He would organize things. He didn't say much; he'd just watch. He always encouraged us to get information from others and facilitated that."

Ray also drove the young racers around in a Dodge minivan and "he never charged anyone for anything." Six or seven athletes -- Jesse Gillis, Megan Stalheim, Jason Mueller, Ken Fleming, Todd, Lindsey and Rebecca among them -- would squeeze into the van. And 13 boats would go on top of it -- "They all fell off once," Rebecca remembers.

Ray also started a series of local races in the Midwest called the Buttercup Series.

After seeing Costa Rica (see below) Ray ultimately decided to move there and lived there for a number of years, operating a small canoeing company, which also did a little rafting. In addition to the boating, he offered rain forest tours and beach tours. Ray would usually drive from Green Bay to Costa Rica; "he drove down there at least ten times," Rebecca recalls. But she always flew.

But on January 23, 2003, after a long bout with cancer, Ray McLain died. He had moved back to Green Bay for the end. A devastated Rebecca said of him:

If he wasn't apart of my family's life, I have no idea where I'd be right now. I like to think that I had a better life than I could have ever imagined and owe a lot of that to him.

Sees First Race

Todd was the first of Rebecca's family to get interested in slalom racing. The first race Rebecca saw was when she went to the Nantahala Outdoor Center in Bryson City, North Carolina to watch Todd compete in the Junior Team Trials. She was twelve years old. After the race, she paddled sections of the river with Todd, Lindsey and her father. "I was terrified of whitewater," she recalls.

But after that, both she and her sister wanted to do what big brother Todd was doing. So Ray brought several race boats back from this race and the group set up five gate wires on the East River, a totally flatwater river. They did river runs on weekends. They were probably in boats four times a week then.

Ironically, Todd stopped paddling soon after that, at about age 17. He had a job and started working full time. But Rebecca and Lindsey kept at it.

Ray ran the workouts for them. They did a lot of technique sessions, focusing particularly on upstream gates and offset gates. Ray timed them. They also did 3-minute gate loops to build aerobic endurance. Jesse Gillis, a young C1 paddler, was part of the group.

With Ray's encouragement, they also participated in Fit For Life exercise classes at the YMCA that Ray ran. These were one-hour sessions that consisted of circuit training. They'd run around the gymnasium, stopping at intervals to do push-ups and jumping jacks and things of that sort.

Ray was really good about putting them in all sorts of boats, too -- C1 and C2, open and decked boats, and even wildwater boats. In fact, like World Champions Cathy Hearn and Germany's Ulrike Deppe, Rebecca credits knowing about C-boats, and especially C1, as being an important part of her development.

"Boat positioning is the key thing in C1," she explains. In C1, you have less control over the boat because you have only one blade, so you have to be very careful about where you put the boat in order to have the water do most of the work. "As a child, it was a lot more about boat positioning for me," Rebecca noted, "I was definitely a big fan of watching C1s paddle." In watching the C1s, Rebecca also noticed the differences between the paddle strokes that the K1s used compared to the C1s and got more ideas from that. Not only did Rebecca watch the C-boats, she also paddled C1 and C2. Knowing about C-boats "makes you more comfortable in a kayak," she says.

In 1989, Rebecca saw her first international race, a World Cup race in Wausau, Wisconsin, about an hour and a half from Green Bay. The whole family went to watch. This began Rebecca's exposure to Wausau and in future years she would attend many clinics and races there and meet many of America's best paddlers.

There were set-backs, however. During one winter, when Rebecca was twelve years old, she was in a C2 with Ray and they capsized and Ray swam. Rebecca got stuck in the boat and couldn't get out. She sucked in a lot of water and got bruised.

Consequently, for the next year she didn't paddle all that much and was timid on the water. But then, at age 13, Ray took her and some local paddlers to West Virginia. He saw that she and Lindsey were losing interest in whitewater, and he thought the trip might fix that. Her dad came, too. The rivers they ran -- the Tygart Gorge, the Cheat Canyon, the New, and the Gauley -- were all in flood.

At first, she was nervous, but after a few days, she loved it. "When I got back home, the slalom course seemed tiny" by comparison. After that trip, they always stopped off at different rivers, such as the Cascades -- and Potter's Falls, a 15-20 foot water fall which she ran at age 13. These experiences caused her to completely lose her fear of

whitewater. Key in this process, she says now, is that Lindsey would always go first. Once she saw that her sister could do it, Rebecca felt it she could, too.

One day during a big family dinner when she was 13, the younger members of the family were all asked what they wanted to do with their lives. Lindsey said she wanted to be a doctor, which was an acceptable answer because her stepfather was a doctor. But when Rebecca announced that she was going to be in the 2000 Olympics “My stepfather was really embarrassed,” she recalls.

It was also about that time that Rebecca started serious training. She began to pattern her activities after the successful athletes in the country at the time. First of all, Ray was very good about asking different athletes about their training and getting her their ideas.

In addition, she had been to many camps at Wausau and did a lot of workouts with people such as World Champion Cathy Hearn. “I held Joe Jacobi’s Olympic gold medal,” she says and “saw that these were normal people, but you could get to work one-on-one with them.” She saw top K1s, too, such as Richie Weiss, silver medalist in the 1993 Worlds.

Over several years at these training camps, Rebecca also met a number of other younger athletes she was to train with for many years, especially kayakers Josh Russell and Scotty Parsons. “I kept seeing them everywhere I went. I was always put in the same training groups with them, along with Jesse Gillis (C1), Anne Mitchell, Amy Dingle and Erica Ruppel (all K1Ws).”

Training during the winter at this time -- when she was 13-14 years old -- consisted of the following:

- Thanksgiving clinic. Every fall she went to Nantahala for the Thanksgiving clinic there.
- Christmas camp. Every Christmas, she did a training camp in Atlanta.
- Cross country skiing and running. Once the river would freeze back home, she did lots of cross-country skiing and running. The sessions were twice a week for about 40 minutes each.
- Weight lifting. About three times a week she lifted weights, doing the standard lifts: three sets of bench press, flies, pull ups, sit-ups, and bent over rowing.
- Fit for Life. Twice a week she did Ray’s Fit For Life circuit.
- Pool sessions. Once a week, on Sunday nights, she did slalom technique at the YMCA swimming pool. They had two wires with 4 gates to work with.
- Spring training camp. Every spring, she went to Nantahala for the doubleheader race and training camp they had there.

First Race

In 1992, at age 14, Rebecca competed in her first race, the double-header at the Nantahala, where she won the Junior class. This gave her a lot of confidence for the Junior Team Trials a few months later and she came back expecting to win the Trials and go to Norway for the Junior World Championships.

However, not only did she fail to make the team, she got second to last in the race. Sarah Leith, later one of her best training partners and a silver medalist along with Rebecca in the 1999 World Championships team race, was last. “I got really nervous,” Rebecca says now, explaining how this was her first race under real pressure, the first time that other people had expectations for her performance and how she worried about being able to live up to them. Lindsey did both slalom and wildwater at the Trials, made the wildwater team, and went to Norway.

It was at these Team Trials that Rebecca first met Sarah Leith who subsequently became part of Rebecca’s training group. Sarah was in private school, Proctor Academy in New Hampshire, and so did not come in contact with Rebecca during the school year.

But during the summer of that year, 1992, Rebecca and Sarah and Josh and Scotty and Sarah’s older brother Corby drove to training camps in Pennsylvania (Youghiogheny River) and Washington, D.C. (Potomac River, Feeder Canal and especially the artificial course at Dickerson).

Lindsey did not come. She left that summer for Norway to be on the Junior wildwater team. Before that she, Rebecca and Sarah Leith would all train together. But during the summer of 1992, it was just Sarah and her brother who trained with Rebecca. “Sarah and I ran all sorts of rivers together,” Rebecca says, “We were not afraid of anything.” They even paddled C2 together and ran Dickerson in the C2 with no problem.

Learning the Variety of Techniques

When asked to single out some of the key things she learned about technique during these days, Rebecca says that being aware of all the different ways to accomplish the same thing was the most important.

I was around so many good paddlers and heard so many different things about paddling that I learned not to accept any one thing as THE way to do something. I learned there were a lot of different ways to do things and that I had to pick the best way of doing something for myself in any given situation.

Take offsets, for example. When do you put the draw in? Before the gate? On the gate line? Don’t do a draw at all, but use sweeps instead? I heard so many different things that I had to learn to think for myself.

She went on to say that seeing and hearing about all these different methods taught her how to do them all and make them all part of her repertoire. “If you grow up with one person, there is the danger of trying to copy that one way,” she cautions.

What about training with men versus training with women? “Although training with women is a lot of fun, I also like training with the men because it pushes me more. I always try to do everything the same way they do.”

Learning What It Takes to Win

Another thing Rebecca got from being exposed to many top boaters was learning what it took to train at a high level -- “I heard about their training plans,” she remembers. But she particularly cites being able to train with top athletes as being important -- “It seems to me that today a lot of the younger athletes don’t take advantage of working with older athletes the way I was able to.”

For example, she learned “When you’re in high school, you’ve got to go to bed early and give up your weekends so you can paddle in the cold – you have to do it if you want to win. You have to give up a lot of every day activities.”

She saw that Scotty and Josh had the same idea and so she trained with them. She had first seen them at camps at Wausau in 1989. In 1992 she started going to more and more South Bend training camps with Lindsey, but this was before she had her driver’s license and she had to depend on her mom or Lindsey or Ray to drive her.

Then, in 1993 she got her license and went every weekend. South Bend is a five and a half hour trip from Green Bay.

At South Bend, she and a small group of athletes had the support of Wayne Russell and Bill Parsons, the fathers of Josh and Scotty respectively. “One dad would be out there making the next course while we were having lunch,” she remembers. “I was used to doing things for myself, but now all of a sudden, I had people wanting to help us.”

Rich Dressen was another paddler involved in their training sessions and Rebecca stayed with his family every weekend – her “home away from home.”

During these weekends at South Bend, they typically did two technical sessions on the artificial slalom course, another session consisting of full length runs and a final session of broken runs—dividing the course into thirds or quarters and doing those sections with only a short rest between them. But it wasn’t all work in those days:

Wayne and Bill would be yelling at us across the river to start the workout but we were doing pivot contests, and splashing each other. Other times it was surfing waves -- seeing how many people could get on one wave, or playing king of the wave -- trying to knock others off the wave. Many times we’d end up making each other swim by popping the sprayskirts.

These trips to South Bend went from late August to December when it started to get too cold, and picked up again in late February.

She still did a Thanksgiving clinic at Nantahala and a Christmas clinic in Atlanta.

At home, she would go out on the water 3-5 times a week, to do primarily technique sessions and gate loops for endurance. She also ran and did exercises “to keep in shape.”

All told, she was getting in 10-12 workouts a week: 4 at South Bend, 2 gate workouts at home, 3 weight workouts, running and exercise classes. In the winter for about a month and half, instead of the paddling, she did cross-country skiing on the weekends (often with her dad) for an hour to an hour and a half and sometimes up to 3 hours.

During this time Rebecca also learned how to be very efficient with her school work, which allowed her to miss a lot of school time in order to train. She was enrolled at Notre Dame Academy, a Catholic school, and was there for four years. Academically, she was good at math, but didn't like it. She actually liked creative writing more, but she struggled with it then, largely, she felt, because her teacher just had a different world view than she did. “I did well, but had to work extra hard.”

Throughout high school they were really nice to me and allowed me to skip study halls so I could go training -- as long as I was doing well in school. This was kind of unheard of at that school. It gave me another hour in the day.

During the race season that year –1993 –Rebecca was 8th at the U.S. Olympic Festival and 17th in the Champion International Whitewater Series. So, in the space of one year, Sarah and Rebecca had gone from last and second to last in the Junior team trials to being first and second boat on the team.

1994 – Breakthrough Year

During the winter of 1993-1994, during her sophomore year in high school, Rebecca went to Turrialba, Costa Rica for the first time. She left on Christmas day and spent 10 days there. “Ray gets a lot of credit for this. He had gotten a hold of Cathy Hearn and asked her to come down and coach, which she did.”

So Sarah, Amy Dingle, Lindsey, Rebecca and Ray made the trip. Costa Rican paddler Roger Madrigal also helped them once they got there.

Prior to this, during the winters, Rebecca paddled on whitewater only at South Bend and then only on weekends. That and pool sessions were the only times she was in the boat during the winters. But after starting in the winter of 1993-94, she made the first of five winter trips to warm weather for winter training in Costa Rica: '93-94, '95-'96, '97-'98, '98-'99, and '99-2000. Except for the initial trip, each was for 1.5 to 2 months.

After the first trip to Costa Rica, Rebecca really picked up her training, particularly the workouts at South Bend.

In 1994, I had more specific schedules to work on. Before this it was more for fun. I also made sure I studied ahead of time so I could get my school work done and have time for workouts. I missed months of school because of training camps. For instance, I went to Cathy's house to train there and I also went to Atlanta. I took a lot of books with me and studied in the car and things like that. This actually pushed me even harder in school. It also helped when I got to college because the work there was easier than what I had in high school.

1994 was also when she first began dating her eventual husband Eric Giddens, one of the country's top K1 paddlers who was a student at Georgia Tech. Also in Atlanta was Jiri Pultera, the head coach of the U.S. National Team and two other even better K1s, Richie Weiss, world silver medalist in 1993 and Scott Shipley, who was to win 3 silver medals in the World Championships and win the overall World Cup 3 times.

Eric and I met at a spring training camp at Nantahala. During the winters, he came to Wisconsin to visit me a few times and we did cross country sessions together. And I started going to Atlanta more.

In describing her training in more detail, Rebecca says:

I didn't do more paddling sessions now but I did them more intensely than I did at home. Before this, I thought I knew what being an athlete was all about but this was an eye-opener for me. Now, instead of being coached by these top athletes in a training camp, I was actually participating in their workouts.

Shoulder Problems

But this year Rebecca started to have shoulder problems, problems that plagued her for four years and ultimately led to surgery and seven months out of the boat.

The first incident was at the '94 Olympic Festival at Six Flags in Missouri. It was a shallow course and there was an offset move and I wanted to use a hole to help me make it. But I flipped upstream in the hole, caught the paddle on the river bottom, and completely dislocated my shoulder. I couldn't paddle for the rest of summer. I went back home and was in physical therapy.

Doctor Pat McKinsey, head orthopedic surgeon for the Green Bay Packers, told her she needed arthroscopic surgery right away. He even scheduled the operation for a few days later but Rebecca just didn't show up. "He told me I'd be fine in 4-5 months. But I was young and I just didn't want to hear that I needed shoulder surgery."

So she kept training through 3 more years.

I had problems all the way, always when I was least expecting it. I'd finish a run and let my paddle dangle in the water – and it would hit a rock and sublux my shoulder

again. Or it would come out while I was sleeping. It slipped out and in again – maybe 7-8 times. I'd go through months when I couldn't paddle very well, but then I'd be OK for a while. I saw many, many doctors. But I wasn't comfortable with them because they all told me something different.

Her race results that season began to reflect all the work – sort of. That year she placed 13th in the Senior U.S. Team Trials, the first time she entered them.

But she also went to Junior Worlds in Wausau that year -- and “did terrible – ended up twenty-something. I'd been 10th in the Wausau pre-Worlds the year before and started to fear living up to people's expectations, I guess.”

What she doesn't say, though is that she was also having very bad shoulder problems at that race. In fact, right before it, a doctor said he didn't think she should paddle. “I really remember that being a really hard and emotional time for her,” Sarah Leith recalls. “We both loved racing and were willing to do anything to get good and when someone told her that she wasn't going to be able to, that was hard. But you don't tell Rebecca no -- that merely gets her going more!”

At any rate, Rebecca was having to find her way through the mental side of the sport and this is how she describes it:

For me, it's been a roller-coaster dealing with the mental part of paddling. There were two ways I finally found to deal with it.

First, you want to duplicate at the race site your normal training environment back home. You don't want a lot of new distractions, especially any negative ones – people you're not used to, intrusive media attention, people getting nervous around you. I can sense people's attitudes and if they are negative it bothers me.

But I found it even more important to remember why I originally got into the sport in the first place and to focus more on myself and what I could do to race up to my expectations, not someone else's expectations.

At the Bourg Worlds, for example, when I finished, I was unaware of where I finished. It was just a good feeling coming down with a solid run. I had a definitely relaxed feeling. I wasn't focusing on the outside negativity.

Eric and I had finished walking the course in detail. On our way back up the course I was rambling on about something unimportant when out of the blue Eric said ‘Make sure that when you come out of gate five, you don't lose your bow.’ Here I thought that he was listening to my story. Instead, he was nervous for my run and didn't want to forget to tell me something. The whole scene was very sweet. It made me smile.

I've seen so many people train beautifully but then race badly. Leading up to the 2000 Olympics, I almost had that problem. I was a basket case – but I got over it. I hope having been through one Olympics will help me with the next one.

In 1994 Lindsey left for Spain for her senior year in high school and thus began to leave slalom for good, focusing instead on crew and pre- med in college.

1995

Rebecca's accelerated training continued into 1995 and she placed 8th in Team Trials that year, on the Ocoee River, site of the following year's Team Trials and Olympic competition. She describes one of the important things that happened that year in her development:

I did a lot of technique workouts with Eric and he'd see things. He's definitely the most technical paddler I know. And he was better at explaining it to me than anyone else. For example, take upstreams. I was always a very physical person, and I had a lot of speed, but I was often carrying the speed in the wrong direction. I used to pocket the gate too much (go a bit low into the eddy on purpose to keep speed up). But now I learned to take a tighter line.

But it was a two-way street with Eric:

I think I also influenced Eric, on the physical aspects of his training. He had always been good at the technical side of the sport but I think being around me, he started training harder than before and his results picked up, too. We traveled a lot together and went to Costa Rica together.

We shared a passion for kayaking which made it more fun. If I felt tired, hopefully Eric would be fired up. When he'd feel tired, I'd just give him a hard time, saying that I could handle more than he could. He never takes that comment too well -- most guys don't when it's coming from a girl!

1996

1996 was an Olympic year, and not just any Olympic year. This time, for the first time, the Olympics in slalom were being held in the United States. The event was part of the Atlanta Games, even though it was held on Tennessee's Ocoee River, the only medal event to be held outside of the state of Georgia.

So that winter, the winter of 1995-96, her senior year in high school, Rebecca went to Costa Rica for two months. She had arranged to graduate from high school early, in December of 1995, so she was able to skip the entire second semester of her senior year. Even though she missed a lot of school because of training, she still managed to be an honors Student and a member of the National Honor Society.

She placed fifth in the U.S. Team Trials that year (6th in one race and 5th in the second), not good enough to make the Olympic Team, but good enough to do a number of World Cup races, her first international competitions.

I'd been training with Dana Chladek and Kara Ruppel and sometimes my times were in there with theirs but a lot of times they weren't and so I didn't expect to

make the team that year. 5th was pretty much where I expected to be and it allowed me to do some of the World Cup races, the ones Dana Chladek didn't go to. Sarah got to go, too, because Cathy Hearn didn't go.

But she was pretty disappointed with her performance in those races, never placing higher than 20th in any one of them. "It wasn't so much the places I came in; I just didn't feel that I had paddled very well. I knew I could paddle much better under pressure than that."

She had a lot of penalties, including fifties. "It was a whole new scene for me. I had the jitters the whole time and made mistakes the whole time. But it pushed me to do well the next year."

While Rebecca didn't make the Olympic Team, Eric did. The U.S. had initially qualified for 2 slots in K1, but then at the last minute there were some extra slots, and Eric got one. He placed about 20th in the Olympics.

"This was a fun experience for me," Rebecca recalls, "because I got to go into the Olympic Village with him and see all the exciting things there."

In the fall of 1996, she started attending Georgia State, while Eric was a student at nearby Georgia Tech. She completed two years there, stopping in 1998 and has been more or less in full time training ever since, although she has worked as a personal trainer and coached for the Atlanta Center of Excellence on occasion.

1997

1997 "was the first year I really made the team," as Rebecca puts it. Jana Freeburn actually won the Trials, but Rebecca was second and when Freeburn gave up her spot on the team, Rebecca moved up into the first slot. Cathy Hearn moved from the third slot into the second.

1996 was my first full year of training and that carried over into '97. I was better prepared. A lot of the other top athletes moved away from Atlanta, but Eric and I stayed. I got a lot of experience through this.

1997 also saw a major change in the slalom rules. In the past, athletes could count only the best of two runs, but starting this year, they had to count both runs added together. How did that affect her training and racing?

You know, it seems to me that the rules have changed almost every year I've been in the sport. So, now I'm not going to say that I like the rules or don't like the rules. I just focus on paddling really well – every run. Now you are always trying to be clean. With all these rule changes all I can focus on is paddling two good runs, on-line.

That year, Rebecca placed from 10th to 14th in four World Cup races – Bourg St. Maurice; Bjorbo, Sweden; Bratislava, Slovakia; and Minden, Canada – and placed

14th overall in the World Cup. She and Heather Corrie of Great Britain were the only women to make all the finals, which really excited her.

At the World Championships in Brazil, she just missed making the final by coming in 16th in the qualification race. "I knew that I was capable of a better result. I was hungry; it motivated me for the next year."

1998

1998 was an unusual year for Rebecca because it was the year she finally had to have surgery on that shoulder and it was to keep her out of the boat for 7 months. Surprisingly, however, she benefited from it in ways that one might not expect, as we will see in a moment.

After sustaining the initial injury in 1994, Rebecca tried to train through it, hoping the shoulder would just heal on its own. But it never did. Finally, in 1998, one week after placing second in the U.S. Team Trials at Wausau, she came back to see doctor McKinsey, who had been her original doctor. Her stepfather was a doctor at the same hospital and arranged the appointment.

McKinsey basically said that I had torn my labrum and that while arthroscopic surgery might have taken care of it originally, now the tear had gotten worse and he had to open it up and do a regular surgery. When he did that, he found that in addition to a bad tear in the labrum, I'd worn down the cartilage, too.

Following the surgery, she had to stay out of the boat for 7 months. Since then she has found that as long as she keeps the muscles of her shoulder really strong, she can stay out of trouble. And she credits living near the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista nowadays with helping a lot on this score:

Because of where I live, I'm forced to be off the water more than many athletes. But it's actually been good for my shoulder. And the weight workouts that I do at the Training Center are even better for my shoulder than the ones I used to do in Atlanta. I haven't had any problems at all in two years now.

During the 7 months that she could not paddle, Rebecca went through an interesting experience:

This could have been an easy stopping point in kayaking for me. The recovery was going to take a full year and the rehab was intense. 7 months of my rehab was done in a clinic with a tiny gym. I'd always hated gyms and most definitely disliked lifting weights. However, coming off of my last season gave me a lot of promise for my kayaking career. I knew that if I could suck it up and give it 110% that I could do better than just making the finals -- and that I could definitely do better than 16th in the worlds. I'm not one to leave things half finished and I felt that that's what I'd be doing if I stopped in 1998. She goes on to explain some things that happened to her that year:

This was a huge year for me. I got to watch how people handled things. I saw how some people got really nervous and didn't really enjoy themselves. I saw how really strange this seemed – why do it if you're not enjoying it? Just stepping away allowed me to learn how to enjoy it more. When I came back I was really thankful I could paddle again. It used to be that sometimes I'd dread going out to do workouts, but now it was my choice. Every day was my choice. Before it was kind of repetitive; it was my job. Now it was a big realization for me. Also, I was coaching a lot of kids at that time, watching them and helping them, and that made me appreciate the sport more. I was just taking in everything at that time.

1999

In 1999, Rebecca placed third in the Team Trials – and then came in 2nd in the World Championships team race and 5th in the individuals. They were two excellent finishes and ordinarily she would have been pleased with them, but there was a serious controversy that marred the experience.

The reason I got only third in the Team Trials was because I hadn't done many races before then due to my shoulder. Also, Eric was away in San Diego that year, going to graduate school and I was in Atlanta. This was a trial year for him, to see whether he could still make the Team living in San Diego where there was no whitewater.

So he wasn't around as much. I think one of the big things for me going into the Trials was the uncertainty over whether he would make the Team or not.

Cathy was first at the Trials and Sarah Leith second. Eric also made the Team.

After the Trials and getting some more race experience under her belt, Rebecca began to build up confidence -- 13th at the first Tacen World Cup race, 10th at the second World Cup race, also at Tacen, and 11th at the Augsburg World Cup race.

I had pretty good qualifying times at World Cup races and I thought I was on a good track for the Worlds. We spent a lot of time in Seu. In the spring we spent a month there. Later we spent another 3 weeks there. I got pretty familiar with the water.

Boat Design

In 1999, Rebecca switched from the Atlanta boat design that she had been paddling to the Boomerang, which she has been paddling ever since.

I changed into the Boomerang three days before the Augsburg World Cup and had my best international result (6th). It's a very forgiving boat yet still aggressive. The seams on Double Dutch boats are very sharp; you can hardly tell there is 6 feet of boat behind you. I've tried many other designs over the years and at this point I'm very content and comfortable in the Boomerang.

Team Race

Team runs at the Seu d'Urgell World Championships were held right after the individual qualification runs and before the individual finals. The U.S. trio for the team race was picked on the basis of performance in the qualification runs. Since it had been expected that Cathy Hearn would be one of the top performers in the qualification runs, she had always been on any team that practiced team runs.

But Cathy did not do well in the qualifications and Mary Marshall Seaver was placed on the team. The only trouble was Rebecca, Sarah, and Mary Marshall had never done a team race before.

But we were all pretty close friends and I had done a lot of team racing with Sarah. We had really good communications going on before this run. Mary Marshall kept saying, "You guys, I just know we're going to win." She kept saying it, even right before the run and we were trying to get her to stop. Ordinarily this might be the kind of thing that would bother you if you didn't know the person, but we both knew it was Mary Marshall and it was OK. We were all very comfortable.

Sarah, Rebecca and Mary was the order. Sarah and Rebecca wove really close, leaving some room for Mary Marshall.

We thought we might lose Mary, but she paddled incredibly well. If anyone messed up it was me.

We were the first team to go down and had to wait for all the others. In the end the Germans beat us, but we were second. It was great. Here we were, none of us had ever won a medal in the Worlds before and now we all did it together for the very first time!

Individuals

The individual race was next and turned out to be one of the most unusual ones in the history of the sport.

After the first run, I was in 5th or 6th – pretty good. I thought all I had to do was put down a solid run and I'd probably move up from there.

I came into an up left and I remember hearing someone whistling and trying to distract me. They succeeded. I looked up and saw red and white team uniforms there. (Later the British told her it was the Polish team.)

But then I got focused again and the rest of my run was good. After the finish, I looked up and I saw I was in second place. For an hour and half I was in second.

But then Ian Raspin (of the British Team) said don't get too excited, something's going on; the judges are still looking at the results. But I got drug tested, and thought to myself, what can they do now?

Then coaches came up to me and said that the Swiss and the Polish were protesting my run, saying that I had hit a gate and should have been given a penalty for it.

This was highly unusual; up to this point in the sport it was not allowable under International Canoe Federation rules to protest someone else's run, only penalties on your own run.

When officials went to the judging station in question, they found that one judge had said Rebecca had hit the gate, but a head judge said she did not; the score sheets showed that first the penalty was put on the sheet, then taken off.

Furthermore, spectators were yelling at the judges, trying to influence them to say that she did hit the gate. For the record, close observers, including some members of the American team, say she did hit the gate. Rebecca says "I truly don't know whether I hit it or not."

Then things turned really ugly. Don Giddens, Rebecca's father-in-law-to-be, was the Chief Judge for the race. One of the protesting countries alleged that Don had been the one to cause the judges to strike Rebecca's penalty. Furthermore, it was alleged, she had actually hit another gate as well, and Don had changed that one, too.

The protest dragged on into the night. It was an intense drama. Emotions were high and people were screaming at each other. Videotapes of the run were reviewed – again contrary to ICF rules.

In the end, one penalty was added to Rebecca's score and she dropped from second to fifth. A Pole moved into second and a Swiss moved into third Rebecca was understandably upset:

It really disgusted me about the politics of the sport. It's rotten. I was not prepared for that at all. I would have been happy with the fifth place. But the way they protested it against the rules and especially the way they dragged Don into it really upset me.

But whatever Rebecca thought about the situation, according to Sarah Leith, at the event she "carried herself with dignity and grace -- when a lot of other people did not."

It was truly a horrible situation but I was impressed with her. Imagine being medalist one moment and then having it taken away in another. I think the way Rebecca carried herself speaks of her character in a way that is more important than any medal.

Training for the 2000 Olympics

In the fall of 1999, Rebecca and Eric got married and he took a leave of absence from school in California to come back to Atlanta to train for Sydney.

By that time Rebecca's shoulder was doing well and now she and Eric could train as much as they wanted.

In late October they went to a late World Cup race in Sydney on the Olympic course-to-be and then stayed there another 2 weeks for training.

Then, British athletes Heather Corrie and Andy Raspin came to Atlanta for a month, so both Rebecca and Eric had really good training partners for the month of November.

Rebecca and Eric then spent two and a half months in Costa Rica, starting in January. A contingent of German athletes was also there. But it was the last time Rebecca and Eric were to go there, since the river was river dammed after that.

“We had a bunch of athletes working together. There was a lot of video. It was a very solid training camp,” Rebecca remembers.

They then came back and did the spring races at Nantahala and the Ocoee and then did the Team Trials on the Ocoee. This time Rebecca made the Olympic Team but Eric did not.

She did well in World Cup races leading up to the Olympics – 1st at the Ocoee, and 1st at Seu, the site of the big controversy a year before. This time she won the Seu race by 11 seconds, stimulated, she admits, by an effort to atone for '99. Richard Fox, the five-time K1 World Champion from Britain, and now the Australian coach, said that her run was one of the best women's runs he had ever seen. Even Rebecca says to this day that it was the best race she ever had – not one mistake on either run. In fact, at Seu that year, she not only won the final, she won the qualifier as well and had a total of 4 clean runs.

But there was another controversial judging call this year, this time at the Augsburg World Cup race. Rebecca was given a 50 on the first gate, a downstream gate. This was in the qualifier and as a result, she didn't make the final. Had she made it to the final, she would have been at least third in the overall World Cup instead of the fourth that she eventually got. She thought she didn't have the penalty and protested the call, but the protest was denied.

2000 Olympics

Rebecca says that she doesn't think the Olympics could have been held in a more beautiful place than Sydney, Australia. “There was a big carnival going on everywhere.”

She particularly remembers there was an AT&T Global Village for the athletes, right under the “coat hanger” bridge.

There was a boat from the Athlete Village to this place. They served lobster -- anything you wanted. You could call the U.S. for free. You could get Internet access. After my race, we spent a lot of time there.

Her family could get in there, too. “We’d go there for all our meals.”

Although the AT&T Global Village was better than the Athlete Village, they did have the international cafeteria in the Athlete Village, which was interesting. You could get cuisine from any country you wanted there.

But instead of staying at the Olympic Village, the U.S. Team stayed at a rented house five minutes away from the race course, which team manager Bob Campbell had found. The Village was much further away and the trip presented logistical difficulties in getting to the course in a timely manner.

The Race

I was pretty nervous in the days leading up the Olympics. I knew that I wasn’t paddling to my potential. The coaches tried to be positive with me and said it wasn’t so bad, but I knew that it was. Eric and I had been training together for 7 years, so no words needed to be exchanged. By looking at him I could tell exactly how my paddling was going. We were all getting nervous.

There are some things I had a really hard time preparing myself for. We had a lot of support for the Olympics, and that’s an excellent thing. However, I wasn’t used to all of the attention. I was used to seeking out coaches, times, splits, video, and food. We had a lot of talented coaches at the Olympics but I wasn’t familiar with the different coaching styles. I’d feel guilty for not talking to some of the coaches in between runs. I was used to training with Eric, not having him on the shore.

Even though our team had a plan of attack with the media, the press still managed to pop up in random spots sometimes asking questions about things I never thought about addressing or simply didn’t want to address. One time a simple unplanned question was asked by a media person and before I could answer it a huge fuss was made about talking with me without permission. All I could think was ‘I can answer or not answer, let me decide.’

Finally, Eric figured out that the best thing would be for me to leave the area for three days. (Thank God I have a husband that knows me so well!) We went up to the Blue Mountains to hike and mentally relax. I had a lot of time on our hikes to think about all of the Olympic hype and address the issues that were bothering me. What it came down to was that I was trying to take control of things that were not in my hands. I was focusing on the negatives when there were so many things

to be proud of and happy about. I was reacting to the media's questions and comments when they didn't even know me. By the time I returned to the Olympic world I was ready to take in the whole experience and enjoy it.

When I came back to the course, I realized, hey, this was slalom; even the best people could have a bad run. I felt I had the potential to get a medal, but I was able to forget about the media prediction that I would get one or someone else's prediction that I could get one.

Also I realized that for all I knew, this might be my only Olympics and that I'd better to be sure to enjoy the experience.

In the start pool, you could see everyone and see people cheering for you. This can be pretty disconcerting. So, instead, I focused on seeing my family there. I remember looking up from the starting gate and locating my family in the stands. There was my sister who was missing medical school, my brother who took time away from his work, my grandparents who were in their 80s, my aunt and my parents. I had my husband Eric there as my coach and he was missing the first 2 weeks of his second year in grad school. Being able to look out and see them here was the most incredible feeling. I was so grateful, so proud to see this family. I wanted to be "in the moment" for that run and I think I was. I was feeding on the environment.

I had a couple of penalties and a few time errors but I was happy with it (7th place). The runs were solid. It wasn't a disaster – and a few days before it seemed like it was going to be a disaster.

Living in California

After the Olympics, Rebecca and Eric moved out to California so he could continue with school. They now reside in San Diego in their own house, 30 miles from the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista. Eric is a student at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, 5 minutes away, working on a Ph.D. in Oceanography. He started the program in the fall of 1998. Then he took the academic year 1999- 2000 off to train for the Sydney Olympics with Rebecca, as we have seen.

Rebecca and Eric don't get on a lot of whitewater when they train at home. During the week they go to the Olympic Training Center to lift weights and they paddle on a nearby lake and on the bay. Other activities to keep them in shape for slalom are running, climbing, surfing, mountain biking, and cross-country rollerblading. On the weekends they drive to Bakersfield to train on the Kern River. It's a four-hour drive if they get lucky with LA traffic.

2001

Starting in the fall of 2000 and continuing into the spring of 2001, Rebecca and Eric began a new type of training that had them doing gate workouts only on the weekends

and sophisticated weight training and conditioning exercises during the week, along with paddles on flatwater.

This was also a special year because the World Championships was being held in America, on the Ocoee Olympic course and Americans were eager to make use of the home course advantage.

Here's how her new training schedule broke down:

WEIGHT LIFTING. Three times a week. Normally, Rebecca says, "I hate weight lifting," but in San Diego she has been able to work out a routine that she really likes with Zach Weatherford, a professional trainer at the U.S. Olympic Committee Training Center in Chula Vista.

Variety and specificity to the sport are the keys:

Throughout the year it changes depending on what the goal is for that part of the year. Every 3 days are different. We have harder pulls one day, harder pushes the next. One day we may use cables, the next we might do bench pulls. Zach is very creative. He went to school for this. He's made a big difference in terms of my being injury free.

Instead of regular pull-ups, sometimes we do "monkey pull-ups" with different grips. Sometimes instead of pulling up to a bar, we pull up to a plank of wood, which stresses a different grip. Sometimes we have to grab pennies off the board with one hand while hanging on with the other.

Zach runs the workouts, usually just for Eric and Rebecca alone, but sometimes they are joined by one or two others.

In the fall, we start out with light weights and more repetitions. An example would be 5 sets of 12 reps. Then, we add weight and gradually work it down to fewer reps to build strength. Then, we change and work on power. We increase the speed and explosiveness during each lift.

We have two days, the first with more emphasis on the pushes than the pulls. The second day it's just the opposite, emphasizing the pulls. The third day is usually some type of circuit – for example 5 sets of 6 exercises with no rest in between each exercise and little rest between sets.

Core Workouts

In addition to the weight workouts described above, Rebecca does another type of lifting called "core workouts." These focus on the waist area (the core). One type of core workout consists of doing 2 sets of 10 minutes of work, changing the exercises every 30 seconds. The exercises include such things as sit-ups, V-ups touching toes, side crunches, getting in a pushup position and raising your butt up to make a V, and

“Russian twists” (sit on your butt, lean back while lifting your legs and lifting a ball with your arms), and bicycles on your back.

While the other exercises help keep Rebecca in generally good shape – and particularly keep her shoulder in good shape -- she feels that the core exercises actually make her stronger in the boat: “One summer when I hadn’t been doing my core exercises my performance in the boat suffered; I felt more fatigued while twisting the boat, doing basic sweeps and ducking gates.”

THREE PADDLES. The first type is 10 4-minute loops on a flatwater race course with 30 seconds rest between runs, using the buoys as turnaround points. Rebecca aims for a heart rate of 165-175 on these – medium intensity.

The second type is doing 8-10 500 meter pieces, also on a flatwater race course, with one minute rest between them. Heart rate is between 170-178. These come out to about 3 minutes on and 1 minute off.

The third type is 1000 meter pieces -- 6 of them with a 40 second rest between them. Heart rate between 160 and 165.

When I first started doing these workouts, I could barely finish. We did them as 4 and a half hour sessions instead of breaking them up into two sessions so Eric could cut down on travel time and do more school work. But now I really like it as one big session. Even though our race is only 100 seconds long, the whole race day can last several hours and this type of training can really help with “race day endurance.”

She does absolutely no gates during the week – only on the weekends. But she finds that those are really good sessions, that she can put a lot of time into thinking about and learning from them.

They have a full length course at Bakersfield -- 21 wires. The wires stay up all the time. Eric and Rebecca keep the wires and gates maintained. There is also a club there (Kern River Alliance) that helps to maintain the course, including moving rocks and cleaning out eddies and brush. The course is like the Nantahala, without the drop but with more eddies. The Giddens are very thankful to stay with the Leveque family while training there, sometimes as often as 12 weekends in a row!

They also have two places to train on the Kern, and often do river runs on the Kern in slalom boats.

That year I made a plan to not race in so many World Cup races. I decided I wanted to train in Bakersfield. I really like the U.S. and being home. The more I do this, the happier I am.

Still, that year she won the Team Trials and placed 6th overall in the World Cup. At the three World Cup races she did that year, she placed 6th at Goumois, 4th at Merano, and 3rd at the final in Wausau. At Wausau she was 1st in qualifier and had the fastest

time in final (with 1 penalty) and thus felt as though she and Eric had a good training plan and were peaking at the right time for the Worlds.

Ocoee Cancelled

But the Worlds were cancelled, the first time this has ever happened. The races were scheduled so soon after the 9/11 terrorists attacks in New York and Washington that officials felt they could not guarantee the security of the athletes and thus cancelled the event.

I found it hard to be too upset considering the circumstances. I felt selfish for feeling bad. It was a very strange feeling. I'd put so much into this one race, it was my main focus that year. I skipped a number of World Cups for first time just to focus on the Worlds.

When we found out the race was cancelled we decided to drive back to San Diego. Eric still had a week and a half off from school. So, we stopped at a number of National Parks on our drive home -- Bryce Canyon, Arches, Zion, and Escalante. It was a good mental break for us. It helped us let go of the race and enjoy the things we did have in our lives.

2002

Even though the Ocoee World Championships had been cancelled, in 2002 ICF rules changed so that starting that year, there would be a World Championships every year (except for the Olympic year), and not every other year, the way it used to be since 1949. So Rebecca was going to get another crack at the Worlds right away.

In May of 2002, the ICF adopted a new qualifier/semifinal/final format. Under this system, all boats participate in a two run (combined times) qualifier or heat. Then a certain number of boats progress to a single run semifinal, based on finishing high in the heat. The exact number that progresses to the semifinal is determined by the number of boats entering the race. In all cases, however, only the top ten boats from the semifinal then advance to a one run final where that final run and the semifinal run score are combined to produce the finish results.

Rebecca greeted this change with the same indifference she showed to previous rules changes.

I kind of feel that the first day is a waste because 40 boats qualify, but I haven't let that change my race plan. In some ways, though, the first day is more relaxing, although I hadn't thought of that until now.

And after a successful 2001 and becoming comfortable with a new training method, Rebecca was confident that she could continue to climb up the ladder with this type of training.

Being off whitewater for a long time wasn't as big a problem for me. I just had to do longer, extended technical camps to make up for it. Places like St. Pe, Foix, and Lannion, all in France, and Atlanta, and Durango are where I go for this. I don't get lazy the way I might if I were always on the gates.

These last two years have been pretty similar for me. I have to travel a lot and I don't like it, but I've become resigned to it. Because I do get sick of the travel I have to be careful. But I also know that to stay at the top, I have to participate in as many training camps as I can.

The 2002 international race season didn't start out all that well for her. First there was a training camp in Bourg, the site of that year's World Championships and that went fine. But then there was the World Cup. In the qualifications at the first one, Augsburg, she had a 50 – but managed to qualify anyway and got 6th in the final.

At Augsburg I felt good and I don't really know what happened with all the penalties. I remember just wanting that race run to end. When I went down the drop I knew I was a little slow. Then I hit a gate. I thought to myself that I needed to make up for it by going faster. But I shouldn't have done that because every time I do, it always leads to penalties. Despite the difficulties, this race was a good lead into my season. My times were fast enough to medal which made me realize that I didn't need to do anything special. I was right where I wanted to be when it came to speed, I just needed to clean it up.

The next weekend at Tacen was even worse. She was to call it her “Most Humbling Paddling Experience” since she fouled the first three gates on the course and failed to make the final.

At Prague, however, she won the last World Cup race heading into the World Championships. She placed 6th in the qualifier, 6th in the semifinal and then laid down a superb run that catapulted her to the top of the podium for her third career World Cup win. She won that race by more than 4 seconds.

At Prague I was ready to have something happen. I'd messed up 2 races already and was ready for a good one. But Prague is smaller, technical water and I was afraid the Czechs would have a real home course advantage there. So I didn't expect to do well there and was really happy when I did. It helped me build confidence for the Worlds.

After Prague, Rebecca returned to Bourg and for two days was surprised at how much trouble she had:

I'd been off the big water and when I got back on Bourg again, I had 2 bad days. In the past, I used to get into a mental rut about this sort of thing and then not do well in the race. But I've been working on getting out of that mindset, and I was

able to do it again at Bourg. Enjoying the environment is the key. You don't do it in a way that you're trying to trick myself. You have to be honest about what's wrong and fix it. But then you have to enjoy the moment, too.

Part of what allowed her to enjoy the moment in 2002 was the nature of the U.S. Team that year:

This was a unique year in terms of team unity, staying together, having group dinners. It was a very supportive year. Yes, none of us had a lot of money and in a way we were competing against each other for whatever money was available. But despite that, I felt a lot of support from my teammates this year. I was really moved when I saw everyone on the U.S. Team running down the course each time an American took a run. We could all hang out in the Team tent together and not get nervous. Something I've always noticed about our sport is that while a lot of people think of our sport as an individual sport and that people need to look out for themselves, it isn't really. If you approach it as a team it's better. When that happens, it makes it special.

Race Day

Although I certainly noticed things going on around me, I had a pretty good feeling. I was very focused on the water and wasn't at all nervous about my run. Having Eric there was helpful so I could go over the course with him and to hang out with between runs. I get more nervous for his runs than for mine. He'd probably say the same thing – he got more nervous for mine than for his. I got more nervous for Sarah's run, too.

In between runs we had about 4 hours break. We were hanging out in the tent. I got hungry and needed to get something to eat. I usually have something like PowerBars, banana or yogurt. But all the cafes were closed because it was Sunday. So finally I decided I wanted to go to McDonalds! Eric said no way, but Sarah said yeah, let's do it!

Eric finally gave in, realizing it was more important for me to be relaxed, and drove us to McDonalds. However he did help me eat my McFlurry Sundae.

The Run

Going into the final run, Rebecca had done about as well as she could do, winning the qualifying race and finishing 2nd in the semifinal. The course was very technical and powerful and the USA's Bob Campbell was one of the course designers. Eight different nations were represented in the 10-boat final. Here is what she was thinking just before that run:

At Bourg, when you're at the top getting ready for your run, you can't really see the other people, which was good for me.

Bourg is a course where if you're on line, you're going to be fine. But if you aren't, you have to have backup plans. So I didn't make very specific plans for most of the run. I was ready with backups.

Gates 10-13 (the hardest move on the course) was a place I had a definite plan for, though, and didn't really have a backup. The question was whether to do it all direct or to do a reverse. But I ruled out reverse right away because it was 3 seconds slower. I had the confidence to do this. In a previous race I had this sort of experience, and it worked there, so I had the confidence. Also, I got to watch Eric do it direct with no problem.

(Eric was the best U.S. finish in the men's kayak class, finishing 13th in the semifinal, one penalty away from making the final. His two-second penalty moved him from 5th place to 13th, missing the 10 boat cutoff for the final run.)

The day, August 25, had started out beautiful and sunny. But as the women prepared for the final run, a strong wind picked up and a big dust cloud swept down the course and blew the gates horizontal to the river.

I noticed the wind, but I thought I can't do anything about it. I didn't focus on it. Silvan (the U.S. team coach) got really nervous and sent Eric up to tell me that it was blowing. I appreciated the concern, but I could see that. It did help a little though.

Because of the wind, Rebecca had to dodge gate 10 -- right before the big move.

Then I slowed it down to be very precise for the big move -- which is what some of the good guys should have done. McCleskey and Dave Hepp said something that helped me. They said everything out there is a big water move. Take the moves that way and you'll do fine. And that's what I did on that move.

I came out of the last up left. I thought oh my gosh, I'm going to do it! Then I thought, wait I could blow it! So I was a little cautious right at the end.

At the end I knew I had a solid run. I wasn't sure whether I was going to win or not. But to be honest, I didn't really care. I was very content with my race. No one seemed to care if I ended up first or second. We didn't even watch Mandy's run (Mandy Planert, Rebecca's main competition, from Germany) on the Jumbotron, we were too busy celebrating!

The feeling I had coming down and seeing that the whole U.S. Team had run me down the course while everyone was screaming and clapping was -- wow, I couldn't believe it, what an experience. That was really exciting. I couldn't find Eric. Then I found him waiting at the finish dock with his hands dangling in the water crying. Of course Eric claims that he had a piece of dirt in his eye.

She ended up posting the fastest K1W time of the day on her second run to finish 2.02 seconds ahead of Mandy Planert. Cristina Giai Pron of Italy took the bronze. Her win

marked the first time that a U.S. woman won the World Championship since 1979, when Cathy Hearn did it in Jonquiere, Canada, and the first time any U.S. athlete won a World Championship since 1995, when Cathy's brother David won the C1 title in Nottingham, England.

But for her, this wasn't the best part:

The best part of it was how sincerely people cared about it – people like Rachel Crosby (from England) and Margaret Langford (from Canada). It was really nice. This caring about other people reflects a quality about Rebecca that Sarah Leith believes is worth underscoring:

So many times we see professional athletes and World Champions that might be incredible at their sport but are not people to be proud of. Rebecca is an absolutely amazing friend and I think it says a lot about her that I am capable of saying that. After all she is one of my main competitors and all my kayaking life I have had to compete against her and live in her shadow. But, she has never treated me like her shadow. She has treated me as an equal, a competitor, a training partner, a sister, and most importantly a best friend. I think of her as a person first and an athlete second and I know that a lot of others feel that way, too.

FLASH FORWARD TO THE SEAL COURSE...

The SEAL commander strode forward to meet Rebecca. He said he had never seen a woman complete the course before. He asked whether she could come back and demonstrate it for new recruits.

Not for the women.

For the men.

She said sure. She thought to herself that it really hadn't been all that hard. Besides being in good physical shape from kayaking, she wasn't afraid of the obstacle course, not afraid of the heights the way some of the men had been. Besides conditioning the muscles of her body, slalom kayaking had conditioned the muscles of her mind.