

Lehigh River High

Kayaking Olympians kick-off program of bringing Gold Medal attitude to the Lehigh River

By AL ZAGOFISKY @Byline.Line2:azagofskptd.net



1992 Tandem Canoe Gold Medal Olympian Joe Jacobi, left, 1996/2000 Olympic Whitewater Coach Bob Campbell, and Northeastern PA Kayak School president Jerry McAward with McAward's Yellow Lab Pax.

Olympic Gold Medal winner, Joe Jacobi, and Olympic Whitewater Team coach, Bob Campbell, recently taught Gold Medal Living classes at Jerry McAward's Northeastern PA School of Kayaking in Weissport.

"These guys are the real thing," said McAward, "I met them and got to know them as ambassadors to the sport of kayaking as we at the school like to think of ourselves as shepherding people into kayaking in the right way."

The classes, aimed at intermediate level paddlers, started with the fundamentals of warm-ups, posture and balance, then built upon these skills, first on flat water at Beltzville Lake, then in moving water below the railroad bridge near the Dunbar's Distributor.

McAward wanted Jacobi and Campbell to get a feel of the Lehigh River and its paddling community. This was the furthest east they had taken their Gold Medal program. He plans to have them return for two additional years and "maybe forever," as part of what might be called a Lehigh River High initiative.



1996/2000 Olympic Whitewater coach Bob Campbell (in distance) leads warm-up before start of kayaking lessons. AL ZAGOFISKY/TIMES NEWS

McAward sees the excitement of the Lehigh River's whitewater offering an alternative to local kids that are seeking something challenging and exciting to do, and that gets them out on the water. And as McAward points out, "this river is in their backyard."

He's hoping that next summer, his school will be able to offer an affordable program of kids kayak instruction given two nights a week for six to eight weeks to lead up to a chance to practice with an Olympic Gold Medalist and National Team coach.

Olympian Jacobi won the Gold Medal in the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain. He raced in tandem canoe, sitting in the rear seat behind partner, Scott Strausbaugh. Jacobi was 21 at the time; Strausbaugh was 28.

Jacobi is now 36, and though recently retired from whitewater competition, he retains an upper body that would rival the Incredible Hulk.

In the 2004 Olympics in Athens, with partner Matt Taylor, he ran a great race, finishing in eighth place. The field raced a great race," Jacobi said "I wouldn't trade the 2004 experience for anything."

At the age of eight, he learned to kayak at a summer camp near his Washington D.C. home. After mastering the Eskimo Roll at the age of ten, and attracting interest, he was motivated to improve his kayaking skills. For fun, he and a friend began practicing in a tandem canoe, eventually earning the Red Shirt, the highest honors the camp bestowed on a kayaker.

Although the Olympics discontinued whitewater competition in 1972, many top competitors under the tutelage of coach Bill Endicott continued practicing for and receiving top wins. Looking for young blood, Endicott invited 12-year-old Jacobi to his trainings and encouraged him to stay with the tandem canoe, and at the age of 17, paired him with Strausbaugh, a more experienced river reader. Over the next four years, they meshed, making the National Team and being invited to the Olympics.

Placement in the race was based upon the best time of two runs. "On the first run, we had a really good run and felt good when we crossed the finish line," Jacobi said. "We had a six second lead. While we paddled well, the other guys paddled not so well."



Gold Medal awarded to Joe Jacobi after winning the 1992 Tandem Canoe event with partner Scott Strausbaugh.

Although they thought they had it made, their coach urged them to do better, and in the second race, they reduced their time by two seconds with Jacobi's life vest just missing a hanging gate that would have penalized their run by five seconds, moving them to third instead of first.

"Everyone that day who was in first place after the first run, and did not improve on their second run, dropped to third place except us," noted Jacobi. "We were the only ones to capture first place on the first run and then improve the second run. That was the difference."

"You don't have control of your competitors," he concluded. "We were just two guys that had to finish a job doing the best we could do."

Campbell 51, coached the US Olympic Team at the 1996 and 2000 Olympics. He hails from Rochester, New York and, while an older teenager at Outward Bound in Colorado, learned kayaking.

He studied education and took a position at the Colorado Rocky Mountain School, a school with a long history of kayak instructors, achievers in slalom racing, and connections to the Junior and Senior National Whitewater Teams.

He became involved with the National Program and its athletes. A sabbatical allowed him to coach two brothers training for the national team in tandem canoe. "We were successful," said Campbell. "Other National Team members noticed my work and I was offered a position as an assistant coach".

"When the 1996 Olympics came, I was invited to be an assistant coach. I continued and, in the 2000 Olympics, I also served as the Slalom Program Director and Olympic Team Leader". Campbell has formed two businesses, Gold Medal Connections - giving kayak clinics, and Whitewater Parks International helping promote large scale purpose-built whitewater parks.

For additional information, see www.kayakschool.com, or call 610-379-9013.

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