FOCUS ON WINNERS: ERIC JACKSON

Former canoe slalom Olympian, and four-times world freestyle kayak champion Eric Jackson is now president of his own kayak manufacturing company. But he refuses to give up competing at the top of the sport just yet.

Family life

In 2009, Eric Jackson lost his world freestyle kayak world championship title to a young pretender from Canada, Nick Troutman. This was tough enough for the veteran, former Olympian and four-times world champion to take, but the fact that he had spotted and begun to nurture the talent in his much younger rival at the age of 15 added extra poignancy. The fact that Nick Troutman had, earlier that year, also become his son-in-law took matters off the poignancy scale. As a small consolation, Mrs Troutman, winner of the women's world championship last year, still competes as Emily Jackson.

"It was tough," her father admits, "losing your daughter and your title to the same guy in the same year." Rather than leave things to the new generation, however, his reaction is to continue to train as hard as ever in preparation for taking the title back at the 2011 world championships (the event takes place every other year) at Plattling in Germany.

Having spent many years designing kayaks for various canoe brands, Mr Jackson took the step in 2003 of founding his own company, Jackson Kayak, but he has a novel way of combining his passion for the water with running his business. The factory is in Rock Island, Tennessee, conveniently close to the Collins River, making kayaking part of each business day. He trains twice a day when he's in Rock Island and says it's the best kayaking place in the world and the obvious place for him to have set up his home and his business. He is being modest though. Jackson Kayak took over a warehouse in the town that VF Corporation had closed down. The company is the only one in the white-water boats sector that carries out all its manufacturing in the US and has more than 100 employees.

In any case, the company founder only spends part of the year there. As well as attending specialist training camps in Europe and Africa in the build-up to events, he has, since 1997, spent most North American summers packing his family and many of their belongings into a recreational vehicle (RV) to spend as many minutes as possible of each day paddling . This has allowed him to become familiar with different types of water from the warmer waters of the east coast, medium-to-large volume rivers further inland, the fastest-flowing (2,000 cubic feet of water per second) Colorado Rapids, and the cold, clear waters of the Pacific North West– and is one of the main reasons he is still competing in his mid-40s against athletes half his age.

He says combining the commercial design and manufacture of kayaks such as the successful Fun or Hero models with competing at the highest level is "easier than you think".

Like lots of ambitious young athletes, Eric Jackson set out with the twin aims of winning the world championship and becoming a millionaire by the age of 30. He found, though, that one ambition often got in the way of the other. He found a quote he liked from US author and political activist Helen Keller, who said: 'The secret of success is fidelity to a worthy purpose.' He believes in this maxim still, all the more so since he found that Ms Keller was only slightly adapting something German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said more than a century before. For him, naturally (Jackson, not Goethe), the worthiest purpose of all is kayaking.

He explains: "I love everything about kayaking: the equipment, the events, the training, the disputes, everything. When I realised this was what I really enjoyed, I took the decision to shed everything that was getting in the way of that. We had two young children at the time, but I'm lucky to have always had the support of my wife, Kristine, which has been essential. We sold everything we owned in two days, bought our first RV and drove to California. I found I was able to make enough money doing coaching clinics for two days to be able to spend the rest of the month kayaking without distractions. I started to win competitions and we were super happy."

Four-times freestyle kayaking world champion, Eric Jackson.
Jackson Kayak.


ASTRAL



Family of champions. Left to right: Emily, Dane and Eric Jackson.
Jackson Kayak

A move into boat design happened later, and his designs were successful, even though the name Eric Jackson was unlikely ever to appear on any employee attendance award ("the key is always about results and never about appearances"). He walked away in the end to set up his own company because he wanted his employer to make children's boats. Part of this was because he felt his own son, Dane, was ready to take to the waters in his own kayak. There was no boat on the market for people younger than 13 at the time, and even then it was the smallest adult boat on the market that parents were purchasing. "They said there was no market," the Jackson Kayak founder says. "The market was there; it was the product that was missing, there wasn't a boat for the market. Now you can see five-year-olds running class-three rivers and doing Eskimo rolls [flipping the kayak back over when the paddler ends up upside down in the water]." Something else that proves he was right is that Dane Jackson is already, at the age of 16, a national US champion.

On the purely business side, Jackson Kayak sold 2,500 boats in its first year, doubling this by 2008. In 2010, the founder anticipates selling 9,000 kayaks and 20,000 by 2012. The company believes the best way for it to achieve growth is to increase the white-water market. It's an enthusiast-based sport, Eric Jackson points out, but it can reach critical mass if small towns in Colorado or Montana or wherever can offer enough social activity to run alongside a kayaking event. People will come and will start by playing on the river. If competitions start appearing on the calendar and those same people find there is a level at which they can take part, they start to become more serious about it and exponential growth could follow. "That's my theory," Eric Jackson says. "We're still in the flat-lands, and I don't have any grand plan. I'm not some smart guy who knows how to do it all, but I believe that growth can come. It's the way these things work.

Freestyle kayaking

One of several disciplines in the sport of white-water kayaking, freestyle has been compared to snow-boarding because competitors are judged on a series of tricks that they perform in the course of canoeing their way down a stretch of river. At specific points on the course, they perform flips, jumps, spins and other moves. Based on criteria laid down by the International Canoe Federation, a team of judges awards points to each athlete. Competitors have a set amount of time in which to complete as many moves as possible and can receive extra points for style. The world championship takes place every two years.

The special moves that freestyle kayakers perform include:

- ***The Splitwheel*** – Not just an ordinary cartwheel, this move involves a half pirouette to move from one edge to another while vertical, usually when the bow is down. For example, if the boater is using the right edge of the bow and left edge of the stern while cartwheeling, they will rotate to the right when the bow is down and begin using the right edge of the stern, followed by the left edge of the bow.
- ***The Phonics Monkey*** – This is a combination of two moves, performed within a hole in which the paddler begins performing a pirouette but instead of dropping into a regular surf upon finishing, uses the pop coming out of the pirouette to perform a loop.
- ***Macho Move*** – The kayaker enters and sustains a bow stall while drifting towards a wave or hole. As the boat enters the trough of the feature they pull down, driving their boat vertically into the water. As they move to the peak of the wave or hole, the boat will also be rising from their pull down and they can perform a loop over the feature itself.