

# Slalom E-Book

*By William T. Endicott*

## Section VI - Case Study : Benoît PESCHIER

“It was a matter of changing objectives at the start of the race, where I used to think about wanting to win and was stressed out because of not being able to control all the elements that went into winning.”

-- Benoît Peschier

In 1969, a couple of months before I got into the sport of whitewater canoeing, a young Frenchman won the K1 individual World Championships in Bourg St. Maurice, France. It was the first time a Frenchman ever won the event. He also got a gold in the team event. He wasn't the favorite coming into the race, either, East Germany's Siegbert Horn was. But because of a political row with the French, the East Germans withdrew their team and Horn did not race.

That young man's name was Jean-Claude Peschier. Fast forward 35 years to the Olympics in Athens in 2004 and this time, another Peschier, Benoit Peschier, the son of Jean-Claude, also won in a surprise, the first Frenchman to ever win slalom K1 in the Olympics.

Although he had won medals in individual World Cup races and a World Championship bronze medal in team in 2002, he had never won a big title before Athens. In fact, he was ranked 12th in the world coming into the Games.

That Benoit Peschier, who wasn't even on the French team the year before the Olympics, won the Olympics, testifies to France's impressive depth in the K1 class. Peschier strongly influenced the favorite in the race, Fabien Lefevre (See case study elsewhere in this E-book) and vice versa. But even though the two have been training partners off and on for a long time, they are quite dissimilar athletes.

Their current coach, Yves Narduzzi, knows about this as well as anyone:

“Benoit Peschier and Tony Estanguet are a little different from Fabien Lefevre and Julien Billaut. Benoît and Tony are very strong all-round athletes, with a taste for all kinds of activities and sports. Tony, for example, loves basketball and rugby and he's very strong in skiing, pala, and racket games. It's like that with Benoit, too.

I think they draw a lot of their energy and their inspiration from their interest in other sports. They have a respect for sports in general and that makes them the most professional that they can be.

Fabien and Julien are more centered on slalom itself. They are very, very specific in what they do but in a total way because the others they train with, like Benoit and Tony, are also concentrated on their activity.

Now, Fabien and Julien certainly do other activities, they're open to other things. But I have the impression that their culture is a little different. Benoît and Tony have a sporting culture that's a little more general.

Fabien has said that he prefers artificial courses to natural ones. Benoit, by contrast, says he prefers natural courses to artificial ones because of the sensation of speed and gliding on natural rivers.

Fabien's most at home when he's playing in gates. That's perhaps not the same with other athletes. For example, I remember seeing Benoît a few years ago on a beach in Brittany. There he was all by himself, surfing waves in the ocean, these enormous waves. He just went all alone into these rollers. I don't think Fabien would do this. I think Benoît's more into the elements, in an environment that's a little extreme. That suits him well."

### **Benoît's Story**

I should mention that most of the information here comes from interviews with Benoit because he generally did not keep a training log - "Every year I start," as he put it, "but I have a hard time finishing, to keep it going for the whole year."

Interestingly, however, the only year he was able to keep one for the whole year was the year of the Olympics, in 2004. I was unable to see it, though, because he was in the process of moving when we spoke and he didn't know where it was. He said I was welcome to look at it some other time, though. Someone ought to.

Benoit Peschier was born May 20, 1980 in Saint Saveur de Mantaigu, a little village in the Ardeche. "But then, pretty soon, we moved to Vallon Pont d'Arc." He is 1.77 meters tall (5'9") and 74-75 kilos (165 pounds) "when I'm really in shape." His paddle length was 203 centimeters when he won the Olympics but now it's 201 or 202.

At the Olympics he had a straight paddle shaft. "It was only after the 2005 World Championships that I switched to a bent shaft. I think the extra leverage really helps a lot:"

"I think it makes it easier to paddle. It hasn't taken me a long time to get used to it. I think it fits in very easily with the sensations that I'm used to. And the grip on the water is good in all positions, on draws, on sweeps, in paddling straight ahead. The grip is really good and continuous.

I didn't switch earlier because I had another paddle that I also thought was very good and I wanted to continue at least 2 years with it before changing."

Benoit's mother, Mireille Peschier, never complete in sports. But his father, Claude Peschier, certainly did, being K1 World Champion in 1969. And Benoit's only sibling, brother Nico Peschier, who is 4 years younger, also competes in Slalom Racing, and was also an Olympian in Athens, placing 14th in C1. Nico started in kayak and he was very good at it. But around age 12 or 14 he started doing only C1.

Benoit talks about getting into kayaking -- at age 2:

"It certainly was thanks to my father that I got into the sport. I started very young because there were always a lot of kayaks around home and I saw them all the time and played with them in the garden. One of the earliest photos of me was when I was 3 or 4 and on the water.

But I was a little scared of the water, so it was hard for me to go into the water all by myself. Starting at age 8, though, I really started boating without much fear."

Sometimes Benoit did C1 as well as kayak," but not very often." He talks about the nature of his paddling at that age:

"It was just general paddling, getting over being scared of the water. I did some races about once a week. But it wasn't really training.

They called me the "eternal Poussin." "Poussin" is the youngest category in France. Up to the age of 10 or 11 or maybe 12. So, I did a lot of years in that category!"

### **Dad Backs Off**

Claude Peschier coached his son on the water a little when he was starting to train, but soon backed off.

"In the beginning, sure, he coached me because he had to take me to the water and watch out for me so he came with me on the water. But then very quickly I started training all by myself. Sometimes there were other kids. But the major part of my training until age 19 was all by myself. That was because I always wanted to paddle more than the others and there wasn't always someone who would go with me. Also, I preferred paddling alone so I could be more focused. But during all the training camps I got a lot of information from coaches. "

### **1992 -- Sees First Olympics**

Benoit saw two Olympic slaloms before he won one, the first one being when he was 12 years old, in Seu d'Urgell in 1992. Slalom had just been returned to the Olympics after having been out of the Games for 20 years, so it was a momentous occasion for the paddling world. The second Olympics Benoit saw was in Sydney.

Benoit talks about the kind of paddling he did then:

"It was mostly playing on the river, doing pivot turns in the currents. I was just having fun. I think up to age 17 I didn't do anything except play on the river. Even if I did some workouts that were more focused than that, trying to build my aerobic capacity, work on technique, or whatever, it was always fun and I think it's still a bit like that for me. When I get on the water, it's often just fun."

He also did a variety of other sports, not just kayaking:

"I tried a few other sports before getting into kayaking, like tennis. I did a bit of nature sports like VTT, running, a lot of long walks in the mountains, too. I did a little parasailing, a lot of skiing and snowboarding. I still do all these nature sports. But kayaking was the only one in which I was able to have fun and still win races!

I didn't reach a very high level in those other sports, with the possible exception of cross-country skiing. I did some cross-country ski races at age 18 or 19 but I was already too old to succeed in that sport.

I never liked school sports, with the exception of handball. "

### **A Good Student but not an Interested One**

"I was a rather good student but I didn't work a lot; I just did the minimum. What I was interested in was getting away from it as soon as possible so I could go paddling. I tried not to study too much."

But after getting his baccalaureate degree, Benoit enrolled in Toulouse University and after that in the Professor of Sport course, which he finished in 2005 -- "So, I did the rather traditional path with primary school, high school, university and after that, the Professor of Sport course."

His father, by the way, is also a Professor of Sport, even though he never took the exam for it: "He was grandfathered in. Over the years he had worked as a Professor of Sport so they gave him the title."

### **1995- First Serious Competitions**

"1995 was the first year I raced in the French championships. I think I was 2<sup>nd</sup> in Wildwater Racing and 15<sup>th</sup> in Slalom Racing and 3<sup>rd</sup> in the combined. Wildwater was maybe a quarter of my training in those days."

Does he think doing Wildwater Racing is important for slalom paddlers?

"Yes, because it means working with the paddle in a little different way, a boat that's different and allows you to change sensations and to go a little faster and to do longer work efforts. That's important for your aerobic system. I'd even advise someone starting slalom today to do wildwater or even flatwater sprint."

At that time Benoit had a coach for one year, Laurent Brossat, who was "really good on physiology:"

"He had us do very precise workouts. He wrote on a piece of paper exactly what we had to do, like 4 minutes of work, for example, with 2 minutes rest and so on, on the flatwater in a straight line with wildwater boats. It was very precise and it wasn't a lot of fun. It was a somewhat unusual year because I didn't think about playing a lot and the next year, I really thought about doing whitewater and playing all the time!"

### **1996 - Change of Training Venue**

"In 1996, I changed where I trained. Up to 1994 I trained at my club. But in 1996 I went to high school in Aubenas on the Ardeche river. And they had a departmental training center where I could train about 10 times a week. But shortly after that I started going to the club at Vallon Pont d'Arc.

This year was my second French championships and I won in both Slalom Racing and Wildwater Racing (in the Junior class). I was 16 years old.

I also had good results in school that year.

This was also the first time I got selected for the French national Junior team. “

## **1997**

In 1997, Benoit was selected for the French team that went to the Junior European Championships in Nowy Sacz, Poland, where he got 14<sup>th</sup> in the individuals, and 5<sup>th</sup> in team race.

He also was on the team that went to the Junior Pre-World Championships at Lofer, Austria, and was surprised at some of the paddling he saw there:

“It was really an eye-opener to see the foreigners who were very fast with a technique that was just a lot more evolved than ours. For example, I remember an upstream gate that was very hard and where there was no real eddy. Peter Cibak (Slovakia) who was younger than I was -- a Cadet, I think -- did it in just two paddle strokes where it took me 5. He was very quick with that.”

Watching Cibak was one of the places Benoit and his teammates got the idea of doing one-stroke upstreams, the way they became famous for later.

“It's true that Cibak was already doing that. A bit less extreme. He wasn't coming into the upstream gate here (pointing to lifejacket) but only to here (pointing to forward edge of cockpit).

But the first time I saw something like this was at the Olympics with Oliver Fix who did it in 1996.”

## **School Turns Bad**

While important things were happening to Benoit with paddling in 1997, things were not going so well at school:

“I had really bad results in school that year because I realized that's not what interested me. I was on the wrong track. So I stopped working a bit in order to change high schools and go instead in a direction that suited me better. At my new school I got into technology courses, to be an engineer and I liked it a lot more.”

## **1998**

In 1998, Benoit made the team for the Junior World Championships at Lofer, and got 20<sup>th</sup> in the individual and won the bronze medal in team, along with Fabien Lefevre and Julien Billaut, who would become off and on training partners in the future: (Peter Cibak, who had been so impressive the year before got 3<sup>rd</sup> in that Junior Worlds.)

“I trained the whole year with the aim of winning the Junior World Championships in Lofer. I was ready physically when I got there but wasn't completely at home mentally because I didn't know how to manage my stress. It was my first time having the desire

to win a big race but all of a sudden not being able to control my boating. That was tough.”

### **Training During this Period**

Benoit says that by 1998 he was training twice a day, every day. He still trained mostly by himself but “I had the French team coaches when I was at training camps.”

“I was always in the boat. I think I did 3 weight workouts during the entire year just to try it, because I didn't really need it. And maybe a little running and a lot of cross-country skiing during the winter. Besides that, it was all in the boat and usually in whitewater. “

By this time, Benoit says, his father did not have much influence on his paddling: any more. “Maybe in 1996 he gave me a little advice. But after that he backed off and let me be.”

And Benoit and his brother, Nico, never trained together at that time, either: “I was all alone because Nico was still in primary school and I was at high school. So, we were in different places.”

### **1999**

“That year was a little harder year because it was my first year as a Senior. And I wanted to get selected for the World Championships at Seu. And the team trials were at Seu. But it was a goal that was a little too high for me. So, it was hard and I didn't qualify for the team. And at the same time, I was preparing for the baccalaureate exam that took 2 weeks out of the year, but I succeeded in passing it.”

So, instead of going to the World Championships, Benoit did one World Cup race with the French team, at Augsburg, “where I was 42<sup>nd</sup>.”

### **2000**

The year 2000 was a very important one for Benoit because he went to the national training center in Toulouse, where for the first time he had other top athletes and coach to train with every day. That year he also acquired a sports psychologist and went to Sydney to watch the slalom Olympics. Here is Benoit's description of what happened that year:

“2000 was an Olympic year. But I knew I was pretty far from being on the national team, so I wasn't able to be in the team trials or the 2000 Games. That was a bit rough but on the other hand, I preferred to focus on easier goals that were more at my level and to reach them -- like getting selected to the French Youth team. There was a special team trials that year, along with the French Olympic team trials, for being able to do World Cup races that were really fun to do. So that's what I did.

I was 54<sup>th</sup> at Saint Pe, 8<sup>th</sup> at the Augsburg final, and maybe 4<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> at the Ocoee, which put me in 8<sup>th</sup> place in the overall World Cup standings.

It was a big transition year for me because I also went to the national training center in Toulouse with Philippe Vuiton who was my coach for the whole year. Sometimes we had Sylvain Curinier as a coach, but he was with the athletes who were getting ready for the Olympics.

But there I was with Julien Billaut, Mathilde Pichery, athletes who were now at the elite training center. We trained together all the time. “

This was the first time Benoit was able to train a lot with other top athletes outside of training camps: “It was a big transition and very interesting for me to train with a coach and good athletes.”

He goes on to explain what was important about training with other good athletes:

“I think a lot of it was just being able to watch because Julien Billaut was there, a very good athlete at the technical level. It was interesting to watch him and find little technical things to work on.

And then there was the competition, the fact that he was quicker on flatwater than I was, that they trained a lot on flatwater in Toulouse, and the fact that he was very fast on short courses. It all pushed me to go faster and that was really very good.

It was Julian and working with the coach, Philippe Vuitton, that was very helpful. For example, I learned some points about the forward stroke, like trying to get more extension and greater torso rotation through a better back position. I learned that rather than letting your back be a little curved, leaning forward, it was better to keep it straight but at the same time more relaxed in general.”

And here is what Benoit has to say about Vuitton:

“He showed us a lot about training at a high level. I had a tendency to train a lot in quantity, but not with great quality. But thanks to him, I succeeded in making the quality a lot better. We still trained a lot in 1999, though. I've just been thinking about it: it was about 3 times a day on many days. I was trying to do the most I could. (Note: Benoit told me he now trains about 20 hours a week when he's in top form.)

Vuitton also showed us a training plan for the whole year, which was defined in advance and that we really followed to the letter. All of this allowed me for the first time to really get into shape for the team trials and later for the World Cup races. “

### **Isabelle Inschauspe**

2000 was also the first year that Benoit started working with a sports psychologist, Isabelle Inschauspe, the same one who worked with Tony Estanguet (and Benoit's brother, Nico). Benoit explains the importance of this:

“Almost from the beginning she helped me to paddle better during races and I was able to really relax on courses rather than being stressed out.

It was a matter of changing objectives at the start of the race, where I used to think about wanting to win and was stressed out because of not being able to control all the elements that went into winning.

She made me more conscious of the idea that at the start of a race all I can do is to paddle. So, trying to paddle as well as I could and to not worry about the result until later. That may sound really basic but it's very hard to do.”

So, did Isabelle teach Benoit ways to practice thinking like that?

“Not a lot at the beginning. It was up to me to figure out how to put it in place, but we saw each other regularly to improve the little details.

Sometimes I went to see her once a week. Sometimes I wouldn't see her for 3 months. It was about 10 times a year, sometimes less than that.”

### **Shoulder Injury**

“I injured my shoulder in 2000 while rolling. I broke my paddle and it took me several attempts to roll and on the 3rd attempt, my shoulder went “crack!” It didn't come out completely, but it moved some. The problem was that it was one week before the team trials. But thanks the physiotherapist, Mario Scianimanico, I was still able to compete and win the trials (for the French Youth Team). “

### **Watched the Olympics**

Even though Benoit wasn't on the French Olympic team, he was there watching. “one of my coaches told me, 'You've to go see it.' “

And this is the impression it made on him:

“After that, I really wanted to have my turn. For me it was a great festival and I wanted to take part in and it was a bit frustrating to be there because I would have loved to paddle on that course and do the race with the others. But I was just a spectator. Still, it was a really good experience.

I saw Laurent Burtz, the best French K1, who was 8<sup>th</sup>. And to see Tony win, to see him right after the race before the medals, it was really exceptional. I'd seen the Olympics in 1992, but I was very young then, so in 2000 it was different.”

### **2001**

“I came to the team trials that year really wanting to win them. I was 2<sup>nd</sup> and I did not do a good job. I really wanted to win that year.

Jean Yves Cheutin (now one of the French coaches) won. It was a good team trials for me but I was 2<sup>nd</sup> twice. But 3 weeks later, I won my first World Cup race at Goumois. I won the next week in Merano, too. (And subsequently got 5<sup>th</sup> place in the overall World Cup standings.)”

### **Evolution of Upstream Gate Style**

During the 2001 season, Benoit continued to work on his upstream gate technique:

“At that time I had a boat that wasn't as good as what the team had. Mine made me paddle a bit differently, I think. But it actually forced me to do a few more upstreams the

way the C1s did, come in pretty quickly, turn in place, and benefit from the rebound to jump out of the gate. I'd come in high, turn with one stroke and leave.

The next evolution was doing the upstreams with just one big sweep stroke and that came the next year, in 2002, with Fabien. But in 2001, we were still boating in a pretty classic way: trajectories that were not very strained but always with the boat gliding around the turn more. It was really the next year that things changed."

## **Explosions back at Home**

In 2001, the World Championships on the Ocoee River in Tennessee, USA, were canceled because the 9/11 terrorist attacks on Washington and New York. So Benoit couldn't race in his first Senior World Championships.

"This was really sad. But then as soon as we came back to France, there was an explosion in Toulouse that entirely destroyed our training center. A chemical factory exploded.

The training center wasn't rebuilt until last year (2005). So, for 3 years we were in Toulouse with somewhat difficult circumstances.

And not only did our club get destroyed, so did our apartment. There were thousands of apartments destroyed. So, I had to move and find another apartment."

Fortunately, Benoit was not in Toulouse when all this happened -- "We were getting ready to do a mountain climb about 100 kilometers away." But he thinks that even if he had been there he wouldn't have been hurt: "There were about 15-20 deaths in Toulouse. And if I'd been at the training center, yes, that could have been dangerous, but other than that, no."

## **Influence of Sylvain Curinier**

After 2001, Sylvain Curinier became Benoit's coach. Curinier had won the Olympic silver medal in the Barcelona Olympics and Benoit had been there to see it.

"I think he had an enormous influence on me because he taught me a lot by letting me explore certain fields of technique. It was really little things that he taught us in workouts. For example, putting your pelvis in a different position in the boat, trying to move your abdomen forward with each paddle stroke. He'd point out things that worked that you needed to keep doing or things that didn't work that you needed to get rid of. He was always a great source of ideas and inspiration.

With Sylvain we always tried to improve our technique to be more extreme, more quick in the gates. For example, I remember one workout where he said to us: "Today, we're only going to do one-stroke upstreams like the C1s and on certain ups, it's very hard and on others it's not so hard." And then we went to work on it. It was like that that he helped us to get better.

He started the whole idea of the C1-style upstreams, the one stroke upstreams. But then Fabien went off on his own a bit and developed it and we didn't really begin working hard on it until we saw what Fabien had done. "

## **2002**

“This was a big year for me because it was the World Championships in France. They were the last World Championships on a natural course, at Bourg Saint Maurice. I had a lot of trouble paddling on artificial courses. So, I said to myself that if I wanted to win the World Championships, it was at Bourg Saint Maurice that I had to do it. And that was a lot of pressure I put on myself. “

2002 was also Benoit's third year at University in Toulouse, but by then he had figured out how to train and go to school:

“Every year I continued my studies. But during the university years in Toulouse, I was pretty free because I could get the lecture notes from the people who were there and I worked by myself at home a lot.”

To prepare for this season, Benoit trained in Australia for 3 weeks, the first time he was to do this.

“And then the team trials went really well for me at Bourg. I won one race and was 2<sup>nd</sup> in the other. The start of the season with the World Cup went well, too, with a 2<sup>nd</sup> in China, a 3<sup>rd</sup> in Prague. But at that time, Fabien was starting to improve very fast, to do really extreme things in the boat, such as the one-sweep upstreams, for example. (Fabien was to win the World Cup that year, while Benoit was third.)

We trained together very often. And Julien also, but he wasn't selected for the World Championships, so it was a little different.

With Fabien, we were real competitors and didn't help each other a lot. That bothered me a little. And I had a hard time seeing him go faster than I did and that made me lose the World Championships little by little.”

So Fabien won again-- and Benoit got 24<sup>th</sup>. “I completely messed up the semifinal,” he says now.

### **Still Did Wildwater Training**

Benoit kept up training in wildwater boats during this period -- and even added some training in sprint boats:

“I always trained a bit from time to time in the wildwater boat and I think in 2002, or just after, in 2003, I bought a flatwater boat. At the time I was starting to be good in flatwater.”

Although this was not something Fabien Lefevre did, it was something one of the other kayakers, Jean-Yves Cheutin, also did.

## **2003**

2003 was a very important year, coming as it did right before the Athens Olympics. So, one would expect Benoit Peschier to have done particularly well that year at the World Championships in Augsburg.

But instead “I was looking from the bank because I wasn't selected to the team. I had a very bad team trials in Seu d'Urgell.”

“At that time I wasn't at the university any more. I tried to pass the exam for Professor of Sport but I failed. And I also failed the team trials. So, I was on the French Youth team, less than age 23. I did the World Cup race in Tacen where I was 4<sup>th</sup> but I was really a bad year, very hard. “

Preparation for the year started well enough, with Benoit again accompanying the French team to Australia for 3 weeks of winter training.

### **So what happened?**

“I made a mistake in how I trained and in my objectives. I fell back a bit into mistakes I made when I was younger by training too much and losing quality. That's one of the reasons.

Also, I didn't go to see the sports psychologist who I had been working with at all because I wanted to see what I could do all on my own. And it didn't work.

Also I arrived at the team trials with a boat that was not right and that really bothered me throughout the trials.

And finally, I think I was too heavy and that made me lose a lot of time at the team trials. From that point on that I started to pay more attention to my body weight before races, to be as light as possible.

So, in 2003 I saw the Augsburg World Championships from the bank because I'd been hired as the coach for Luxembourg. “

During the summer, Benoit did international races in Europe all alone “and I was really bad there, too, because I was 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> in each race.”

### **2004**

With a far less than ideal year in 2003, Benoit began his preparation for the Olympics. He went to Australia yet again, this time for 5 weeks.

But when he came back home, he changed training sites, leaving Toulouse and going to train in Paris. But there's no whitewater in Paris!

“No, none at all! I went back to INSEP, the National Sports Institute, to study and pass the exam for Professor of Sport. And I think that really helped me because I had courses there and I trained in between the courses. I was in a structure that allowed me to train well, to have regular hours, to be a bit removed from Fabien and Julien who were going really fast and putting a lot of pressure on me in each workout.

I could improve at my own pace and I paddled a lot on the course at Cergy Pontoise. It's a little artificial course made by EDF and which resembles the Penrith and Athens courses a little bit, but smaller.”

And did he train alone? No other athletes?

“Yes. Almost all alone. On the weekends you had to pay to paddle, so we had to come in a group and I trained with others then but they did not have very high objectives. I was with them, but I did my own workout.”

Did he have a coach there?

“No. I saw Sylvain Curinier once a month at training camps. I tried to go to Toulouse often to see him and to go to Seu d’Urgell to try to get better on that course because that’s where the team trials were going to be.

That was also the year in which I changed boats and went to Fabien’s boat, the Optima, because I didn’t want there be any question about equipment and that really helped me.

What was good about that boat was that everybody in the world was using. So, at that point there really wasn’t a question about whether it was good or not. I found it enabled me to do one-sweep ups that I couldn’t do as easily before. That boat had an usual glide to it that was really adapted to slalom technique. It also turned really well.”

So, it turned really well but also had good glide. How did they achieve that? More rocker on the boat for turning but how did that help the glide?

“It’s really unusual because they started with a boat that Zig-Zag, the boat manufacturer, had designed by himself in 1998, almost without the help of any athlete, so a boat that was very old.

Then, they improved it and they came up with a boat that was truly exceptional. A bit like a C1, the chines on the sides were fairly distinct around the cockpit area but became a lot less distinct at the stern and this allowed it not to slide too much, but also to turn really well.”

## **Starts Working with Isabelle Again**

Realizing that one of his mistakes in the last year was to stop seeing his psychological coach, Benoit now started seeing her again:

“The main idea was having a specific goal for each workout and to achieve it. And to work on something very specific each workout, something very precise. These can be implemented by remembering key words or using techniques of visualizing the course, either while paddling or watching a paddler. Or with technique, for example, I tried to work on the glide of the paddle in the water, trying to maintain it throughout the entire workout.

Working like this gave me a sense of satisfaction that I had been missing in my workouts. The workouts where I didn’t succeed were very, very hard psychologically because I had invested so much that it really hurt to fail.”

Did Isabelle work with Curinier about these kind of things?

“Yes. We always had a good communication between all 3 of us. I told Sylvain Curinier what I was working on. He told me what he thought about it. I think he modified workouts based on what I said.

We never got together, all 3 of us, but I think Sylvain went to see Isabelle from time to time to get information. That was really a truly hard year mentally with workouts that were very focused.”

### **Change in Weight Lifting**

“It was also a year in which I did a lot of weightlifting but in a little different way. I tried to look at books on weight lifting at the beginning of the year and set aside what I had been in the habit of doing in order to start again from zero and build a little different training program that would make me more explosive on the water.

When I started weight lifting in 1999, I concentrated on heavy weights. But for the 2004 season I changed this. I tried to lift lighter weights but lift them very quickly, to be very explosive and to transmit that in the boat as soon as I could, to try to transmit a maximum of speed onto the paddle.

I did 110 weight workouts that year.

I think another difference was that I continued to do it all year long, rather than doing more weight lifting in the winter and then stopping in the spring when you do a lot of boating. That made a big difference because when you stop lifting, I think you lose power pretty quickly.”

(Note: See the Appendix to this case study for more information on the French method of weight lifting)

### **Video Becomes More Important**

In 2004 Benoit also started working better with the video:

“I’d worked a lot with video in the past but that year the difference was I took a lot of videos of the best athletes, of Fabien, for example, and I tried to learn the upstreams the way he did them. I tried to really understand how they worked and to improve how I did them.

Take, for example, the approach angle where I learned to turn earlier and place my paddle differently. And to change how I held my chest, too. Fabien had the habit of paddling very straight and that was something I tried to do, too. So, I looked at the videos a lot, both with Curinier and by myself.”

### **2004 Team Trials**

“The team trials were at Seu d'Urgell in March. They started very badly for me because we had 3 races and I completely messed up the first one. So it was imperative that I succeed on the next 2 and that's what happened. I really had a turning point there. I graduated that year, right then, I think, in terms of my ability to go fast in a race. I won the 2<sup>nd</sup> race and I was 2<sup>nd</sup> in the third one. “

So now, since Fabien was already preselected to the Olympic team, it was between Julien and Benoit to decide which of them was to take the second French slot for the Olympics.

“That was going to be decided at the World Cup race in Athens. All 3 of us French were in the final of that race. I think I was 3<sup>rd</sup> and Julien was 5<sup>th</sup> on the 1<sup>st</sup> run. It was really close. I think I finished 4<sup>th</sup> and Julien 6<sup>th</sup>, so I was selected and he was not. So, it was really tough.”

From then on, for Benoit the only thing that mattered was the Olympics themselves:

“The other World Cup races weren't really my objective that year. So I trained through them and trained just for the Olympics. And that was hard because I didn't have very good results in the World Cup races. I think I was 17<sup>th</sup> at Seu d'Urgell, 11<sup>th</sup> at Prague. Little by little I was improving. I was 2<sup>nd</sup> at the Bourg St. Maurice World Cup with a very good 2<sup>nd</sup> run.

(He ended up 8<sup>th</sup> in the overall World Cup.) So, by succeeding on that course I picked up confidence. It was one several steps of that year at the mental level that allowed me to improve. “

### **Being at the Olympics**

“For me, it was a celebration just to get selected. So, I went with the aim of benefiting from the experience and trying to have a lot of fun with the course and the Olympics in general.

I saw Fabien talking with journalists all the time and saying all the time how he was going to win. He put a lot of pressure on himself.

So, the journalists completely forgot about me and that made it a really very comfortable situation for me. I was calm, with no pressure and it was just a lot simpler for me to succeed at the Olympics like that.”

### **The Race Itself**

In the race, Britain's Campbell Walsh led after the semifinal by a quarter of a second over Benoit.

In the final, Benoit was the second-to-last paddler to go, and his run was breathtaking. He pounded through the waves without seeming to lose any momentum and powered across the finish line more than 2.5 seconds ahead of anyone else.

Then Walsh went, the only one left who had a chance to catch him. But it quickly became clear that wasn't going to happen. The slightly-built Glaswegian hit a big wave early on and, instead of slipping through it, seemed to be momentarily stopped. After that he seemed too cautious down the course.

As a result Walsh hit no gates, but he was almost 2.5 seconds slower than Benoit, and initially placed third, behind the other Frenchman in the final, Fabien Lefevre. But then the judges realized Fabien had nudged the third gate and changed the results. So Peschier took the gold medal, Walsh the silver and Fabien the bronze, as follows:

1. Benoit Peschier, France, 187.96 seconds
2. Campbell Walsh, Britain, 190.17
3. Fabien Lefevre, France, 190.99
4. David Ford, Canada, 192.58
5. Thomas Schmidt, Germany, 192.93
6. Scott Parsons, United States, 194.76
7. Grzegorz Polaczyk, Poland, 196.57
8. Sam Oud, Netherlands, 197.28

### **Thoughts About the Race**

“For me it was a progression on all 4 runs (2 runs in the qualifier, 1 run in the semifinals, 1 run in the finals). I didn't have a very good 1<sup>st</sup> run during the qualifications. But the 2<sup>nd</sup> run was good. And then I had a good semifinal run, and a very good final one. I think I really succeeded in not having any stress at all about the results. I was just there to try to paddle the best I could.”

Was that the best race he ever had, “The Ultimate Run?” “No, not completely. There were still mistakes:”

“I think I was really close to the Ultimate Run, though. On the physical, technical, mental level, everything came together on that day. I didn't completely do it, but it was enough.”

I told Benoit about what Fabien had said about not being ready for the crowd reaction in Athens and asked Benoit whether he had felt anything like that:

“I personally didn't have that feeling. I had the sensation that there were a lot of people there and that it was really an exceptional ambiance and that pushed me to go all-out. Whether it was on the top part of the course or the bottom part of the course, I just heard a lot of noise everywhere and it was really fun to paddle like that.”

### **Aftermath**

Right after the race “there were an enormous number of journalists, questions, interviews.”

“It was really hard for almost 4 months after the Games because I had something to do every day. Not a lot of journalists, but a lot of activities in support of Paris's candidacy for the 2012 Games. It was very tiring. But after that it didn't really changed my life a lot.”

### **2005**

“That was an unusual year because I was preselected for the World Championships. I didn't need to do the team selection trials. I was very pleased by that because I was able to pass my exams for Professor of Sport a little easier. So, from January to the start of May, I was really oriented towards my studies.

Then, I went to Australia for 2 weeks just after the first part of the exam. But it wasn't really very productive. Instead it was more of a vacation.”

## **2005 World Cup and World Championships**

“It was very hard for me because during the first World Cup races, I was not in shape. Also, Sylvain Curinier was no longer our coach. A new coach replaced him but it didn't really work out. And just before the World Championships we got another coach just for the Worlds and things went a lot better. He was Arnaud Brogniart. He had been among the 10 best in France and is a good coach and we liked him. He really was the person we needed at that time to help us do well at the World Championships.

I only really trained for the World Championships. So, I didn't have very good World Cup results. (He got 11<sup>th</sup> in the overall World Cup rankings.) Nevertheless, I arrived at the Worlds in pretty good shape but lacking a little confidence because I hadn't been successful in races just before that.

It's a good memory for me, though, even though I really scared myself in the semifinal. I thought I wasn't going to make it into the final. That would have been a big disappointment to not do the 2<sup>nd</sup> run of the World Championships.

I didn't have an exceptional run. I didn't make a lot of mistakes, but my choice of tactics wasn't the best and it caused me to lose a bit of time. I got 5<sup>th</sup> in the individual competition. But I still have good memories of it because we won team race. That was one of our objectives that year.

So, overall that year, compared to my preparation, I couldn't have done a lot better.”

## **2006**

“In 2006, an old problem from Benoit's career reappeared: he didn't qualify for the French team again, and thus missed the Prague World Championships. Furthermore, his training partner, Fabien Lefevre, could manage only 5<sup>th</sup> in that race. But another training partner, Julien Billaut got the silver medal, his first in the individual competition. And the French team won the team race again, this time without Benoit. So the French “system” was still successful in K1 -- but Benoit wasn't part of it this time. “

## **Looking Back**

In reviewing Benoit's career so far, one of the major themes you can see is that there have been periods when things didn't go very well for him but then he rebounded and got back on track. The most obvious one is 2003 - 2004. But it happened before, too. So I asked Benoit what he thought about it:

“I think each time I had a bad year like that, as I saw I was making mistakes, I couldn't help but make others. In trying to get better, I did things that actually made me finish even lower.

Afterwards I took the time to pull back a bit, whether it be with a coach, whether it be alone, whether it be with Isabelle, to analyze what happened.

We tried to detect all the things I did wrong and the things I did right in order to see what I could do to improve. And each time it was a little like starting from scratch. I'd gone off in other directions a little bit and into other philosophies of training. So, I needed to start over.”

## **Advice**

What advice would Benoit Peschier give to a young slalom competitor? "That's a difficult question, but I'd say, think about school, do other sports, do a lot of whitewater slalom, do wildwater."

## Appendix -- French Weight Lifting

The French feel that one key to paddling today's new short boats is being able to exert strength from unbalanced positions. They feel the shorter boats veer off course easier and require more strength to keep them on track.

But instead of looking for more maximum strength, the French are looking at being able to use a higher percentage of their maximum strength in the boat.

So, the top French athletes, including the K1s, Olympic Champ, Benoit Peschier, and 2-time World Champ and Olympic bronze medalist Fabien Lefevre, and World Silver medalist Julien Billaut, as well as C1 2-time Olympic champ Tony Estanguet, do a lot of weight lifting while balancing themselves on big medicine balls.

They call this kind of weight lifting "gainage."

They use two sizes of balls, the first being a big, blue one, about a meter in diameter. It is made of plastic and one of the ones I saw bore this inscription on it: "Gymnastikball Made in Italy by Ledragomma 0 max cm 65 -25.5"

They also had another ball that was the same size but I think made by another company, the name of which I did not get.

When the French do their weight training sessions, they are really circuits mixing classic lifts and exercises -- such as the standard bench press, squats, and various dumbbell lifts along with sit-ups and push ups -- with exercises using the medicine balls. Some examples of the exercises with the medicine balls follow:

- \* One hand bench presses, leaning your back against the ball. With your knees bent, you put your back to the ball, and push dumbbells up in the air, alternating hands. All the while, you're trying to balance yourself on the ball.

- \* Do draw strokes while sitting on top of the ball. You fasten a bungie chord to the wall, hold one hand over your head as though it were in the draw stroke position, and then pull the lower hand towards you, as you would do with a draw stroke, all the while teetering on the ball.

- \* You can either do this one with both feet on the ground (not so hard), one foot only on the ground (harder), or no feet on the ground (pretty hard).

- \* Or you can do it with both feet on a much smaller ball. The smaller ball looked to me like the classic medicine ball, a heavy leather one. It was about a third the size of the bigger, plastic ones.

- \* Do forward stroke in the same ways as above.

- \* All the stroke movements are very quick, as quick as you can do it -- quicker than you'd actually do them in the boat.

There were other drills with medicine balls, too, without emphasizing any strokes, just general balance. For example, the hardest one of them involved 3 balls, two big ones and one small one. Basically, you started by spread-eagling on one of the big balls, with one hand on the small

ball, and one foot on the other big ball. Then you just tried to turn around on the balls, climbing from one to another. This was very hard and the athletes fell off pretty soon.

Another drill involved push ups with one hand on the small ball and the other on the floor, as you would do normally.

Others consisted of sitting on the big ball with eyes closed and moving the head from one side to the other slowly and then holding it there for a little while before moving it back to the other side and then holding it there.

I asked the athletes what percentage of their maximum strength they could do while perched on the balls and they said they didn't know, so we ran a quick experiment. We had Peschier do about 8-10 alternating one hand dumbbell bench presses while on a stable bench. Then we had him do the same number with his back leaning on the big medicine ball and he did 47% of the weight he did on the bench.

Now, probably the percentages will vary with the difficulty of the balancing acts they do in connection with lifting, but that at least gives you an idea -- considerably less than they can do in a stable environment.

Another interesting exercise I saw involved the athlete sitting on an inclined abdominal board. He'd start out lying flat, back against the board. Then as he tried to raise his torso up, a coach would hold onto his shoulders to provide some resistance. But when the athlete got his torso to approximately 90 degrees to the ground, the coach would let go, and the athlete would quickly drop his torso back down again towards the board before suddenly reversing directions and raising it up quickly again towards his toes.

The French have identified 7 different kinds of lifting they are interested in:

E = Endurance (Endurance)

P = Puissance (Strength)

F = Force (Power)

I = Isometrique (Isometric)

Ex =Excentrique (Excentric)

PI = Pliometrique (Plyometric)

S = Stadoynamique (Stadodynamique --push up slowly part way and then explode up for the rest)

The following table shows just what percentage of each of these 7 kinds of lifting should be done, by week, during a year-long weight training program:

Date	E	P	F	I	Ex	PI	S
Nov 14-Dec 11	82%	15%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Dec 12- Jan 15	33%	42%	17%	0%	8%	0%	0%
Jan 16- Feb 5	11%	52%	11%	19%	0%	7%	0%
Feb 6-26	0%	92%	0%	0%	0%	8%	0%
[Seu training camp]							
Mar 6-26	61%	22%	0%	0%	0%	17%	0%
Mar 27-Apr 9	0%	67%	25%	0%	0%	8%	0%
Apr 10-May 7	25%	42%	0%	0%	0%	0%	33%

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May 8 -14	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
May 15-Jun 4	7%	80%	0%	0%	0%	0%	13%
Jun 19-Jul 2	0%	82%	0%	0%	0%	0%	18%
Jul 3-26	17%	50%	0%	8%	0%	8%	17%
Jul 27-Aug 6	17%	50%	17%	0%	0%	0%	17%