

Slalom E-Book

By William T. Endicott

Section VI - Case Study : OLIVER FIX

To The Tune Of a Different Drummer

"Yes, there may be rules...but you want to learn how to short-cut the rules."

-- Oliver Fix

Introduction

Germany's Oliver Fix was World Champion in Men kayak in 1995 and Olympic Champion in 1996. He is one of only two men to do this, the other being Siegbert Horn of East Germany, who won the Worlds and Olympics in '71 and '72, respectively.

The first thing that pops out in a study of Oliver's career is how many advantages he had. In many ways, he is the prime example of "what it's supposed to look like", the top athlete coming out of the traditional "pyramid" structure with plenty of racers, coaches and training facilities.

Oliver had the advantage not only of growing up in Germany, which has one of the biggest, most organized programs in the sport, he also grew up in Augsburg, probably the most famous training and racing center in the sport. On top of that, he studied sports in school and even did a year of medical school. He also started kayaking extremely young; he trained in swimming and kayaking at the same time for 5 years, which must have gotten him into fantastic upper body shape; and he had coaches for his whole career, including one, Helmut Handschuh, who spent almost every workout with him. He was also paid to train fulltime for 3 years when he was in the Army. And finally, living in Europe, he had exposure to plenty of international competition.

But some other paddlers had such advantages, too. What sets him apart from them is his willingness to question traditional thinking and come up with new approaches. In some ways, it's harder to do that when you grow up in a big, successful system ; it's just easier to go along with the conventional wisdom. Perhaps the moral of the story is, if you want to be Olympic Champion, you're going to have to do your own original thinking, even if you do come from the "ideal" program!

One is tempted to compare Oliver's mental approach to the sport with that of Richard Fox, the 5-time World Champion who set the standard for a decade. Both were great thinkers and patient men. But Richard was more of a sequential thinker, and Oliver more of a holistic one. Richard was always taking things apart and analyzing them in a conscious, rational way. He would keep extensive training logs and write out his thinking in them. It was almost as though he had to "confess" what he had learned.

Oliver did not approach it that way. Yes, he thought a lot about it, but it was not in such a

conscious, rational way. He did not keep logs; there are no lists of do's and don't with Oliver Fix. It was almost as though he conceived of a big picture in his mind and just set about to achieve it in a subconscious way.

Background

Oliver Fix was born June 21, 1973 and grew up in Stadtbergen, a suburb of Augsburg. An interesting fact is that the name "Fix" means fast in the Bavarian dialect where he lived. When he won the Olympics, Oliver was 179 centimeters tall, weighed 73 kilograms, and used a 203 centimeter-long paddle which was right-hand controlled.

With the exception of his father, Oliver's family had no unusual sports involvement. His father, however, was a motocross racer on a regional basis in Bavaria. Oliver and a half sister lived with his father, and a full sister and two half brothers lived with his mother.

Education

Oliver claims he was an average student, just as he claims he had only average physical skills. "I think being average in everything, as opposed to being good in some things and bad in others, is actually good for Slalom Racing because it requires such varied skills," he says.

He did well enough in school, however, to qualify for Gymnasium, the German university-track secondary school system. While in Gymnasium, Oliver studied mathematics and sport for 2 years. Then, following a three-year stint in the German army, he attended the medical faculty at the University of Munich for one year, 1995-6. He dropped out towards the end of that academic year, however, because it conflicted with the Olympics. He never went back.

Oliver says that his Gymnasium study of sports, plus his one year of medical school helped his athletic career significantly. Even though he studied only general physiology and kinesiology and not kayaking specifically, it was helpful "because I learned enough of the literature that I could understand the scientists and form my own opinions."

Oliver also noticed that the period in which he was training the most was also the one in which his school grades were the highest. For example, during his last two years in Gymnasium, Oliver was training particularly hard to try to make the 1992 German Olympic team. But this was also when he had his highest grades (so he could get into medical school). He attributes this to "better time management." He says that with so many things all going on at the same time, he had to be more efficient with his time - "quality counted."

Getting into Kayaking

At age 6, Oliver started swimming and subsequently, several other sports, such as soccer and cycling. But at 8, he got into kayaking, liked it right away and trained at it continuously from then on.

However, it is also important to note that while he trained in kayaking, for 5 years, until he was 13, Oliver also trained at swimming during the same time. He was a member of the TSG Stadtbergen swim club located in the Augsburg suburb in which he lived. He

could walk to practice and back, whereas it was an hour's trip to the kayak course on the other side of town. Oliver was competitive in swimming on a regional (Bavarian) level.

Oliver got into kayaking at the Schwaben Augsburg club, on the banks of the famous Eiskanal whitewater course, site of the first-ever Olympic slalom in 1972 (In fact, he was born less than a year after that race).

It is hard to think of a more famous whitewater site than the one at Augsburg. Even before the Olympic complex was built, the place was well-known, having been the site of the 1957 World Championships, on a much easier canal made difficult in spots by using boards to create holes, waves and eddies. After 1972, many other major international races were held there including the World Championships 1985, and the final for the first World Cup, in 1988, and the World Championships 2003. Furthermore, a long line of World and Olympic medalists have lived and trained in Augsburg.

Besides the famous Eiskanal course, Augsburg has a number of training canals, all of which have lots of gates on them. Some of them are Class I, moving water courses. One of them is called the "Jugendstrecke", the "youth course", and is a Class II whitewater course used primarily by youngsters. There is also the Class I Lech river, running parallel to the main course, and a nearby lake. Conference rooms, dormitories, sports shops, a restaurant overlooking the Slalom Racing course, and even a bowling alley, all round out the picture and make Augsburg probably the most well-equipped Slalom training and racing site in the world.

When it was created, however, the Eiskanal was a very unique course, quite unlike natural rivers on which most of the big international races were held at the time and up to the 1990s. The uniqueness is due to the unpredictable surging of the water, which bounces off vertical concrete walls, similar to a river in flood. This was quite unlike natural rivers in which there is a lot less of this unpredictable surging. Because of this characteristic, it was thought through the 1980s that training at Augsburg for too long was a disadvantage because it was so unlike the natural courses where the big races were held.

But Oliver felt that during his career this was no longer a problem, for two reasons. First, more and more races were being held on artificial courses. And second, everyone based at Augsburg started spending more time at other places than in the past. Oliver says, for example, "I spent a total of 10-15 weeks at the Ocoee before the 1996 Olympics" (The Ocoee is a natural river, or perhaps more accurately, a "man-enhanced" one!). All together, he made 5 trips there. So, while Augsburg certainly has unique characteristics, this was not the liability it once was.

After the 1972 Olympics, the Eiskanal Olympic site was given to the local club, the Augsburger Kanu Verein (AKV). Another club split off from AKV, called Schwaben Augsburg, and it was Schwaben that became Oliver's club.

Schwaben Augsburg is the whitewater subdivision of a much bigger club, the Turn und Sport Verein (TSV) which encompasses many sports. Schwaben Augsburg also has a flatwater gate training site on the Wertach river, across town, which was the original site of the club many years ago.

Oliver reckons that when he was there, Schwaben Augsburg had 300-400 members and a yearly budget of about 100,000 Deutsche Marks, or about \$60,000. The money came mostly from sponsors recruited from organizing World Cup races on the Olympic course.

Oliver wound up at Schwaben more or less by accident. He and his father came first to AKV, which is an entirely separate club. But no one was there so they walked around the corner until they came upon Schwaben Augsburg, where they ran into a coach and some athletes. Oliver was invited to begin participation in the youngsters' program. At 8 years old, which was what he was, the athletes went to the club twice a week and sometimes on weekends.

Oliver started his career at Schwaben Augsburg in a group of 10-15 youngsters, "but not many stayed more than 2 years." He remembers the experience as stimulating: "you were anxious to get on the water. It was quite strict, not a lot of playing around." They trained on the flatwater gates right beside the club.

Oliver reckons he probably was in one or two races that first year. "I remember one really terrible race at Ulm," he muses. "I was terrified by the number of people there, waiting in line to take their runs. I flipped and swam before I even got on the course. Then, I swam again during the first run. I didn't do the second run - and thereby missed the 'Trostpreis,' (consolation prize for good effort). "

When he was 9 years old, Oliver first ran the Eiskanal Olympic course. This was in 1982. The local paper, the *Augsburger Allgemeine*, commemorated the occasion by saying that he was the youngest person to ever run it.

Levels of Competition in Germany

In Germany when Oliver was growing up, there was (and still is today) a fairly elaborate system of competitive leagues based on age:

- * Schüler ("pupil") B, for 10-12 year olds
- * Schüler A, for 12-14 year olds
- * Jugend ("youth"), for 14-16 year olds
- * Junioren ("juniors"), for 16-18 year olds
- * Seniors, for 18 and over

National Championships were held on separate weekends for each division. For Schüler B, the nationals in Oliver's time were pretty formal: 40-60 K1s competing on a 30-gate course. The same number also competed in the Schüler A Nationals.

Today, it's less formal for the Schüler B group. Now, instead of a normal race course, it is more like the British "Paddles Up" competitions in which there are a lot of fun tests, such as tires suspended over the course, through which you must toss your paddle, and so on. "I guess they had trouble with the more formal competition at that age," Oliver says, "so they changed it."

Ranking Systems

Besides the above classifications, Germany has two national ranking systems for its athletes. From age 15 on, athletes are eligible to attend ranking races. You start with

"Rangliste (rank list) B" and then move to "Rangliste A". In the B list, you are ranked on the best 3 out of 4 races on a basis of how many seconds behind the winner you are. These cumulative seconds behind the winner are added up and a ranking made from that. The A list was calculated in the same manner.

Each year, the top 6 boats from the B list are exchanged for the bottom 6 from the A list. This is done both to promote the best athletes and also to keep the number of A ranked athletes about the same number, 80 or so.

1981-84 - Getting started

When Oliver thinks back over his early days, he remembers the benefits of coaching and group training. First of all, most of his sessions were coached. Probably 100% of the workouts for Schüler A and B athletes were coached (by volunteer coaches) -- and probably 90% of all the workouts he did for the rest of his career were coached, as well.

Secondly, most of these were group workouts. This was true even later in his career when Oliver was much better than anyone else in the group. In the latter instance, however, it should be said that the other athletes "trained with Oliver," rather than "Oliver trained with the group."

Finally, many of these workouts were timed and competitive, especially as his career progressed.

Every Stroke Counts

Since there was a coach and other paddlers in most of Oliver's workouts, it was easy for him to stay motivated during hard training. It also led him to develop the concept of "Every Workout Counts" and even "Every Stroke Counts." In other words, the presence of the coach and the other athletes was conducive to carefully comparing and analyzing what they wanted to do and then working hard to accomplish it.

This was the primary way Oliver learned technique when he was young. He doesn't remember coaches telling him specific things to do. Rather, he remembers watching the others do the same course he was doing and comparing the way he did it with the way they did it. In fact, a frustrating thing about asking Oliver to describe the technique elements he learned and how he learned them is that he can't really answer you. He feels he was always setting the standard for his technique development. He was always developing it. He feels that there wasn't a specific time that he learned things. He had started so early that he was able to just keep building on what he already knew. "We were always experimenting with times," he explains:

"Every situation was unique. There were thousands of situations. I can't conceive of a specific situation that I could put in a box. It's more of a sense you have to acquire as to how you can keep up your speed. First, you start out doing a move without thinking about it. Then you time it. Then you try it with a backstroke. You have to learn versatility."

And later, when he was a coach, Oliver felt the problems were the same:

“You teach versatility by giving feedback. You give time feedback for those working on the clock. You talk in terms of how does it feel with people who aren't taking times. I can't give you experience. Experience has to be acquired. That takes time. You have to put people into different situations so that they can figure it out, learn how it feels. Yes, there may be rules for certain kinds of gates. But you want to learn how to short-cut the rules.”

But one definite lesson Oliver learned was "You have to really believe the workout you're doing is the right one for you. In other words, no matter what someone else wants you to do, it's not as important as you yourself believing deeply in what you're doing." Oliver feels this is a form of confidence building, the ultimate aim of which is to make you believe you can win. He felt this was so important, he constantly nurtured it during his career.

1984- 1985 - Schüler B

In 1984-5, when Oliver was 12 years old, he competed in the Schüler B class. This was the year he competed in his first national championships. In 1983 he had not been old enough to compete in the nationals - by one week - and it had grated on him.

At this time, Oliver was training in both swimming and kayaking. For swimming, he did 3 workouts a week, although at times he went to 2 more optional workouts a week as well. He did not specialize in an event. He did all events, backstroke, breaststroke, crawl -- whatever. In fact, for a while, he had the club record for the 200 meter butterfly - because he was the only athlete in the whole club who could last 200 meters!

Kayak training at this time consisted of 3 workouts a week, on Monday, Wednesday and, Friday -- in addition to the swimming workouts.

Training at this time

October was a rest month. Training started around November and the first phase lasted until mid-March. During this phase, workouts were both indoors and outdoors, on the water. There would be 2 indoor workouts a week, one on Wednesday evening and the other Friday evening, both in a big gymnasium. The athletes did running and circuit training on an obstacle course (rope climb and other obstacles). On Fridays, they did light weight interval training. There were 8 stations and you would move quickly from one to the other. Oliver did these workouts with the other kids. The objective was endurance and basic body development.

On the weekends, depending on the weather, there was paddling on one of the canals at Augsburg. "It might be paddling on the Jugendstrecke ("youth course," or easier course) just doing moves," Oliver explains, "and a lot of it was on your own initiative, or maybe with a few friends."

In mid-March they stopped the indoor activities. They got on the water again on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday basis. Races started by mid-to-late April and Oliver did both Slalom and Wildwater races, especially early in the year. He did about 15 competitions a year, which included Slalom and Wildwater. The Slalom and Wildwater races were held at separate venues.

1985 was a most successful year for Oliver, in that he won both the Slalom and the Wildwater nationals in Schüler B. It was also a big year in Augsburg, for the 1985 World Championships were held there that year in commemoration of the 2000th anniversary of the founding of the city. It was "kind of a glorious year," Oliver recalls.

Recollections of the period

Oliver started to get really enthusiastically involved in kayaking now. He learned he was a very competitive person. He had a number of outgoing coaches and other volunteers to help him. "It was pretty balanced," Oliver reflects, "not too hard core, but still pretty organized."

Oliver doesn't remember working on draw strokes or sweep strokes or things like that, though. "The coach would set a little course and say 'try this'. Then he'd say, 'try it this other way', always experimenting. You'd learn a lot in the group just by watching the others and imitating them."

Interestingly, one of the things he remembers the most is simply "the sense of being free, running around outside in the winter":

"I was only 12 years old but my parents trusted me to be able to take the tram one hour to get to the Eiskanal. They trusted me to be responsible in how I did this. Then they would pick me up after the workout."

Watching the '85 World Championships

1985 was the first time Oliver heard the name Richard Fox, the reigning World Champion from Britain, who had actually become a member of Schwaben Augsburg so he could practice on the Eiskanal in preparation for the '85 Worlds to be held there. Furthermore, the name Fox was very close to Fix. In fact, at the time in Germany, there were two famous cartoon characters, two smart little animals, named "Fix and Foxy" and Oliver became the subject of a number of jokes based on this.

But Oliver didn't pay much attention to it. And he claims that having the Worlds in Augsburg was not all that important to him - at least not as important as it was for the other people. "I was kind of aloof to it," he says now. He didn't even see Fox's winning run, nor did he pay much attention to Peter Micheler, also a member of Schwaben Augsburg, who won the silver medal.

1986-87 - Schüler A

By the time Oliver was competing in the Schüler A category, he was being told he was 1-1.5 years ahead of his age group. Each year at the national championships, he was a favorite to win. But for the first year in each category, he had trouble winning. Then, in his second year, he would almost always win. This meant that by the time he went into the Senior category, he had already won about 10 national championships, if you include Slalom, Wildwater, and Slalom team.

Serious training during this period started in November. At this time, his training group started 90-minute Sunday endurance workouts in Wildwater boats on the Donau river. They would drive an hour up to the town of Donauwoerth just to get to the start of the

run. At this time, they did these workouts as time trials, starting the boats off at 30-second intervals and racing. But later, in 1989, they changed it to a slower pace (didn't race it).

On weekdays, if the weather was good, they would sometimes go on the water in Slalom boats on Wednesdays and Fridays. Then, after that, they would go indoors and do the same circuit training they did as Schüler Bs.

Every Wednesday was quite standardized: start out with a warm-up basketball game. Then go into the circuit like before -- 2 x 15 minutes of exercises. Oliver was probably doing 6 workouts a week at this time.

There were usually only 2-3 paddling workouts a week now, and they usually came on the weekends. They were mostly endurance workouts, some kind of loop workout. If it was really warm, though, they'd work on technique.

Training and racing at this time was quite similar to what he had done in Schüler B, but this was the first time he competed in international races. At first, it was in Austria and Italy, but later he went to France, Czechoslovakia and Switzerland. He probably did 2-3 of these international races a year.

Most of the trips were adventures. He had a friend, Vitus Husek, who often went with him and this made it even more fun: "The possibility of going to all these places was the most exciting part of it all".

Sometimes Oliver had to compete against older paddlers and they gave him a run for his money. He would have a new threat each year; one person would be really good one year but then the next year, either not be racing or hadn't trained very much and wasn't so good any more.

Oliver's progression was very continuous -- "I never had a really bad year." He regularly won both Slalom and Wildwater races. One year he won two Wildwater trophies for winning one race on the Enza river in Italy that were so big he couldn't fit them into his trophy case at home. He won the nationals in his second year in Schüler A, but not the first year.

1988-89 - Jugend and Helmut Handschuh

1988 was a crucial year for Oliver because of several significant changes that occurred in his training. The first was getting a permanent coach. For the Schüler A and B groups, the coaches would change each year. Some were strict, some weren't. Some were social, some weren't.

At age 15, however, Oliver began an association with a new coach, Helmut Handschuh, and maintained it to the end of his career. Helmut started coaching Oliver while working full time as a computer repair specialist for Siemens and he'd come to the club after work. Later, after he retired from Siemens, he spent even more time at the club. During the entire period, however, he was always a volunteer coach.

Helmut's group was the "high performance group" of the Schwaben club. This wasn't determined by age any more - there were Juniors and Seniors in it. Oliver asked to be in

the group, and Helmut accepted him. "But I was still a youngster, pretty quiet and trying to catch up."

Helmut had had a long involvement in the sport of whitewater canoeing, having been one of the founding fathers of the Schwaben club and a coach of the German national team. In the beginning, Oliver was one kid in a group of 10 athletes. Later he sometimes worked out with Helmut alone or in smaller groups.

But whatever the format, Helmut had a great influence on Oliver. For example, Oliver never kept a training log, but Helmut did, or at least he kept some records on an Excel spreadsheet. "But we never really looked back at these records," Oliver explains, "we projected ahead more. And we never did exactly the same thing each year. We always came up with something new."

"Helmut kept us updated with new training ideas, ideas that very much resonated with my philosophy," Oliver explains.

"If you have a 2 minute race, every workout should give you a stimulus designed to help with a two-minute effort. Sometimes, you'd go longer than two minutes and then the intensity would go down. Other times, you'd go shorter than two minutes and the intensity would go up. But you always kept the two-minute time frame in your mind."

1988 was also the first year for winter training in southern Italy, at a place called Policastro. Oliver and his colleagues had to drive about 16-18 hours to get there. A busload of people went for two weeks. Helmut went too. They went there for many years in a row. Even when he was on the national team, Oliver went there, but not as part of the national team.

There was a Class III river there. It was warm and next to the ocean. Oliver and his group put gates up there and did these kinds of workouts:

Technique workouts:

- * Short courses in small groups with video or timing as an additional feedback. They were trying to learn how to do upstream gates more efficiently, learn all the different possibilities for them. As Oliver explains it, "you acquire your style and versatility through trying different things. Each and every upstream gate requires a different way. A lot of this has to do with automating the technique." After looking at the video, they might do the exact same course in more than one workout, thus repeating it over and over again.

Endurance workouts:

- * 90-minute paddles on the ocean in downriver boats.
- * 90-minute downriver paddles on the river.
- * They didn't do loops on the gates because there weren't enough gates.

Oliver increased the number of his workouts during this time and his training partner, Vitus Husek, the C1 paddler, helped motivate him. Oliver learned a little bit about using his paddle from watching the C1, but the most important thing was that Husek was in a different class, so Oliver did not feel the competition.

Autogenic Training

1988 was also the first year Oliver started doing autogenic training, a relaxation technique he felt he needed "because I was a nervous person." His autogenic training entailed laying on the floor and going through a number of steps all designed to relax him. For example, first he would tell himself that his arm was heavy and then he'd relax it. Then, he'd tell himself the other arm was heavy, and he'd relax that. And so on, until he went through his whole body. Or he'd tell himself that his body was hot and then relax it.

Oliver learned this technique in the "Volkshochschule", a voluntary continuing education program in Germany. You pay a small amount of money for evening classes and you have a teacher who goes through an 8-week period of instruction. Oliver did this during the winter of 1988-89.

He took this course because he felt it would help him with his sports. It was his own idea. In retrospect, it had a huge impact on him, not just in his sports career but in his whole life. "Part of it is positive suggestion," Oliver explains. "Once you are in a relaxed state, you can work on things that bother you. You have fears that you can overcome by learning how to formulate positive suggestions." Oliver worked with this technique for the rest of his career. "Once you have experienced relaxation, you know when you're not in it," as he puts it.

Rangliste A

1988 was Oliver's first year in Rangliste A, which was significant because he now had to compete against Seniors. Furthermore, there were four major races a year now, not just one. Before this year, Oliver was used to doing a lot of little races and only one big one, the German nationals. Now he had three other races that were as intense as the nationals.

As a result of these changes, Oliver almost qualified for the Junior World Championships in 1988. One touch kept him off the team. He wasn't really shooting for this Worlds, but after the Trials, he realized that he had almost made it anyway. This lit a spark in him, and from this point on, his training took a big jump forward and making the team for the next Junior Worlds became his obsession.

1989

As previously stated, one of Helmut Handschuh's attributes was bringing his charges new training ideas. Examples of this were two ideas that had great impact on Oliver starting in 1989.

They came from two Russian scientists named Boiko and Verhoshanski. Helmut would read an article by one of them in a sports magazine and would then contact the author and ask for the entire translation, which he would then present to the athletes for their consideration. The two ideas:

1. **Your body adopts best to new technique with aerobic training.** When you are working on your technique and trying to automate your stroke, you're better off trying to do it with an aerobic intensity in training rather than with an anaerobic intensity. The

aerobic training is long and boring, but when you get through it, you retain the quality of the stroke better. If, on the other hand, you try to master new technique while always going fast, you'll have a harder time learning it and you won't retain it as well. Only after being sure that he knew the proper technique, would Oliver attempt to go faster and faster using it. This was a cycle he would repeat each year. For example, each winter, he would concentrate on slower aerobic training and then in the spring switch over to faster, lactic acid (anaerobic) training. He had a control course at Augsburg where the gates always stayed in the same position and he found that he would get up to 8 seconds faster on this course in the spring after switching over to the lactic training.

2. Block training. Normal training technique calls for a hard day/easy day approach to working a muscle group. This would mean doing endurance paddling on, say, Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. But Block Training calls for several hard days in a row, then doing something else for a few days to allow for recovery. The idea is to tear down even more than usual, but then build back even more than usual. So, from 1989 on, Oliver did his endurance workouts on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, and then did something completely different for the next couple of days.

Race Simulation

Specific race-day simulation was something else Oliver developed in 1989 and then perfected it in later years. For Oliver, an important aspect of Helmut Handschuh's concept of the importance of specificity in training was race simulation. For example, starting 8-10 weeks before the team selection trials, the most important workout of each week should be a very detailed race simulation.

For Oliver this meant getting up the same time of the day as you would on race day, eating what you would on race day, and warming up exactly the same as on race day. It also meant studying the course the same way you would on race day, taking only one practice run on the course (in those days race format consisted of a practice run, then two timed and scored runs, only the better of which counted), waiting in between the runs the same amount of time as you would on race day, and even going away to rest the way you would on race day. "At the Ocoee, for example, you know you can't get anything to eat or drink at the course, so you have to bring a cooler with you. Then, why not do the same thing in race simulation?". Oliver found this kind of preparation was often much harder than a regular training session because you have to think more. "Often, it's just easier to go out and take another run."

"Training is nothing more than having your body and mind adapt to what you want them to do. A lot of this is done through repetition and it takes determination to do the repetition. You need motivation and having the coach there is good for motivation. I was always extremely motivated, always wanting to do more, and sometimes Helmut even had to hold me back."

By this time, 1989, Oliver's prime objective was to get to the World Championships Junior 1990 in Tavanasa, Switzerland. He was now doing 12-13 workouts a week, almost double what he had been doing just a year before. "This was when I really started doing a lot of two-a-day workouts."

Each year serious training would start in November - December, after a month off following the previous race season. The top priority from then until January 1 (only two

months) was strength-endurance. One is struck by the short time frame of this endurance phase, or "base conditioning" phase, as Oliver calls it.

Traditional training literature talks about much longer periods, from September to February, for example, as being more appropriate. But Oliver explains it this way, "you only need enough endurance for a two minute event."

While the overall objective was strength/endurance, the specific workouts changed from year to year. They were almost all long workouts, though:

- * Gate loops: 6-10 x [3' minutes on, 6 minutes off].
- * 90-minute loops, non-stop. In these, they would also do a 10-second sprint every 10 minutes or do attainments for 10 seconds on the Jugendstrecke.
- * 90 minutes in Wildwater boat on fairly flat water (the Donau). This was a modification of a workout they had started in 1986 (see above). But there was a crucial difference now. In the early days, they conducted this workout as an intense time trial. But that got too lactic and now they changed it to a slower pace. "In later years, we went into fat-burning," as Oliver describes it. He had read that it was better to do endurance training without getting into the lactic acid system, the way they did with the all-out 90-minute paddles. With the slower pace, you burn fat, which was more desirable.
- * From 1989 on, they did "Trichter" workouts. These consisted of dragging different sized cones (Trichter) behind the boat, in intervals of 8 x 5 x [30 seconds on, 15 seconds off]. The most frequently used cone had a 15-centimeter diameter in the front and a 1.5 centimeter diameter in the back. The others' dimensions were 12, 9 and 6 centimeters in the front and 1.5 centimeters in the back. The athletes did the Trichter workouts as block training. Once a week they would do three days in a row, then a day off. These were "hard, but not lactic," because Oliver used a heart rate monitor to make sure they never got lactic. This was only for going straight ahead on flatwater and whitewater (down the Eiskanal). In gates, they used bungy chords wrapped around the boat.

The Trichter workouts forced you to be more efficient with your forward stroke - "taught you to take deeper, stronger strokes." The Trichter made you slow down your stroke, but that allowed you to concentrate more on each one. That was harder when you got tired, but the coach was always there to help maintain good technique when you got tired. Smaller Trichter were used to speed up the stroke rate a little, while still concentrating on the good technique.

During the Trichter workouts, Oliver and the other athletes used heart rate monitors to gauge the intensity of the workout and the boater's efficiency. They used it to learn how to relax muscles that were not needed for paddling. For example, by trying consciously to relax the face and neck muscles while they were paddling, they could lower their pulse rates by 5 to 10 beats per minute. By mastering this technique they could actually learn to paddle harder at the same pulse rate as before.

- * Direct preparation for the team trials. Starting on January 1, Oliver's group switched into direct preparation for the team trials, which were held in April - May. This preparation phase consisted of higher intensity training, accomplished at the time by gate loops. They also did Trichter workouts, but with a slightly higher intensity, plus doing more of

them on whitewater. Oliver explains that one of the main objectives of all these workouts was to "make our strokes more efficient" specifically, to get maximum power on right at the beginning of the stroke:"

"We did quite few tests to determine what makes some people fast on flatwater and some slow. What we came up with was that the very beginning of the stroke should be the time of maximum propulsion. A graph would show the most power coming on right at the start, and then leveling off - not building up to maximum power progressively and then leveling off."

1990-91 - Junioren

When Oliver got to the Junior class in 1990, the training was similar to the past but the quantity went up. Many of his sessions were timed and videoed, which facilitated analysis of technique: "You have to know how much time a mistake costs you and how much time doing something well helps you."

The group would run a short course, such as downstream, upstream, downstream. The coach would both time the runs and video them. Then, the group would go watch the video, learn the fastest way to do the course, and return to the course right away and do it again. Oliver even found that sometimes "a repair" (a "plan B" after a mistake) could end up being faster than what he had originally planned.

Probably 80% of his workouts were with Helmut during this period. Later, when Helmut retired from work, he was able to even attend more sessions with Oliver and coach as much as 95% of Oliver's workouts.

Oliver started visualizing being on the podium: "do you want to be on the podium or be at the back of the tent cheering for the others?".

1990 Trials

In 1990, the German selection trials for the team going to the World Championships Junior consisted of 2 races. The winners of both were on the team and the third boat was chosen on the basis of combined seconds off the winner. In the first race, the German national team coach disqualified Oliver for hitting the poles on purpose, on the last gate on the course. This meant that he had to win the second race to make the team. He was 17 years old then, competing against 18-year olds. But he won. He had a water touch on an upstream gate, but the judge made the right call and gave it to him clean.

1990 Junior Worlds

Oliver was very tense at the Junior Worlds. On his first run, he tripped over his paddle and had to loop for a gate. On the second run, he paddled conservatively and got fifth place. The Czechs took first and third. Oliver was on the team that won the team race, though. He learned from this experience not to be conservative. The Junior Worlds was his last conservative race. He decided that from here on, it would be all or nothing for him; he would go all-out in races.

He knew he could work hard and his confidence was high. He had gotten a good deal of race experience, especially international race experience, which he felt was important for boosting confidence. "It's important to know the group you're competing with," he explains. "You want to hear about the people who play a role in the international field. You want to know who to look out for, who to watch. All of a sudden, you're in a network." At the time, the Slovenians, Marusic and Verhovar were the ones Oliver wanted to learn about.

1991-92

The period 1991-1992 was important because it was when Oliver first got bitten by the Olympic bug. While he was not on the Senior German team in 1991, he did finish in the top 11 of the rankings that year, which was crucial because it meant he had qualified for the final Olympic trials in the spring of 1992.

At that time, the Germans were experimenting with an unusual team selection method, a method they used only to select the 1991 World Championship team and the 1992 Olympic team, and which they abandoned after 1992. Under this method, the team was chosen in two phases. The first phase occurred mostly in the fall of 1991. To make the team for 1992, you first had to be ranked in the top 11 K1s on Rangliste A. This, as the reader will remember, was based on the best 3 out of 4 races. Three of these races were held in the fall of 1991 and one was held in the spring of '92.

Then, there were two more races, this time on the Olympic course at Seu d'Urgell, at which the top 3 boats were chosen to make up the German Olympic Team. At the end of the first phase, Oliver was ranked as the 11th best boat in Germany out of Juniors and Seniors. And the top 11 could go to the Olympic Trials. (It had originally been only the top 10, but then another athlete who had been sick in '91 and thus not ranked, was added to the list.)

But while 1992 was an Olympic year, it was also the most important academic year for Oliver. High school ended for him that year and he had to pass important examinations if he wanted to be admitted to university. As a result, Oliver spent more time studying than ever before and this was his best academic year ever -- even though he was picking up his training at the very same time. The Olympics was a motivation for him even though he wasn't a realistic candidate to make the German team. Others in Helmut's group were seriously going for it, though -- Eva Roth, for example - and he was inspired by this.

1992 - Final German Olympic Trials

The team trials in Seu d'Urgell in 1992 were very tight. Oliver was right in there. 5 or 6 people all had runs that had they been clean, would have qualified for the team, Oliver included. But Oliver had 1 or 2 touches and came in seventh or eighth. Furthermore, the K1s who made the team were a surprise. Martin Hemmer, the silver medalist from 1991 Worlds, didn't make it. Neither did Michael Seibert who was a favorite. Instead, two others, Jochen Lettmann and Jens Vorsatz, who had never been on the team before, made it.

Influence on Oliver

Even though he did not qualify for the 1992 Olympics, Oliver "got the rush" of the Olympics from trying to and watching others in Helmut's group trying to. "I saw what was necessary," as he puts it. He also saw the politics involved. "There's always a lot of politics in the selection of the German Olympic team." All this gave him a pretty good idea of what he had to do for the next Olympics.

Oliver feels that "the Olympics is very specific": it's not like a World Championships. There's an almost philosophical difference":

"There are a lot of extra research and talk and planning that go into the Olympics. Some of it's mental, some of it's financial, some of it's physical. In 1992, I benefited from all of it. Take for example, lactic acid tests. In 1992, we had money to use for measuring lactic acid levels in the blood during training and trying to see how they would affect performance. This definitely picked up in the Olympic year because of the extra money and the prestige of the Olympics. We also experimented with kayaks and lifejackets."

Shortly after the 1992 trials, Oliver and Helmut pledged to each other that they would commit themselves towards making the next Olympics in Atlanta. They sat down together and planned out how they would go about it. Later on when things got hard, both remembered this pact and it fortified them in their quest.

Army

Oliver finished school in 1992 and then went into the Army in the fall. In Germany, all males had to perform military service. Because of his high athletic ranking, however, Oliver was allowed to enter the "Sportfördergruppe," (literally, "sports support group"), a special section of the Army which allowed soldiers to train full time in their sport and get paid for it. Looking back on it, Oliver realizes now that had he not qualified for the Sportsfördergruppe, his kayaking career probably would have been finished or at least seriously delayed, because "I could not have afforded to take a year off from training in order to be in the Army."

Oliver did 3 months of basic training in Fuessen. Then he was sent to a secure military base in Sondhofen, which had some facilities there for the more popular sports. Athletes in those sports were expected to stay and train in Sondhofen. But there was no whitewater course nearby, so Oliver and other Slalom Racing paddlers, one or two of whom had paddled with him in the 1990 Junior Worlds, were released to Augsburg to train there. As a result, Oliver got to live at home and train with Helmut, all while being paid (in the beginning, 400 DM a month and later, after re-enlisting, 2,000 DM a month).

Oliver was in the German army for 3 years, and remained a "Gefreiter" (private) the whole time. He was in the Army all the way through the '95 Worlds. He had some military duties, but not too many. For instance, he had to come in and man the phone 6 times a year when the office was closed. Another time he and all the other athletes had to participate in "Grüneweche" ("green week") around January-February. During this time, they did military training exercises in the woods.

"This was the time when I could finally do my sport professionally," Oliver explains:

“I took it as my job. I really got myself informed about my sport. Helmut was retired now and able to put a lot of time into my training. One of the things that ran through our training was that we tried to become progressively more specific; our workouts were geared more and more specifically to race performance.” For example:

* **Change endurance loops.** Endurance loops changed from doing the whole loop at the same pace, to doing 3 minutes downstream hard and 6-7 minutes back upstream easier. I did 10 loops like this in 90 minutes. I'd try to stay clean the whole time.

* **Lots of full length courses.** We looked at the weekend as the most important time of the week. We did lots of workouts on the weekends. We might do 2 on Friday; 2 on Saturday and 3 on Sunday. Then take Monday off.

* **Do the full lengths as race runs, 2 runs at a time only.** We'd do that 3 times on Sunday --have 3 races a day. We'd change the course after each 2 runs. This takes a lot of time, but you have the time on weekends.

* **Fine -tune technique.** We focused on certain moves and analyzed them to a high degree. For example:

* **Upstream gates on the back of a hole.** Normally, you tried to do these with 3 strokes, an entry sweep, a draw, and an exit sweep. But we tried to do them just on one stroke, an exit sweep. To do this, you have to cut the line tighter. You also have to find just the right speed and angle to approach the gate.

* **See how far you could open your paddle (wrist) on a draw stroke.** We took video from above to see how far someone could open his blade and how that correlated to speed on the move. We found the people who could open the blade the most were the fastest. That was because they could turn the boat quicker to get a good exit angle.

* **Strength on the paddle.** We emphasized forward speed. The proper execution of the forward stroke was one of my key indicators as to whether I was ready for a big competition. If I felt my forward stroking was efficient, I felt confident.

* **Modifying Fox style.** Everybody was trying to copy Richard Fox then (because he had won 4 World Championships at that point). We explored how Fox paddled. We found that some things he did well and we copied those. But other things he didn't do so well, and we changed those. One of the things he did well was the way he paddled forward. On the surface it looked as though he was just leaning way forward. But it was more than that. The most important thing was how he used his hips. When he took a stroke, he would thrust his hip forward, then lean his torso forward. He would also lean on his paddle to facilitate this. It had the effect of lifting the boat up out of the water a little bit at the start of each stroke, which really helped his glide. This was one of the things we tried to copy.

But one thing we changed was the way he did upstreams. He would use wide, smooth approach lines. We cut them shorter than that. We realized that was faster, simply by looking at times on the watch. Now the courses are so short you can muscle things more than when Fox started paddling and still not tire out at the end of the race.

1993

Mezzana in 1993 was Oliver's first Senior Worlds. All the selection races were in the spring this year - the old method of pre-selecting a training squad largely in the previous fall having been discarded. This year, the selection consisted simply of performance in the 3 best of 4 races, all held in the spring. The number of seconds behind the winner in each counting race were added up and boaters ranked accordingly. Oliver qualified as third or fourth boat on the German team.

He then spent a great deal of time preparing for the 1993 Worlds. He went to Mezzana 5 times for a week of training each time: "I just knew that river inside and out. I also knew all the people who lived there. I enjoyed this a lot."

This was the first time he had been able to prepare for a major international race so thoroughly and he wound up placing eleventh, the best of the German K1s. The experience reinforced his "all or nothing" approach. He would either win or finish way down. "I felt the need to get out of the pack," as he put it, to distinguish himself beyond just being in a big race.

That intensified his training. He decided to "go beyond the rules," to examine everything commonly accepted and find ways to "cut lines even tighter." He decided to develop techniques for exceptional circumstances and to search for opportunities to use this technique.

"I switched from the standard formulas to new ideas, changing the mindset. First, I'd run a move without thinking about it. Then, I'd run it with a backstroke, or a shorter draw stroke to see if it was better. We'd spend many workouts over many weeks on the same thing. We'd come back to the same move again and again. Everybody'd say "Oh no, not that again!" We'd learn to cut down the movements even more, try to prepare more with the sweep."

But Oliver warns that you have to be pretty advanced before trying this approach : "Unless you have a lot of skill, you might not be able to do this well."

Oliver would do these workouts on a one-on-one basis with Helmut. Often they were alone. But sometimes other people from the club were there. None of the other members of the German team were there, though:

"First, the other team members were from the other end of Germany. Secondly, their philosophies were not compatible with mine. We all developed on parallel tracks, but on the basis of the competitions between us, not by working together in the same workouts."

The way Oliver and Helmut decided what to examine was simple: over the next few years, they examined everything, technique, training, equipment -- everything.

Take the paddle, for example. By early 1995, Oliver had tried and liked the bent paddle shaft developed by the Polish company, Plastex. Way back in 1989, Britain's Richard Fox had used a paddle shaft that was bent in an ergonomic way that he liked because he thought it put his wrist in a better position during the stroke. But Fox's shaft was (a)

bent in a way that placed the blade a couple of inches behind his fist as he pulled it through the water and (b) the shaft wasn't bent in the same way on both sides.

The Plastex shaft was the same on both sides and actually placed the blade in front of the fist during the pull-through, which Fix thought was important for getting the stroke up towards the bow of the boat. Eventually, Oliver experimented with this idea so much that he had the shaft (made in two halves) constructed in Wales and the blades in Holland by Double Dutch.

First time in the Americas

1993 was also the first time Oliver went to the Americas. He made two trips that year, one in the spring and one in the late summer. In the spring, he went to Costa Rica. This was a big change, being able to train in warm weather so early in the year. Helmut didn't come, though, and Oliver had to train with the German Team:

“I had my own training plan. There was quite a bit of friction with the other team members and the coaches. But I could explain everything I was doing and why and they couldn't find anything wrong with it. I was so convinced that what I was doing was the right thing. You have to be convinced of this.”

Then, later in the season, Oliver went to North America to compete in his first World Cup races. Although he won two qualifying races that year, the biggest lesson he learned was the importance of having a good boat. He had made the mistake of leaving his best boat back in Germany and going over with an old boat. He wasn't sure he'd be able to have his good boat for ranking races back in Germany in the fall unless he left it there. Anyway, he had a bad boat for the World Cup races and the pressure of that was a problem for him. He resolved never to let it happen again.

1994

In 1994, when he was turning 21 years old, Oliver made the German Senior team by winning all the selection races. They were in Augsburg and Lofer - the courses that were closest to him. But his chief competitors, Thomas Becker and Jochen Lettmann, knew these courses as well as he did. He also won 2 World Cup finals that year. But in the last race, he didn't even make the finals and that pushed him into seventh or eighth place in the overall rankings:

“The finals were in Japan that year and we went there far too late. We had too much jet lag. I had a bad race. It was a big disappointment. But by then I knew I could go really fast. Overall, it had been a good year to work on what was needed.”

It was also in 1994 that Oliver discovered the value of acupuncture, something he was to use both as an athlete (particularly when training for the Olympics) and then later as a coach with one of his athletes. In 1994, he was looking for a way to speed up the recovery process in between workouts. He read that acupuncture could help with this -- could “help balance the body without taking any supplements,” as he put it.

Then, to find a good acupuncturist, he simply looked in the telephone book in Augsburg and found a western doctor named Meister who also knew how to do acupuncture. This is how they worked together:

- * Dr. Meister would ask Oliver about symptoms. Then, he would take pulse readings from different places in the body.

- * He would check the tongue and the eyes.

- * And then he would determine where to insert the needles.

- * He would put in 10-15 of them, each one staying in about 30 minutes. "There was a little pain with the puncture," Oliver remembers, "and then an additional sensation, a warm tingly feeling, once they were deep down inside and he started twisting them. It would help put me into a deeper state of relaxation."

- * Oliver had about 10-15 sessions like this. He was "very selective" about when he did it -- only after sessions of block training (see above).

- * According to the theory of acupuncture, the needles regulate the flow of "qi" (pronounced "chee") in the body. "Qi" is Chinese for "air" or "breath," and is believed to be part of every living being as a kind of "life force" or "spiritual energy." It is thought that when qi flows freely through the body, the body is balanced and healthy, but if the flow of qi becomes blocked or unbalanced as it might be due to too much exercise, it can be unhealthy. So, to restore the balance, the acupuncturist stimulates the acupuncture points that will counteract that imbalance. In this way, acupuncture can effectively rebalance the qi flow and restore health or prevent the development of disease. The points that the practitioner chooses to stimulate may not necessarily be at the site of the symptoms.

1995

In the spring of 1995, the German team went to Costa Rica again. But this time Oliver went to the Rio Aconcagua in Los Andes, Chile, and took Helmut with him. Susanne Hirt, also from Schwaben Augsburg, went too, and they were the only Germans there. There were two dozen athletes from other countries, though. The Germans spent 5 weeks there and "did nothing but train."

Since the Worlds were in the fall that year, Oliver decided to de-emphasize the World Cup and focus on peaking for the Worlds, which were in Nottingham. Nevertheless, he started doing the World Cup races and felt he was progressing well.

But then, he had an accident that caused him to miss 2-3 weeks of training. This happened in Merano in June. Oliver, his boat on his shoulder and paddle in hand, was making his way down to the river's edge when he slipped and fell on a piece of re-bar that was sticking out of the ground by about 4 inches. It got him right in the buttocks. He was hospitalized, got stitches, and had to be out of the boat for 2-3 weeks. Later, after the season was over, he thought perhaps the forced rest was the best thing that could have happened to him, but not at the time.

Oliver started training again in July and the rest of the preparation went very smoothly. He had made 4 trips to Nottingham, each for a week or more, and knew the course well. He had finished third in the Pre-worlds, which he thought was particularly good since the British kayakers all trained there and were top performers.

"Every course has its own characteristics," as Oliver explains. Here are some of the things that that he learned about Nottingham:

* "You have to have a strong immune system." The water at Nottingham is polluted and it was said that the British deal with it by drinking Coca Cola as a disinfectant. Oliver simply learned to keep his mouth shut more than usual. Despite this, he did get sick once or twice.

* The feel of the water was a bit different. "It was soft, like South Bend, not like the Ocoee, which is crisper. It doesn't feel like you can grab it quite as easily at Nottingham." So it needed getting used to. He and Helmut felt the soft water caused a tendency to pick up the stroke rate when in reality, you had to learn to make your strokes even more efficient at Nottingham. Consequently, Oliver did more Trichter workouts on the Nottingham course to work on his forward stroke.

* The eddies at Nottingham are quite different. They are big. Oliver did a lot of work doing downstream gates in them and some of these very moves turned out to be in the race.

* There are a lot of holes at Nottingham so he and Helmut worked on going through them without getting thrown off- line and doing upstream gates on the backs of them.

* Oliver had to decide how to pace himself on the course and time the sprints on the flat sections. " Do you start out fast? Finish off fast? Balance it out over the whole course?". Oliver concluded that you had to go full-out wherever you could, not pace it at all. "So you have to get in shape for that".

* Get up to hull speed as quickly as possible. Oliver found that there was an ideal speed for the course, and he felt he had to come up to that speed as quickly as possible, quicker than the other boaters. He practiced this by constantly experimenting with different paces and changing his subjective feel about the effort. " 'Smart' is the key word here. Your mental focus should be on maintaining the line, not on the effort of the stroke. This is important because it allows you to focus on the proper lines, not just pulling hard! The speed part has to be automatic; you can't think about it."

The Ultimate Run

Oliver's performance at the '95 Worlds was an "Ultimate Run", that rare moment in a big race where you have a perfect performance. It is a moment that few boaters experience and Oliver never experienced it before or since, not even in winning the '96 Olympics.

"I felt my second run was in a way my graduation day. It was like going into a test and knowing everything. It was a zone experience. Everything was perfect. Everything fell into place."

Going into the race, he felt that if he had a perfect run, he'd win because he had shown before that he could win. But he didn't think about winning. All he thought about was having a perfect run. "Deep inside, I knew that about 8 people probably had the potential to win. But I didn't think about that. I just spent a lot of time preparing for the perfect run."

He didn't get it on his first run. Although had had a good, fast run, he got a 50 on an upstream gate because the judge said he crossed the gate line from the wrong side. He didn't let that bother him, though, and instead concentrated on his second run.

"On the second run, I was on the start line and I had the feeling that everything was set. I just went down the course as though I was on rails. It was in slow motion. I did moves direct that no one else did. One was a downstream in an eddy. I had the perfect run - the Ultimate Run."

Oliver won the race by 1.8 seconds over the USA's Scott Shipley and the next five boats were in the same second.

1996

Based on winning the Worlds, Oliver was pre-selected to the German Olympic Team. Before the 1995 Worlds, the German coaching board had decided on pre-selection for anyone winning the Worlds. (The coaching board was comprised of the national Slalom Racing coaches and a representative from the Deutscher Kanu Verein, the German Federation). So, Oliver knew before the '95 race that pre-selection was a possibility for him. The only condition was that he had to finish in the top 10 at the team trials. He got third.

Oliver says now this helped him a lot, for several reasons:

"First, after the Worlds, I went into a depression of sorts. I had had the Ultimate Run, achieved what I had set out to do, and was having trouble adjusting to that. I lost training time. Also, I had just started medical school. I was torn between competing and studying. I got behind on my base training and I had to catch up. Being pre-selected allowed me to do that. Finally, because I didn't have to worry about peaking for the Olympic trials, I was able to go to the Ocoee at a time when no other Germans could afford to. I was in the first team trials race only two days after returning from the Ocoee."

To get ready for the Olympics, Oliver went to Costa Rica for 4 weeks in February, but this time Helmut did not go. Oliver arrived a bit later than the German team did and did maybe 30% of his workouts with them.

Then, on his way home to Germany, he made a trip to the Ocoee, the first of 3 that year alone. All told, Oliver made 5 trips to the Ocoee, for a total of 10-15 weeks there. During his many visits there he worked to familiarize himself not only with the characteristics of the Ocoee course, but with the region itself. Here's what he worked on:

* **Getting used to the width of the Ocoee.** "It's much wider than Augsburg. This requires that you paddle with a different focus. At Augsburg, you paddle with a focus of about 5 meters around you. But on the Ocoee you have to paddle with a focus of about 10-15 meters. You have to hold your head up more. We tried to imitate this on the

Eiskanal by using longer race courses with more straight-ahead paddling between the gates.”

* **Learning the eddies.** “The eddies are very different from Augsburg. You have to keep up your speed more actively. In Augsburg, with the surging you can let the water propel you more. On the Ocoee, you have to do the strokes more actively. We couldn't really practice this at Augsburg very well, although we did practice doing more active draw strokes.”

* **Making the Ocoee "home ground" to build confidence.** “Feeling good at the Ocoee was something I worked on a lot. I even bought an old '77 Buick in '95 from some Australians and kept it in Tennessee over the winter. I had a lot of fun with it. I also bought a CD player which cost almost as much as the car did. I thought these things were really important. They help you feel in charge. This was different from traveling with the team. With the team, you didn't feel in charge because other people were doing things for you.”

Designed a special boat

Working with the Prijon Company, Oliver helped designed a special boat, the Atlanta '96, for the Ocoee. It had more volume than the boat he used at Nottingham. Thomas Becker (who got third at the Ocoee) used the same boat but with even more volume in it. (Becker, by the way, also worked mostly on his own, like Oliver, and not with the German Team).

Dropped out of Medical School

It's hard to conceive of it now, but through most of 1992, Oliver was a first-year medical student while at the same time training for the Olympics. By June, however, almost at the end of the academic year, he realized he couldn't do both any more and he dropped out of school. Even though he had completed most of the academic year, he had been spending 90% of his time on sports training and 10% on medicine.

The reason he was able to get this far and still stay in school was that he had been able to postpone all of his exams until the end of the year, in July. Oliver summarizes it by saying: "in Germany, the problem is getting admitted to medical school, not staying in." Another athlete on the German team, C1 paddler Soeren Kaufman, was also in medical school. But he had already completed several years and he was able to stay in school while training for the Olympics.

Strategy for the Olympics

What was Oliver's strategy for the Olympics? Did he plan to pace himself and come on strong at the end of the course? Or was his plan to start off strong? Actually, it did not involve those kinds of considerations at all. It was more of a "big picture" strategy:

“I didn't believe in pacing myself in a race. My physical preparation was good enough to enable me to go all out. I had a complete picture of the whole course. I knew that if there was a hard move at the bottom of the course, I had the power to do it. I knew that if I could put together the run I was capable of I could win. To do that, I needed to like the course. So I worked on getting to know the Ocoee

and liking it. But in order to do this well, I needed to feel good, feel confident, enthusiastic. So I worked on that in the weeks leading up to the Olympics. I worked on balancing relationships with family, coaches and team members and so on. I remember I had an important realization the week before the Olympics in this regard. I decided to separate myself from the German team more. Before that, I was with the team and my performance deteriorated. But once I separated from the team, my performance went back up again.”

Surfing the Wave of Hype

The last thing Oliver needed to do was to resolve how to deal with the special hype of the Olympics, something he had first realized would be a problem back in '92. This is how he worked it out:

“One of the major differences between the Olympics and Worlds is the extra hype and media coverage, the large number of spectators, the extra money put into the event. So, I spent a considerable amount of time visualizing all this and what my reaction to it would be. I felt I would either be able to "surf the wave" of that hype and benefit from it, or I'd be trashed at some point on the course! So I spent a lot of time looking at the crowd, trying to tap into their positive energy. I was trying to surf on that wave of hype and not be intimidated by it.”

The Race Itself

Oliver won the race on the first run, but he didn't have the Ultimate Run. At gate 24, he had to "push back a little bit," and lost a second. As he crossed the finish line, that was what he was thinking about.

On the second run, he was on the way to having the Ultimate Run but he used the wrong approach angle in the rapids called "Humongous" and didn't make the eddy there, receiving a 50-second penalty on a missed upstream gate. He summed it up by saying, "I was able to surf on my first run, but I got trashed on my second!"

Never Returned to Medical School

Oliver never went back to medical school after the Olympics. "Originally I wanted to do western medicine and then Chinese medicine," he explains, but he decided that medicine just "didn't fit" his lifestyle. Why not? Basically, he says, because he "didn't believe in the invasive nature of western medicine." Instead, he believed in a "more holistic approach":

“The body is a whole; you have to treat it that way, not single out specific areas to treat alone. Also, through sports, I experienced the mental aspect and western medicine doesn't emphasize that enough. Chinese medicine has a different approach. It addresses the cause of the problem and not the symptoms.”

Got Married

Oliver got married on October 11, 1998 to Gilda Montenegro, a native Costa Rican. He met her in 1995 in Atlanta after a World Cup race on the Ocoee and had been with her pretty much ever since. Gilda's paddling story is interesting because it contrasts so

sharply with Oliver's. In a nutshell, she had twice as much Olympic experience as her husband, having been in both the 1992 and 1996 Olympics and she got to her first Olympics after training slalom for only one month!

Gilda's story

Starting in 1987, Gilda had been working as a raft guide for Rafael Gallo, who was also the manager of the Costa Rican Olympic team. She started kayaking in plastic boats in '91. By the spring of '92 when Raffa learned that he could take more kayakers to the Olympics, Gilda had started paddling class IV water.

“He was just chatting with me and he said, I just learned that I can take some more paddlers to the Olympics, do you want to go? We just looked at each other and we freaked out! I thought about it for a while and I said I don't know anything about Slalom but a chance to go to the Olympics might never come again. Raffa said it wouldn't cost anything, the Costa Rican Olympic Committee would take care of it.”

This was about a month before the Olympics. Gilda moved to Turrialba (where the international training camps had been staged) so she could train full time. Raffa arranged for an American, Steve U'ren, a K1 on the 1985 U.S. World Championship Team, to come and coach her and the two Costa Rican K1s for 2.5 weeks.

“Because I had been kayaking before that, I felt comfortable in big water. But when I got to Seu, it was the first time I had ever seen an artificial course. It was so tight compared to a regular river. I got in the water and I realized that it was going to be hard to do the moves. I thought, well maybe I should just get sick the day of the race and not compete!”

Furthermore, Gilda was feeling guilty for getting to the Olympics so easily when the other athletes had had to work so hard to get there. But two Americans, Marty McCormick and Elliot Weintrob, were very supportive. They said, "Don't worry about it. Why don't you just relax and have fun with it?" She tried that but she couldn't because she wanted to do well.

On the first run, she just did all the forward gates and "had about 10 minutes in penalties." On the second run, she was going to try to do some of the other gates as well. But she flipped, hit her head on the bottom and even cracked the helmet. Still, she managed to roll up. But she came up just in front of a big hole, fell into that and then swam.

"It had been so intense, I started crying. I thought I would never do Slalom again. Thanks for the experience. It's been fun but..."

Gilda didn't get into a Slalom boat again for a year and half. But she kept kayaking and worked as a kayaking photographer both in Costa Rica and New Zealand. When she went to the Olympics the first time, she thought it would make her kayaking better - and in the long run, it did. By '94, she was getting better and better. "I would always see the racers coming to Costa Rica in the winter only now I looked at them differently. Now I knew all the training that went into it," she remembers.

Then, she bought a Slalom boat and started thinking about going to the Olympics again: "the other thing that had me hooked was actually wanting to qualify for the team this time, not just having someone say you could go."

In the summer of '94, Gilda came to the US and trained at the Nantahala Outdoor Center for a month. She also did 3 of the Champion series races. She had applied for a scholarship with the International Olympic Committee's "Olympic Solidarity" division before she went to NOC. Olympic Solidarity exists for the purpose of helping athletes in countries that don't have the facilities for developing their own athletes.

When she got back home to Costa Rica, she found she had gotten the scholarship. "It was ironic because I came back from a race on a really hard course in Duluth not so sure I wanted to do this any more. But now I had to do it!". The scholarship was to start in January 1995 and go all the way through to the Olympics in '96 - 1.5 years.

But the IOC had never given such a scholarship to a whitewater kayaker before. They expected her to find a training center some place where she could go and live and train there all year round. But Gilda explained to them that she wanted to train in New Zealand in the winter, where she could get coaching, go to England during the summer so she could train on the World Championship course at Nottingham, and finally, go to the US and train on the Olympic course there.

The IOC thought 'This girl just wants to travel around the world at our expense,' and they decided to cancel the scholarship. Besides the travel problem, they said, you might not even qualify for the Olympics. We could pay all this money and then you might not even make the Olympics. Gilda appealed the IOC's decision.

Finally, in March, they said she could have the scholarship back but with two conditions. First, she could go to only one country. And second, she had to earn her spot at the first qualifying race, the 1995 World Championships in Nottingham. Gilda felt that she didn't have a chance to qualify at Nottingham (as opposed to a much better chance in the second qualifier the next spring on the Ocoee) but would use the scholarship for a few months of training there anyway. And that's what happened.

"I got a few coaching sessions from Ian Raspin. I had no concept of how to train. I just jumped into the water whenever anyone else worked out and did what they did."

Gilda was at Nottingham when Fix won the Worlds, but she didn't know who he was and didn't meet him. "I had been training with the Brits and wanted them to do well. When they didn't, I didn't care who won. I heard some German guy won."

Following the Worlds, Gilda came to the States for the Ocoee World Cup race. There she asked whether she could work in exchange for the \$100 a week each country had to pay to train in the course. She had also saved money from the scholarship for this purpose of living and training in the United States for 3 months.

While at the Ocoee, she met Oliver when they were both getting rides to the course. They became good friends. She stayed at the Ocoee until the water was turned off in November. Then, she went back home to Costa Rica.

She and Oliver met a second time when Oliver came to Costa Rica in the winter. He suggested a training plan for her, too, but Gilda says "It was like Chinese for me. We developed a friendship then, but the real relationship started later, about a month before the Olympics."

In January 1996, the ICF gave her and other Costa Rican athletes a little money to pay Cathy Hearn, who was in Costa Rica for her own training, to coach them. Gilda approached Coca Cola in Costa Rica for a sponsorship and they initially said yes. But later they, too, changed their minds and said no. This meant that Gilda came to the Ocoee for training on the Olympic course with about \$200 in her pocket. "Again, I had to rely on friends for places to stay."

"I did the qualification race in March and still didn't qualify for the Olympics. That broke my heart even though I knew I might still make it if other countries didn't use their slots. I knew, for example, New Zealand wouldn't use their slots."

She called Kent Ford and trained in Durango for 3 months before the Olympics. She couldn't get any sponsorship, though, because it wasn't sure that she would go to the Games.

An article appeared in the Atlanta papers which related her story, how she was scrounging wherever she could to get money to keep training. It embarrassed Costa Rican officials to the point that they told her if she kept doing that, they would disqualify her from going to the Olympics, even if she did pick up a slot.

Dagger, the American kayak company, helped her, though. She was still paddling the second-hand boat she had bought in '93. Dagger said they would give her a 50% discount on a new boat -- and then some friends paid the other half of the boat. About a month later, she got a slot to go to the Olympics. "I had already bought a ticket to go. I was going even if it was as a spectator."

At the Olympics

Gilda's goal at the Olympics was to make all the gates this time. She was scared about paddling on the Ocoee because she had been hurt there in the spring and on crutches for a while.

On the first run, she made all the gates down to the rapids known as Humongous. There she got caught in the hole and it caused her to miss gates 24 and 25. On her second run, she did the same thing, but this time she got out of the hole and made all the gates, thus fulfilling her dream since the 1992 Olympics.

By this time Gilda and Oliver were in love. After Oliver won, they had planned to travel in the U.S. together but Oliver had to return to Germany for media events. After that was over, though, they went to India and Nepal and have been together ever since.

What makes Oliver so Good

According to Gilda, Oliver is "one with the water:"

“He doesn't study it, he just feels his way through the water. He's always so comfortable, so flexible on the water. All the other paddlers appear a bit more rigid to me. Also, he is one or two steps ahead of where his body and paddle are. It's as if he's already done it.”

Oliver's mental approach is the key factor, she feels. "Oliver had a lot of advantages, sure, but he used them to the max. Take Helmut. It wasn't as though Helmut was feeding him everything. They worked together and learned together."

“Intuitive is the key word. He had the feel of the water, the naturalness. Starting early may have helped with this, but I think it's more than that. I think he just has a special feel for a sport like whitewater. When he's explaining how to do something, you can see his body move in the way he wants to show it. Sometimes he can't explain it, so he'll jump in the boat and just demonstrate it.”

Quit Racing

The other thing Oliver did after the Olympics was to stop racing. When asked why, this is what he said:

“Maybe it was because I had had the Ultimate Run! I had been paddling for 15 years by 1996. It was my profession, my passion. I had reached the level I had been striving for - World and Olympic Champion. Every year I put more in and got more out. I never had a bad year. There was nothing left for me to do. Money was never my motivation for kayaking. I couldn't stay just for the money. There was no other incentive for me to keep going.”

And so Oliver Fix, child prodigy in the sport, World Champion and Olympic Champion, quit racing. In fact, not only did he stop paddling entirely, he also stopped exercising entirely. Yet today, he looks perfectly slim and fit. How does he do it? Largely by diet, he says. “For one thing, I became a vegetarian.”

Coaching

While Oliver may have stopped paddling and even exercising, he did maintain one strong link to the sport, coaching:

“I'd finished paddling for myself, but now I realized I had something to share. It's more than technique, it's a way of living your life that's valuable. As a result of the club system in Germany, I was used to the idea of giving back to the other members of the club, to help them benefit from my experiences, the way I had benefited from other paddlers when I was young. Now I wanted to be a positive influence on other people who were striving for the Ultimate Run! It takes a lot of dedication to get there. I thought I could help them organize their lives to do it. I wanted to give them the same opportunities I had when I was young. “

So, Oliver became a coach. It started in 1998 when he was in the United States, visiting family in Boulder, Colorado. There he met Kent Ford, who had been a C1 World Champion in Team in 1983 and 1985 with Jon Lugbill and David Hearn. Ford invited Fix to do a little coaching. “I never thought before I would do that,” he says.

Paddlers in New Zealand heard about this and invited Oliver to come there in the winter of 1998-99 to coach them, which he did for 4-5 months. Besides working with athletes on the national team he also did outreach at local schools.

In 1999, a doctor by the name of Merrill Stock, who was then the President of the Bethesda Center of Excellence, the Washington, DC-based canoe club that Lugbill, Hearn, Ford and many other US World Champions had once belonged to, asked Oliver to come coach there, which he did for two and a half years, until April, 2001.

At that point he was recruited to be the head coach of the British National Team and served there until April, 2005. Under his supervision his athlete Campbell Walsh won a Silver Medal in the Athens Olympics and Helen Reeves won a Bronze Medal.

“Basically, coaching’s not about you any more. You ask how you can help, or you get out of the way! You try to establish a performance focus -- get the athlete to see what’s his best choice, taking into consideration all the other factors in his life, to really break down what’s going on to help improve performance. It’s a ‘leave no stone unturned’ approach. That meant everything from coaching technique to solving personal problems.

For example, one time I had an athlete whose computer had broken down so he couldn’t contact his wife, which distracted from training. So I had to fix that. Often we’d fall short of our full potential and it usually had everything to do with mental stuff and how to coordinate the rest of their lives.”

At other times, Oliver found he had to be open to new ideas:

“ I had to totally leave behind what I had learned and focus on the present. For example, when I got there, I didn’t think the British team was doing a strength and fitness program that was specific enough for our sport. But now I would revise my opinion about that and I feel that what they were doing was especially important for the women, to keep them from getting injured.

The British had strength and conditioning coaches that were trained in Australia and who took what I knew to a whole different level. The big thing was power versus strength development. There are new machines now that can help with this. But it wasn’t about the old-school idea of sweating a lot. The focus was on training smarter -- very fast movements to stimulate the quick firing of the muscles. It wasn’t so much about the absolute amount of brute strength you could generate as it was about being able to do it fast. I learned so much. I came in from the club level and then jumped into the national team level. It was a big jump.”

Especially when coaching in Britain, Oliver found "you really had to focus on individuals as opposed to the group, because it is an individual a sport. So, even when we worked together, people might do slightly different things." This might extend so far as Oliver just taking two athletes, Paul Ratcliffe and Helen Reeves, to a training camp in Bourg St. Maurice, for example.

Only in certain sessions that they called "Delivery Sessions" -- full length runs, for example -- did everyone do the same workout.

Having athletes all do different workouts was possible because the British team had a lot of staff at that time: 4 full-time coaches, plus another one just for competitions, plus a manager, a physio, and a sport psychologist who was shared with the flatwater sprint team.

Another thing Oliver found important was dealing with certain athlete fears. He dealt with one of them is particularly interesting. He had always been fascinated by Neural Linguistic Processing (NLP), a personal development technique for changing one's attitudes and actions. By using this, he was able to help one of his athletes, Helen Reeves, get over a fear of whitewater that she had gotten due to a shoulder dislocation. A disciple of NLP had written a book with a chapter called "Fast Phobia Cure," which Oliver had Reeves read. It cured her in about an hour and a half and she went on to place 5th in a World Cup race soon after. (Reeves eventually got a Bronze Medal in the Athens Olympics.)

Helen Reeves also was the beneficiary of Oliver's experience with acupuncture. On one occasion she had a case of tendinitis and Oliver took her to the Chinese team acupuncturist and he cured her with only one session.

Oliver also had to deal with the fact that athletes who trained with each other also had to compete against each other in the big races. He developed a policy of what he called "radical honesty:"

“ There were no holds barred. We didn't have the time for it. So, we'd have team meetings and talk about everything. We laid everything on the table. We also had feedback forms in which I'd ask the athletes to tell me 'How are you going to get a World Medal?' What are you going to do about it?'

I was lucky because the team was just forming up when I arrived so I could start at the beginning. But when I arrived, everyone was sort of in his own little corner. People wanted their test results kept secret, for example. I had to break that down.”

Strain Gauge Testing

While Oliver was coaching in Britain, he brought in someone he knew from the German team to do tests on the British athletes. This was Juergen Sperlich, a biomechanist who was once part of a team of doctors affiliated with the East German flatwater sprint team and who, after the Wall came down, worked with both the German flatwater and slalom teams. (He is now in business for himself.)

By attaching two strain gauges to a kayak paddle, he was able to measure the amount of force in Newtons that an athlete can generate on each blade as it moves through the water. Tests could be done on both flatwater and whitewater and for both steady state paddling and sprint speed accelerations.

Sperlich found that top women slalom paddlers could generate about 300 Newtons on steady state paddling and maybe up to 600 Newtons in certain whitewater situations, such as exiting upstream gates. He felt that women who could generate only 200 Newtons, say, might be good paddlers, but it was unlikely they would get in the medals

unless something very unusual happens in the race, such as the woman just happened to have perfect lines on the course and her competitors all made big mistakes. In short, Sperlich had all kinds of force comparisons between top athletes around the world and recommendations for how to generate the required force.

Oliver felt that having these tests performed on the British paddlers provided them with valuable information about how hard they were pulling and how hard they would have to pull to be medal contenders. He felt it was very helpful in acquainting the athletes with what it felt like to generate the required force.

For example, through this testing, he learned it was not just a matter of trying to achieve a high heart rate as an indicator of how hard you were pulling, but how to generate more Newtons with the same heart rate. They discovered little things that helped with this, such as inserting the paddle in the water at an angle because initially that lifted the boat up, out of the water a bit at the start of the stroke, which cut down on resistance. And they learned not to push very much with the top arm in the kayak stroke, but to place more emphasis just on the pulling. They also learned that the best paddlers had fewer and smaller correction strokes and more "purposeful" strokes.

Comparing Britain and Germany

Since Oliver has had considerable experience with two of the best teams in whitewater slalom, the Germans and the British, he can make some interesting comparisons between the two systems:

* The German club system was much stronger than the British system. Ironically, before the Nottingham artificial course was created the British club system was much stronger than it is was when Oliver was in Britain. But after it was created, Nottingham was so much better than anything else available in Britain, that all the best athletes from the clubs just moved there, thus decimating the clubs. This kind of thing didn't happen in Germany because there are more facilities there in different parts of the country. And while Nottingham was the best facility in Britain, it wasn't all that good compared to what was available in other parts of the world.

* German kids got better training earlier in their careers than British kids did. According to Oliver, the British had a lot of kids' races, which was good, but they didn't have as good foundation training as the Germans did.

* Although he feels it's changing now, the British didn't have as good a coach education system as the Germans did, either. The structure of coaches' training was more comprehensive, more scientific in Germany. Also, the German national team coaches mentored other coaches to make sure all coaches were preaching the same gospel.

* Financial support was always been good in Germany, whereas in Britain, it got good only after 1998, when Lottery funding kicked in. Before that, only a few top athletes had good financial support through personal grants.

* Oliver found that the Germans were more honest in their self-analysis than the British (or the Americans) were. "In Britain and the US I got criticized for being too honest. The athletes there were too sensitive. My critiquing would start a whole existential crisis."

* The British had strengths, though. One of them was history, especially concerning 5-time World Champion Richard Fox. Another one was toughness, since they often had less than ideal training facilities. And thirdly, the country was small so it was easier to travel around it.

Moves to Hawaii

After coaching in Britain, in the spring of 2005, Oliver and his wife moved to Hawaii where they had a son, Kai Alexander. Oliver also broadened his coaching to include personal life coaching. He set up an internet businesses called "the Achieving Mind" at www.achievingmind.com. At the end of 2006, he took this concept for personal performance training to the Four Seasons Hualalai Resorts and gets clients through them.

“ Why did I leave Britain? There was a sense of accomplishment. I was ready to move on to a new challenge. I didn't want to coach just whitewater kayaking. It's about living to your full potential. The leadership training I got when coaching was really good; I really learned a lot from that. But I wanted to take it further, to find out more about who I was”

Oliver has found that coaching "is not about answers, it's about questions."

“ Through asking questions you facilitate someone else's growth. It's all about asking the right questions, both in setting overall strategies but in setting individual sessions. You discuss the questions with the person you're coaching and find the answer together. That's the best way for people to take ownership of what was decided. Anyway, it's how I personally would want to work with a coach.

You need to separate coaching from training. Real coaching facilitates growth, knowledge and understanding. Training just applies that knowledge. People are more comfortable with just the trainer's role. But the best coaches are learners themselves.”