

Slalom E-Book

By William T. Endicott

Section VI - Case Study : Fabien LEFEVRE

"I studied the C1s a lot and saw they turned faster than we did. So I asked myself why and I tried to copy them."

-- Fabien Lefèvre

Fabien Lefèvre is the most important K1 of the early 2000s, particularly noted for his mercurial personality ("I want to have a fantastic life!"), his flamboyant, head ducking style and his one-stroke upstream gates. Whether it be pushing off the walls of artificial courses, riding in and out of an upstream gate all on one stroke, the way a C1 would, or simply doing one big sweep to get in and out of the gate, Fabien Lefevre has been the man to copy.

His current coach, Yves Narduzzi describes it this way:

"Fabien's really very fixed on slalom gates. That's a little different from Benoit Peschier and Tony Estanguet, for example. Fabien needs to paddle a kayak, he's in love with boating. But it really has to be done in gates. And it seems to me he prefers artificial courses to natural courses, which really shows the interest he has in kayaking has to be in an environment made specifically for slalom.

I've often seen Fabien surfing a wave with a gate pole suspended over the middle of the wave and he is slaloming his body around the pole while surfing the wave. And I think that if you took the pole away, the wave would really lose interest for him. He's interested in surfing, yes, but especially with a gate in the middle of it, so he can practice turning his chest around it, ducking his head under it, generally working on his agility.

When you look at him boating, that's what you notice, his ability to come really close to the poles while moving his arms and rolling his head. This special relationship with the slalom gates is very, very apparent with him. "

I met Fabien at a workout in Pau, France, on 9 February, 2 days before he was to get married. He was very pressed for time, but gave me time anyway.

It was at the training course in Pau, just downstream of the stunning Henri IV castle that you can see from the course. The class 1-II whitewater course has about 40 gates on it and is separated into two parts by a drop. You can easily paddle back up each half. There's a big highway bridge spanning the river there. The river's called the "Gave de Pau."

It was a pretty amazing workout that I saw, but just an everyday one for Fabien. Consider the cast of characters: Besides Fabien, 2-time World Champion and Olympic bronze medalist, Tony Estanguet, 2 times C1 Olympic Champion was there. So was Benoit Peschier, K1 Olympic Champion. And Julien Billaut, K1 World Team Champion (and soon to be K1 individual Silver Medalist at the Prague World Championships), and Nico Peschier, Benoit's brother who was

also on the Athens Olympic team in C1. Here are my notes from the session, which consisted of 4 parts and was run by their coach, Yves Narduzzi:

10:30 to 11:59 am:

1. 6 X [30" on, 30" off, gate loops on top half only]. No times. Lots of head ducking practice in the upstream gates. Each athlete starts at a different point on the course and they do a big loop, chasing each other around the course.

[change course]

2. 6 X [30" on, 30-40" off, gate loops on top half only]. Time the downstream part only:

Didn't write down the times.

[change course]

3. 3 X 50" gate loop course on bottom half only, divided into 2 courses. Yves timed downstream part of 1st course, I timed downstream part of 2nd course.

My times:

Julien	30.3	30.7	30.5	
Fabien	30.2	29.3	30.2	
Nico	30.6	31.9	30.9	
Tony	30.4	31.5	31.4	31.4

[change course]

4. Repeat 3, above.

My times:

Julien	26.9	27.7	26.3
Fabien	27.4	27.9	27.6
Nico	29.7	30.1	31.2
Tony	29.3	30.5	30.1

After it was over, Fabien had to leave quickly. But I spoke with him the next day in the clubhouse -- while teammate Benoit Peschier was getting acupuncture treatment a few feet away from us.

Fabien's Story

Fabien Lefevre was born June 18, 1982 in Orleans and lived there until he was 16. He is 1.78 meters (5' 10) and weighs 71 kilos (156 pounds). His paddle length is 201 centimeters and starting in 2000, he moved to a "bent shaft" because "it's better for your wrist, for the draw strokes," he says. "I could never do the C1-style upstreams as well without the bent shaft paddle."

Family Sports Background

Fabien's mother was never involved in any sports, but his father played soccer in university as well as rugby. Furthermore, his father played table tennis for 20 years and got to the French Championships, although he never won a title or "got on the podium," as Fabien puts it.

Fabien has a sister who is 2 years younger than he is and she did a little kayaking before taking up basketball at age 8. She then played basketball for 13 years, and in fact, still plays it, although only regionally, never wanting to do it at a higher level than that.

Gets into Kayaking at 6

Fabien got into kayaking because of a neighbor:

“A neighbor did some leisure and touring kayaking. He suggested to my parents that I join a local club. I was 6. I started in a swimming pool and 6 months later I went to do a little bit on rivers. At about 7, I started doing some races. “

In the beginning, Fabien did both slalom and wildwater - and even flatwater:

“I did all three up to ‘Level 2,’ so to about age 14. But already at 7 or 8 my specialty was slalom. I wasn’t cut out for flatwater or wildwater. “

The name of first club was Sète in the village of Orleans, where they had races “about every 2 weeks during the season, when it was hot out.”

Fabien explains the kind of training he did at that time:

“Every Wednesday, we went to the river where there was an old bridge that had collapsed. There were about 15 different current lines there. We had fun playing, going from one place on the river to another. Then, we had races every 2 weeks, or sometimes even every week -- it depended. So, I did a lot of racing at a very young age. We did gates only on the weekends, during the races and just had fun on the whitewater without gates during the week. It went like that for 7 years but it wasn't really training, either in downriver or flatwater or even in the gates.”

Fabien did all this with a group of 10-12 other kids, most of them in kayaks -- “There weren't many canoes in our region.” And they even had a coach for the entire 7 years, Jean-Michel Arnoult.

Changes Clubs

“Then I changed clubs, to a club that did more races in my region. It was the Salbris club, a little south of Orleans. I stayed in that club for 3 years and then I moved to Pau with my parents when I was 16.”

Fabien describes what he learned about slalom at that time:

“I think the main thing was getting a feel for the water by playing in it and learning about races. I liked all that. But what was unusual with me compared to the other kids was that I went through the gates with really well designed trajectories. For example, when there was an s-turn gate, most of the kids did it in a certain way. But I had already figured out how to do it with only one paddle stroke. So, it was natural for me.

And on upstream gates I’d come in very high, always very close to the poles. But I was inconsistent. I didn’t really think a lot about it, though.”

1989 -- First Win

"I think the first race I won was in 1989. It was a regional race. I won by a lot. It was the 8-9 year old class, the "Poussin" class. I was 5 or 6 but I won by a lot. That was the eye-opener. Then, there were 2, then 3, then 4, then 5 races, and I won them all. Every race was important to me. That was my leitmotif."

Fabien got involved in boat design at a surprisingly early age:

"In 1990, I started to change the shape of the boat. From time to time, when we had been really strong during the season, the club offered us a new boat. That was a motivation to do bigger and bigger races. It was the club coach who came up with the idea of making a new boat. The club had sufficient means to have good equipment and we benefited from that. "

And then in 1991 and 1992, he was inspired by seeing the best French athletes competing:

"I went to watch the French team training for the French Championships in 1991 and that really motivated me for the future. Then, there were the Olympics in 1992 and Sylvain Curinier got 2nd and later he became my coach in 2000.

And finally, I started a pattern of setting one goal, reaching it and just setting another, higher one. I'd win one race and I'd want a higher goal. I'd win that and I'd aim for an even higher goal. So, it started with wanting to win a regional race, then a national race, then the European Championships, the World Championships and finally the Olympics. It was like that year after year but never a really high objective right from the very beginning."

In talking about the development of his technique at that time, Fabien plays down attempts at conscious analysis and instead speaks about just doing what came naturally.

"It's true that as I got older I started to think more consciously about what I was doing. But basically it was a really linear progression. And it followed how I was growing. At that time I was 1.10 meters tall. Then 1.50. And now I'm 1.78. My technique improved as my body got bigger. And I never had to think about it much. It was more just instinct."

And he never kept a training log, either:

"My coaches tried to get me to do it but I never succeeded in doing it for very long. I'd do it for 2 months and then I'd forget."

Fabien's parents were a big help with his early development:

"When I started winning races, I wanted to win more and be in training camps with kids who were older than I was, so I could learn more. I was very demanding. I had the desire and I asked a lot of my parents. They tried within their means, because it cost a lot to buy kayak equipment, to take kids to races, to grant my requests. They were always sensitive to my feelings but they never forced anything on me."

Was that because Fabien's father had been an athlete and understood that athletes needed support like this? "Yes, I think so," Fabien says. "Often. But I had the final say. I was free."

1998 -- Makes French Junior Worlds Team

The first year Fabien made a French team was in 1998 for the Junior World Championships in Lofer, Austria. He thereby started an association with two other top K1s, Benoit Peschier and Julian Billaut who are his training partners to this day:

“At the team trials I was selected as one of the 3 boats that were going to represent France in the Junior Worlds, Benoit, Julien and I. I didn't get into the final. Benoit had the best result in the individuals (20th). Then, it was Julien (41st) and lastly, me (61st).”

But at this time, Fabien didn't train with these two most of the time, doing so only at training camps and before races.

1999 -- Wins Junior European Championships

The next year Fabien made up for his loss at the Junior Worlds by winning the Junior European Championships in Solkan, Slovenia. His teammate Julien Billaut placed 12th.

2000 -- Sylvain Curinier Becomes his Coach

In 2000, Fabien competed again in the Junior World Championships, again doing badly, placing 65th in the individuals.

But also in 2000, Sylvain Curinier, one of France's best K1s, having won the silver medal in K1 at the Barcelona Olympics (out of 44 competitors, tied with Atlanta as the most ever) became Fabien's coach and was to have a big influence on Fabien:

“He helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses. He steered me toward the path to a very high level. I was already at a high level, but he's the one who gave me a hand to move up a notch.

It wasn't just a coach - athlete relationship. In other words, he was someone I had a certain bond with. With him you had ties besides the one a coach uses to get things done.

He was a good listener. He listened to what I wanted to do, what I thought I knew how to do, what I wanted to fix, test or innovate. He used his experience as an athlete to consider these ideas and then to try and find something that was within my reach.”

Fabien believes Curinier kept records of Fabien's training sessions:

“I think the Federation has them or maybe they were given to other coaches. There are records, yes. I did a lot of tests between 1997 and 2002, tests in the boat, weight training, in the lab. We tried to find ways I could get better.”

(Note: See Appendix 1 of this study for more information about the French system and national training plans in France.)

Talks About the Support he Got

Fabien told me several interesting things about the kind of support he had during the years leading up to his wins and specifically how he thought it had helped:

“I think it's important to have human support, that is, coaches, equipment, computers, videos and the financial means to be able to travel and train on courses in Europe and Australia.

And all this really started for me in 1999. In France, the closer you get to the top level, the more you have the means to become an expert, a specialist, and to put all your energy into getting on the podium or even winning a title in an international competition.”

But good support, for Fabien, means a lot more than just having money:

“If I had two times as much money as I do now, like David Ford or Helmut Oblinger do, then I'd train only on artificial courses. But ironically, I think that would have made things harder during this period because I think I would have gotten to a very high level, but it would have been 2 or 3 years later.

Whereas what I did (i.e. didn't get to train on artificial courses all the time) actually helped me to get there very early, only 2 years after being a Junior. Maybe if I'd been 100% all alone, I wouldn't have gotten there until 2004.

I don't think it's enough to just have a lot of money to help you train; it's always important to have someone on the bank. Because you may feel something on the water and think it's fast, but it's the person on the bank who can really tell you whether it's fast or not. You may think it's fast, but, in fact, it might not be. The video, too, having someone to take video, I think that's important.

The coach is going to add to your sensations and your experience on the water. It's with him that you're going to compare ideas in an to raise your level. There are times in your career when you have to do that and other times when maybe you want to do things completely on your own. It depends on your personality and your past experience.”

What about having a group of other athletes to train with? How important is that, compared to just having the coach, the physio and the videos, but not the other athletes?

“I think having people to train with is necessary because of the competition. When you do a workout all alone, you only do 3 courses. But when everybody else is there, you do 4. It's a question of personal investment. If you're always all alone, it's harder to push the limits, particularly when you are doing physical work.

With technique, on the other hand, I like to have time to look into things by myself. But then there are other times I like to look at other athletes' technique and see what they're doing. Are they doing things that are more efficient than what I'm doing? Can I do them, too? “

Fabien says that nowadays about 50% of his training time is spent alone and 50% with other athletes. “But it changes. In 2003, it was 60% alone and 40% with others. In 2002 it was 70% alone and 30% with others.

Blending Equipment Improvements with Technique Improvements

In working with Curinier over the next few years, Fabien had a number of ideas on how he could improve:

“I had a several choices. The first was what I could do with me, personally, what I could to improve my technical and physical abilities. That's why I took the physical tests to see what level I was at physically, if I could get better physically and what I had to do. And secondly, what could I do to get better at the technical level. In thinking about technique, I reached the conclusion that to get better technically I had to improve my equipment so it would be better adapted to what I wanted to do.”

And the biggest piece of equipment to improve was the boat:

“It's true, it's the person first at the physical and technical level, then the equipment. But in terms of the equipment I felt it was important that I shouldn't be adapting to the equipment as I was trying to do, but instead the equipment should be adapted to me. So, in 2001 and 2002 I worked on a new boat. It was called the “Optima,” and it sold everywhere. “

How was this boat different from the others?

“It turned better than the others. It was rather new because in K1, there was a tendency to have boats that were very fast but which didn't turn very well. I was willing to have a boat that wasn't as fast but that turned better. This allowed me to do really tight courses and to make up a bit of time like that.

When I was little, coaches kept telling me I was like a puppet because I was so flexible. They'd try to tell me to keep a certain position in the boat instead of moving around so much. So I worked on certain balance exercises to help with this but at the same time I kept my doing my torso mobility exercises because I thought they were important. So, I worked naturally. When I saw something I liked, I just went with it, just did what I felt like doing. “

The seat in the boat was important, too, especially cutting down the back of the it:

“As I said, with the seat as with all equipment, I adapted it to me, rather than me to it. So, I made the back part of the seat lower than other seats so I could lean way back suddenly and sneak gates. It's a lot more comfortable.”

And to further facilitate this ability to lean back really quickly and sharply, he did weight training -
- “A lot of weight training with cables:”

“This was to increase the strength and power of my abdominal muscles as well as their endurance and that whole part of the body so I could transmit force better.”

Fabien worked on these things half in the boat and half out of it. In terms of the weight training out of the boat, he worked with heavier weights, “sometimes isometric lifts and sometimes explosive lifts. Sometimes both. Never the same thing, though, always different.”

And in the boat?

“In the boat, I did torso rotations to move the stern, while holding my legs still. So, this was more for building agility than strength.”

Fabien says a lot of this was an attempt to adapt C1 technique to his kayaking (See “Three in a Row Case Study” about the Estanguet brothers elsewhere in this E-Book):

“Yes, that’s true, because when I developed the new boat, I studied the C1s a lot and saw they turned faster than we did. So I asked myself why and I tried to copy them. Sometimes, the shape of the kayak isn’t as good at turning as the shape of a C1 is. So, I tried to evolve my boat to approach the C1 shape but I knew I could never have it exactly like theirs. It’s a mix between C1 technique and what you can do in a kayak. “

One of the prominent features of his new C-1 based technique was the ability Fabien developed for being able to an upstream gate the way a C1 did -- all in one stroke. In order to do this, Fabien also changed the way he used the paddle:

“It’s not there (lower hand) but here (upper hand) that’s important. Because canoes use their hands a lot here (upper hand). I tried to work with that and then redistribute the work load between the lower hand and the upper hand. So, mobility here (upper hand). C1s use that a lot and I tried to do it in K1, too, but it wasn’t always easy.”

As for specific exercises he did to work on this, Fabien just speaks about “warm-ups.”

“You can work on it with a lot of the little K1 warm-up drills. That, and doing a lot of little courses with it. After that, it becomes automatic.”

Fabien says that he learned a lot of this in discussions with Patrice Estanguet (See “Three in a Row” case study) before he stopped racing, and he learned a lot from watching Tony Estanguet and Michal Martikan “who also had an unusual technique:

“But I spoke mostly with Patrice Estanguet. At that time, Tony was very occupied with requests because he had just won the Olympics. So, I saw Patrice more often. We trained together, we talked about it, we shared the same spirit.”

Fabien was also developing the ability to do an upstream gate with just one big sweep stroke -- the entry, negotiation of the gate and the exit were all done with just this one big stroke. Here he talks about how that evolved:

“It was a sort of reflex action. In training I tried a lot to do things like that, really just for fun. And one day I realized it could also be fast. Then, just by doing it more and more, it became a technique that we developed. But it’s not something I want to do all the time. If the situation presents itself, then I’ll do it. So, it’s just according to the sensations of the moment. In general, it’s when I have a position that isn’t so good, say, if I come in a bit too high, then I’ll use it.”

But when you ask Fabien to explain further the considerations that go into executing this technique well, he can’t really do it:

“It's hard to explain because it's a question of feel, a feeling that starts here at the end of your feet and comes up all the way to your hands. It's by dint of training that it becomes natural and I don't really think consciously about how I do it. “

Because of all this emphasis on C1, I asked Fabien if he had ever tried paddling a C1 and he said “Yes, I've done it now and then, when it's hot out.” I then asked whether he thought he could be a good C1 racer:

“Yes, I think so. I've had occasion to do a race or two, just for fun. I had good times but what's tough in C1 is the legs. They have a very particular bracing and I feel it's never like it should be. But I think I could have good technique. But then, physically, my shoulder gets tired very fast because I'm not used to holding my upper arm up for so long!

2001 -- Becomes a Senior

In 2001, Fabien, precocious Junior, now became a Senior and his goal was to “be on the podium” at the Ocoee World Championships. He made the French team, along with Peschier, Billaut and Laurent Burtz. But that Worlds was canceled because of 9/11.

So, instead of the Worlds, Fabien only had World Cup results to show for the year: “Two 5ths, Tacen and Prague, and a 2nd at Wausau,” which got him a creditable 6th in the overall World Cup standings.

In reviewing the season, Fabien says “I had good boat positioning, and few penalties, but I wasn't quite up to Senior level yet.”

Adding Insult to Injury

As if the 9/11 attacks canceling the Worlds in the US weren't enough, when Fabien returned home there was a disaster in Toulouse, too:

“We went back to France. One week after that, a factory exploded next to our house in Toulouse. That was a lot all at the same time. “

2002 -- Worlds At Bourg

In 2002, the World Championships were held at Bourg St. Maurice, Fabien's home country, the perfect place to win his first World Championships, which he did, beating 100 competitors.

Interestingly, however, he didn't go away for winter training to some southern climate and just stayed in France instead.

“I was in Pau in 1999, in Toulouse from 2001 to 2003, then in Pau again in 2004. The reason I left Pau for a while was because it was a training post for younger athletes while Toulouse was the post for French Senior team athletes. But then Pau became the post for the top athletes, so I came back.”

That year “was also when the Optima really came into its own:

"I succeeded in creating a boat that allowed me to do even tighter moves. I could pick up time because the boat turned even faster. So, 2002 was a bit of a turning point."

The Race Itself

Here are Fabien's recollections of racing at Bourg:

"First of all, it was pretty intense because the Worlds were in France. There were a lot of people who had come to see us and I was really excited. I was really happy to be there and wanted to have a good run and put into practice everything I'd worked on during the year, to cross over the finish line and be happy with what I'd done."

Feelings were the most important because everything seemed so easy and it was a real joy to run the river and to do the gates right. It was really all about sensations and emotions.

There were a lot of people who thought that the upstream at the bottom was a really big deal, but at the end of the day, it was just something we all figured out how to do in training. I ended up in good position there and was able to take advantage of it. I did it well and I picked up some time there. There was nothing that was harder than this move on the course."

Fabien also got a bronze medal in the team race that year, along with Renaud Pallud and Benoit Peschier, but he dismisses it:

"We didn't place a lot of importance on team then. We never did it. We never trained for team runs, except for 2005 (when Fabien, Peschier and Billaut won)."

Here's how Fabien recaps that whole season:

"That year I won 2 World Cup races (and thus the overall World Cup title) plus the World Championships. It was kind of the payoff for all the years of training before that. In 2 years, I had succeeded in reaching the goal I had wanted. But now I had to try to stay there and even get better for the Olympics. And in fact, I got better -- but I finished a little lower at the Olympics!"

Training Volume at That Time

"I trained a lot in 2001, 2002, 2003. But it was because of Benoit because he trains so much and he was very strong and we all wanted to be as strong as he was! All 3 of us (Peschier, Billaut and Fabien) were together in Toulouse and we trained together almost every day. And after that period we stopped doing that -- and I was not as good any more. "

Fabien says they were doing "between 10 and 14 workouts a week then" and at a minimum "about 4-5 of them in the boat". Again at a minimum, only "about 25% of these workouts were timed," he says. "But It depended. The closer we got to the big races, the more we did in the boat and the more we did under the watch."

They also did a lot more video work in 2001-3 than Fabien had done in the past. Why hadn't he done more before?

“Because I was young and we had a lot more time to spend on the water than we did to watch videos. After that I started to get a little money. So I bought a computer that I could watch videos on and I used it to watch videos of myself.”

Working With Curinier

Sylvain Curinier was also an important part of the training then:

“He was a good person. We agreed a lot with him because we had more or less the same approach to sport, to kayaking, to slalom that he did. When he considered our ideas, we always arrived at common ground as to what to do to push K1 to a higher level. He was a very open person, open to new ideas. “

Curinier always watched from the bank, never from a boat on the water. And there would often be 6 boats in these workouts: 3 K1s, 2 K1Ws and 1 C1. There was also another coach on the bank with Curinier.

Did Fabien continue to learn from the C1s?

“Yes, all the time. I think the C1s looked at what we were doing that might help them go faster and vice versa. In other words, sometimes the C1s were faster than we were on moves and we tried to understand what we had to do to beat them. And sometimes it was the other way round. We also watched videos of them.”

2003 - First time in Australia

During the winter of 2002-3, Fabien went to train on the Olympic course in Penrith, Australia, for the first time and he spent 5 weeks there. And he got better:

“But the others did, too. It's a great slalom stadium for training. You can easily learn things and work on technique and physical fitness. At Penrith, you only think about training. There isn't anything else to do there and that's really positive. “

Keeping his Position

With the 2003 Worlds in Augsburg, which was also an Olympic qualifying race for the Olympics, the main thing on Fabien's mind was thinking about the difference between being a champion compared to being a challenger:

“I'd reached a new status as World Champion in '02 and now I had to keep the title. And in order to do that I had to keep getting better. That was hard. Because when you're not number one, you try to do everything to get there, but once you get there, what do you do? It's a different situation.”

Working on technique on the slalom course wasn't the only thing he did in Australia. “I also did a lot of physical fitness because that wasn't my best quality. So I worked a lot on that.” He did this both in the boat and out of it, as weight training.

I had heard from various sources, though, that Fabien did most of his training in the boat, so I asked him how this squared with doing a lot of out-of-the boat training in Australia. “It just

depends on the year,” he replied, “and where we are within a year, or on whether it’s cold or hot out, whether I want to be on the water or not!”

I also asked him whether he did other sports for cross-training, cross-country skiing, for instance, the way some French athletes (like Tony Estanguet and Benoit Peschier) do. “ From time to time, I do,” he said, but not a lot. There were periods where I did a lot of running but now I bike. It changes all the time.”

Long Season

In describing the 2003 season, Fabien says “It was very long. I liked doing the races but the whole season, it was too long.”

Before the World Championships, there were the World Cup races and Fabien got 5th place in the overall rankings, while teammate Julien Billaut got 2nd (to Canada’s David Ford).

The Augsburg Worlds

“It was a hard course. In addition, there was a lot of emotion because there were a lot people right next to you, all along the whole course. It was inspirational.

The gates were hard and from the start to the finish, you really had to go for it. Bourg Saint Maurice and Augsburg are at 2 extreme ends of the spectrum, 2 opposites. So, it was different but it was important for me to show that I could be strong on both artificial courses and natural ones. “

I asked Fabien in what ways does he felt artificial courses are different from natural rivers and his answer came as a bit of a surprise:

“The temperature of the water, it's important: natural rivers are colder. Secondly, the current lines go all over the place at Bourg Saint Maurice but in artificial courses the water goes slower and the current lines are more defined and we can use them better.

On an artificial course, because the water goes slower, we tend to be able to anticipate what's going to happen while on a natural course, you have to adapt more instantly to the moment. It's a different management of time.

In natural courses, when you have one wave after another after another then sometimes you have trouble seeing -- “where am I going?” But it's not a problem on artificial courses.”

Does he mean, then, that artificial courses are less complicated?

“No. Not less complicated. But more pleasant because on natural courses, when the water takes you, you're gone. But on an artificial course, you can use the current lines better. It's a different timing. Yes, an artificial course can be more risky because there are water formations that fluctuate in height more but you can use them better. On a natural course, there are fewer variations but there can be a lot more power to deal with.”

So which does he prefer, artificial or natural?

“Artificial, I think, but here in France we only have natural courses! (Note: the French are going to build an artificial course in Pau.)”

Qualifying for the Olympics at Augsburg

The Augsburg Worlds in 2003 drew competitors from 75 nations, by far the most ever (Penrith in 2005 was next biggest, with 50 nations). Not only did Fabien win his second individual World Championships there (out of a record 144 kayaks), he also won selection to the Olympics the next year because the French preselected reigning World Champions for the Olympic team. Julien Billaut narrowly missed a medal himself, coming in 5th.

Preparing for the Athens Olympics

After the 2003 season, Fabien went back to Australia for 3 weeks winter training with the French team. Then he came home alone, while the rest of the team stayed longer. He speaks of both the physical and technical work he did during this time:

“Because I had a new boat I was working on technique. And in the middle of winter I worked just as hard on physical training. “

This new boat was called the “Synapse:”

“It was made for salt water, a lot smaller in the stern to turn even better. In salt water, the boat sits more on top of the water. So it's harder to get the stern down under the water so you need a thinner stern.”

Prior to the Olympics, Fabien entered 2 World Cup races and won them both. But he didn't do the final one because he wanted to focus on the Olympics, and thus he came in only 5th in the overall World Cup rankings that year.

Before the Olympics, Fabien had 3 training camps on the Athens course, staying between 2 and 3 weeks each time.

So, coming into the Olympics everyone rated Fabien Lefevre the favorite once again, the man to beat. And he says “I felt good and I was happy to be there.”

But he didn't win. His teammate Benoit Peschier did (See Peschier case study) -- after not having even been on the French Senior team the year before. Fabien got the bronze. What happened?

“I was 2 times 1st and then 3rd during the Games (first on the qualifying heats and then in the semifinal; third after the final). I think it was more a question of desire and motivation rather than technique or physical abilities. Because I think I was really well trained.

It was a question of investment in the Olympic Games. It was something emotional, I think, because I had a lot of sensations and feelings during those Games.

It's true that I'd lived through some tough times in 2002 and 2003 with the World Championships and I knew because of the TV coverage the Games were going to be even more intense than that.

But still I wasn't ready for what happened. On the final run, the venue was such that there weren't a lot of spectators on the top part of the course but I had expected more of them.

Then at an emotional level, it was hard to come back in the main Olympic course where all the people were. Maybe it was just a question of not anticipating the spectators' reaction. In essence, I was not sure enough of myself. So, I went slower than usual. I was more in a normal rhythm and not in a rhythm that would really take me to the top. I was not in a winning mode, but more in a standard mode. “

Did he understand what was happening to him at the time and attempt to do something about it during the run?

“Yes. I understood quickly the cause of the emotional state that was preventing me from doing my best. So, I worked quickly to recover but it was too hard. I think I trained well during the year but then with respect to my motivation during the Games, I had a hard time maximizing that. Because in training I really had searched my physical, psychic and psychological abilities and that had tired me out. “

When I heard this I asked Fabien whether he worked with a sports psychologist, the way a number of top athletes did, and he said no. So I asked why not:

“Because I think you know deep inside all the answers to the questions you'd ask yourself and you have in yourself the keys to success or failure. It's up to you to orient your energies so you can be yourself at the right time and to be at your best then.”

He went further in relating this to his studies in university:

“I studied biology. I passed the baccalaureate in France when I was 18. After the bac, I did 3 years in a sports university. So, there you do sports psychology as well as biology. Then, after the Olympics, I read a lot of books about personal inquiry to understand myself better and to put that knowledge into practice. That's why I say that to go for the title, you have to struggle against the competition but you also struggle against yourself.”

Meets His Future Wife

Fabien Lefevre may not have won the Olympics at Athens, but he did win a wife!

“When Benoit won and I was third, all the journalists wanted to talk to him, so I was freer to talk with other people. One of them was a woman named Audry who I met there at the Olympics. So, you could say that if I'd won the Olympics I might not have ever met her and married her. “

Audry has been a model with the professional name of “Aspa.” She and Fabien got married on February 11, 2006, in Pau, just before Fabien left for a training camp in Seu d'Urgell with the French team. (By the way, to see what the French team did in the training camp, look at Appendix 2 to this study)

Preparing for 2005 Worlds

During the winter of 2004-2005, Fabien went to New Zealand, and Australia for the 3rd time.

He then won the silver medal in the individual competition at the World Championships in Penrith. Since his teammates also got 5th (Peschier) and 8th (Billaut) it wasn't exactly a surprise when they all got a gold medal (for the first time) in the team race.

"The whole year, I evolved and tried to apply what I had learned to my sport. And it worked because I succeeded in doing what I wanted to at the moment. I was 2nd in the 2005 World Championships. I was happy with that because I think in the year after the Olympics, there are a lot of athletes who didn't do the Olympics who really have a lot of desire. (Note: The winner was Germany's Fabian Doerfler, who also won the World Cup that year but hadn't made the German team for the 2004 Olympics.)

Going Commercial

In the spring of 2006, Fabian did what I don't believe any other top paddler has ever done, he launched a personal line of 8 face and hand creams called, "Paddler."

But in many respects, this is not terribly surprising for a man who's married to a model and who says on his official bio that he loves:

"watching movies and the cinema in general. Everything to do with fashion (clothes, photographs...) classic or fad, going to stores. Seeing people succeed whether it be in sports or elsewhere, that motivates me a lot and helps me to overcome difficult times. To relax the atmosphere, to lead to a good mood and enthusiasm..."

From his website about the skin care products at www.paddler.fr, he says:

"Performances at a very high level for your skin

Paddler is a line of care products developed in collaboration with a cosmetic laboratory."

And on another page:

"Fabien Lefevre

Being a World Champion or an Olympic medalist requires a high level of effort. You get these results through hours daily training on the water.

Despite being exposed to extreme weather conditions (wind, sun, water, cold...) you want to look like a young man of your time, concerned about your image and your well-being. That's why, because of the daily needs of my skin, I've developed with a cosmetics doctor: the K-ONE LINE."

2006 Worlds

In the 2006 World Championships, Fabien didn't win a medal in the individual competition -- his teammate Julien Billaut did (silver) -- but he did win a gold in the team race, so he was World Champion once again.

But he told me something else even more interesting: he and Audry were expecting a baby and they already knew it would be a boy and they've already named him Noe. He also told me that he is a landlord; he owns an apartment building and rents apartments in it.

"It's all part of the "fantastic life!"

Appendix 1 -- The French System

As you read the case studies on Patrice and Tony Estanguet, on Benoit Peschier, and this one on Fabien Lefevre, you see how over and over again the French have an impressive support system, with lots of athletes, lots of coaches, and lots of organization.

Here are a few notes about that.

- * The Federation Française de Canoe-Kayak FFCK (www.ffcanoe.asso.fr) has 30,000 members, about 3,000 in slalom.

- * It also has more than 700 clubs. But it's impossible to say that a certain number of these clubs are just for slalom, because technically each club has athletes in all the different disciplines. But it is also true that from time to time many of them wind up specializing in one discipline or the other. Most of the clubs have a coach, too, paid for by the local government.

- * The FFCK has a 6.2 million Euro budget, a 40% increase from 1996. 39% of this budget (2.4 million Euros) goes to high performance sport in 5 disciplines—Flatwater Racing, Slalom Racing, Wildwater Racing, Kayak Polo and Marathon Racing. And The FFCK estimates that it spends roughly 30,000 Euros of this on each of its elite athletes annually.

- * Electricité de France (EDF) has been a partner with the FFCK since 1993. Besides being in the electricity-generating business, they also design slalom courses, such as the ones used for the Sydney and Athens Olympics and the one now being designed for the Beijing Olympics. Fabien Lefevre and Frank Adisson (former French C2 champion) have been FFCK liaisons to EDF.

- * While the FFCK gets money from the Ministry of Jeunesse, des Sports et de la Vie Associative, it also has links with another ministry, Ecologie et du Developpement Durable.

French Training Plan

The FFCK has a training manual that it gives to all its elite coaches. It gets updated from time to time. Although the manual does not lay out specific workouts for the year, it does offer some fairly specific guidelines for periodizing the year that the coaches can use in constructing workouts.

The assumption is that these coaches have been sufficiently trained in exercise physiology and sports training in general to know how to translate these principles into specific workouts. In this way, the whole coaching establishment is working off the same page around the country, but there is a certain amount of room for creativity in constructing specific workouts. Some of the highlights from the 2006 manual follow:

I - Periods of the year	Objective
Nov 1-13	Starting the new year
Nov 14-Dec 11	Aerobic 1
Dec 12-Jan 15	Power
Jan 16-Feb 5	Aerobic 2
Feb 6-26	Technique 1
Feb 27-Mar 5	Recovery 1

Mar 6-26	Preparation For Competition 1
Mar 27- Apr 9	Individual Strategy
Apr 10-May 7	Final Preparation 1
May 8-14	Recovery 2
Amy 15-Jun 4	Preparation of Specific Course 1
Jun 5- 18	Aerobic 3
Jun 19-Jul 2	Preparation of Specific Course 2
Jul 3-9	Technique
Jul 10-13	Recovery
Jul 14-23	Preparation For Competition 2
Jul 24-26	Recovery 4
Jul 27-Aug 7	Final Preparation 2

Ratio of Boat Training

The following table shows the number of workouts the manual recommends for certain periods of the year, along with both the number of workouts in the boat and out of the boat (mostly weight lifting):

Period	No of Workouts	In Boat	Out of Boat	Ratio
Nov 12-Jan 8	60	36	24	60-40
Jan 23- Feb 3	34	20	14	59-41
Feb 6 -24	38	29	9	76-24
Mar 6-Apr 9	32	23	9	72-28
Apr 10 - May 14	40	32	8	80-20
May 15-Jun 4	36	29	7	81-19
Jun 5 - 17	20	12	8	60-40
Jun 19-Jul 2	19	16	3	84-16
Jul 3 - 23	24	24	0	100
Jul 24 - Aug 6	13	13	0	100
TOTALS	316	234	82	74-26

Appendix 2 -French Training Camp at Seu D'Urgell, Feb 13-24

Mon		AM Arrive	15:30-17:00 Free session
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Tue		10:30-12 Short courses	15:30 - 17:00 Technique
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Wed	9:00 Jogging	10:00-12:00 Free session individual choice	15:00-17:00 Weightlifting
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Thr		10:00-11:00 Loops In-3	Off
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Fri	9:00 - 12:00 X-country or Alpine Skiing		14:00-17:00 Thalasso
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Sat	9:00 Jogging	11:00-13:00 Full length courses	16:00 Loops In-1 on Flatwater
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Sun		10:00-12:00 Weightlifting	15:00-16:30 Short courses 1/4 of course
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Mon		10:00-11:30 Technique	15:30 Loops In-1
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Tue		Free day for athletes; coaches meeting	
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Wed		10:00-12:00 Free session Individual choice	16:00-17:30 In-2
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Thr	9:00 Jogging	10:00-11:30 Technique	15:00-17:30 Weightlifting
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Fri		10:00-11:30 Short courses	
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Summary:

Short courses.....3/22 (14%)
 Weightlifting.....3/22 (14%)
 Free session on course.....3/22 (14%)
 Technique.....3/22 (14%)
 Loops.....4/22 (18%)

Jogging.....	3/22 (14%)
Full lengths.....	1/22 (4%)
Skiing.....	1/22(4%)
Thalasso.....	1 (4%)
Total.....	22 (100%)