

## **Jun 11, 2008 Future of Slalom: Preliminary**

Last December Bill Endicott suggested that I write a paper on what could be done to improve Slalom in the US.

There were several reasons why I wasn't all that excited by this idea. Was Slalom really in need of improvement, compared to other small sports, I wondered? And even if it was, could anything be done about it? And would a paper really help?

### **THE LIGHT BULB**

Despite my doubts, I finally got around to following one of Bill's suggestions by contacting Dwight Bell, a volunteer who heads the board of directors of luge.

Wow.

Dwight Bell was a member of US Luge teams in the late 70's and early 80's. When Dwight got involved on the administrative side, in the mid-eighties, the total yearly Luge budget was somewhere between 100 and 200K per year. This coming year, due to cutbacks in sponsorship, it will dip to a 'mere' 2.8 million dollars. (!) Luge is now backed by a foundation of 2 million, and possesses its own multimillion-dollar year-round refrigerated facility paid for by York International. There are only three Olympic Luge events. By most measures it's a tiny sport, with only a handful of courses (two world class, two other) in the US. Yet they have a full-time paid staff of 12, and they hire 8-10 more paid coaches in the winter, plus interns and an active network of volunteers. Their website and regular newsletters, for example, are created by volunteers. They run an elaborate junior recruitment program, which involves traveling around the country and giving kids in the ten to twelve age range the opportunity to try out luge sleds on wheels. Top juniors are sponsored by Luge, with tutoring included, to spend the winter in Lake Placid or Park City in preparation for international junior competitions.

Could Slalom replicate this success story? It's hard to see why not. Dwight was clearly envious of Slalom's widespread appeal, its huge base of

recreational boaters, its relatively unlimited facilities, and its much cheaper equipment. What's holding us back?

## RE-DREAMING

In the old days we had a fun dream: out of the backwoods, into the limelight, taking on state-funded European powers in our own crazy, dirt-bag, creative way. That was a good dream, for its day, but we can't hold back the clock. Nor should we want to. It's time for a more inclusive dream. Imagine, for a moment: high school slalom championships in every region of the country; development of rotomolded slalom kayaks, and perhaps even C-1's and C-2's, for youth and club boaters; a network of clubhouses beside permanent training sites; a traveling road show that introduces canoe sport--ideally including other disciplines--to school kids, including inner-city kids, around the country; the US winning as many, or more, slalom medals as France; opportunities for paid coaching positions at the local, regional, and national levels; volunteers engaged on every level, including traveling to Europe and Asia and Africa, and welcoming foreign athletes here. It's true, I wouldn't want to see Slalom become too tightly structured, too bureaucratic. But I think it's possible to have a multi-million dollar budget, and still have excellent fun at every level, maintaining a creative, athlete-centered ethos.

## PASSION AND FOCUS

How the heck did Luge create its extraordinary growth? Dwight Bell's refrain: focus. "The entire organization is laser-lock focused." And later: "Passion, and focus." The Luge staff is large, but the board is small. Seven members, at the moment; two more can be appointed, as necessary. They meet once a year. Every four years, after the Olympics, the board has a meeting to set the next quadrennium's goals. The once-a-year meetings check on their progress toward those goals. A 'facilitator,' hired from outside Luge, is used to keep the meetings on track. There's a hierarchy of goals. According to Dwight, the central goal--within a context of sportsmanship, honor, and Olympic ideals--is winning Olympic medals. Then there's a small number of secondary goals, each one relevant as it contributes to the overall

goal. And then strategies, etcetera. Each and every employee and volunteer understands the overall goal, and how their efforts relate to this. And Luge is, indeed, winning World and Olympic medals, in a sport long dominated by European powers such as Germany, with its half-dozen first-rate courses. Focus, Dwight's key word, is exactly and precisely what may be hardest for Slalom to achieve. Luge is one sport, completely separate from, for example, Bobsled and Skeleton. Whereas USACK is divided. It's hard to see how USACK could have one easily understood goal; it necessarily has a whole bunch of goals. USACK serves two Olympic disciplines--for all intents and purposes, separate sports--as well as a plethora of non-Olympic disciplines. There are exactly two USACK employees who deal exclusively with Slalom: coaches Silvan Poberaj and Cathy Hearn. High performance director Chris Hipgrave divides his time between Sprint and Slalom. No one in the USACK office is focused purely on Slalom. Everyone at Luge is focused purely on Luge.

Luge has a board of seven--whereas Slalom has in essence two boards, the USAWS board for Slalom, and the USACK board, which is in charge of not only slalom, but also sprint, wildwater, marathon, freestyle, canoe polo--and I've probably missed a discipline or two.

### RESTRUCTURING?

Luge's example tempts one to think that Slalom and Sprint should be split into two National Governing Body's. (No insult to Sprint; it would be a simpler structure for them, too.) But can this really be done? And, if so, should it? The mixed NGB is a reflection of the way canoe/kayak is organized on an international level. And this has had its advantages. I have also spoken with a person who spent 16 years working with the US Skiing and Snowboard Association, Alan Ashley. I was surprised to find that the USSA, which oversees Alpine, Freestyle, Cross-Country, Ski-jumping, and Snow-Boarding, has a centralized structure much like USACK's. It may not be possible to achieve the "laser-lock focus" of Luge's structure. But perhaps, with some relatively minor reorganization--or even just rethinking--we could improve Slalom's focus and morale. I've read a copy of Luge's

strategic plan, and there is an interesting word that crops up again and again: "owner." Each "strategy"--"promote the public awareness and image of Luge," for example--has a person's name, or in some cases, names, listed as its "owner." The slalom organization should feel that it 'owns' its own program--otherwise there's neither focus nor passion. Luge is run on a business model; the same CEO has overall responsibility for earning the money, spending the money, and improving the sport. ( \_Earning\_ the money through selling the sport's advertising potential seems to be the Luge attitude, by the way; more purely charitable donations are solicited, as well, but this is a secondary income stream. The Luge foundation raises its own money separately.)

Could Slalom create such a structure under USACK's umbrella? This is the question I need the most help with. Focus, a sense of ownership--these are familiar concepts to both athletes and entrepreneurs, and I think the proper structure would help them to flourish. At the same time, close, friendly, and crystal-clear relations with USACK will be necessary at every step of the way. There have been a lot of positive developments--the two new artificial courses, and exciting developments in Oklahoma City. I think USACK has had a lot to do with these. Things look pretty decent for the very top athletes. But slalom participation is down, which spells trouble for the future. Right now, it seems that most of Slalom's money comes from the USOC--and we can hardly expect the USOC to be far-sighted about slalom development. That's our job.

#### RE-DREAMING into RE-THINKING

Of equal importance with the organizational question, is the drawing up of a clear mission statement, an explicit goal or goals, and a plan for how to get there. Dwight said, "The first thing I would do is draw up a dream plan. The plan comes first. If you don't have a plan, it's hard to raise money." (I don't suggest, by the way, that our goal has to be identical with Luge's goal; we're allowed to be different.) I ask for your input as to what this should be. Then I think we should set subsidiary goals, ways to serve the central goal. (More input.) The final step is the actual four-year action plan. Somewhere in this

planning process the baton gets passed to the professional staff; they're the ones who create the high-performance plan, for example.

Now's the time to start. The natural time to finalize an action plan for Slalom is this fall, after the Olympics, at the annual USAWS and USACK meetings.

The exciting thing about all this is that Slalom's potential is huge. There is every reason to think that Slalom could become a vibrant and growing sport in this country. And the law of the universe seems to be: you can't stay in one place. If you aim for stasis, you wither. Growth is our only other option.

So as you can tell, the Luge example has made me interested in writing a paper on how to improve Slalom. I don't intend to invent my own plan; I wish to stimulate a discussion that will result in a plan that reflects a general consensus on goals, and on the first practical steps that should be made to move toward those goals. This email is a request for your positive input.

Lest this email itself seem unfocused, I propose the following goals, to be accomplished by the end of 2008. 1. Mission Statement due by the end of August. 2. Complete "dream plan" paper due by no later than Sept. 27. 3. Either define, or establish, Slalom's executive structure, with power to raise money (through both sponsorships and contributions), hold money, and spend money. Define what sponsorship opportunities we have to sell. Due by end of October. 4. Hire a full-time Slalom executive director by end of year.

Sincerely, Jamie McEwan

P.S. I've set up a "Future of Slalom" discussion board at the alumni website, available here: <http://www.uswtaf.org/board/viewforum.php?f=3> I thought it might be convenient to post ideas and responses there, rather than send emails around that tend to get buried in people's inbox. This is an open forum; anyone's welcome to participate. You don't even need to log on, though that will save you having to pass through the robot filter when you post.

