

June 10, 2005

New U.S. slalom coach returns in time for Whitewater Senior Time Trials

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JERRY McBRIDE / Herald

Coach Cathy Hearn picks a front row seat as she watches Wil Lokken work his way through the gates at Smelter Rapid during practice on June 2. Lokken is one of the younger boaters out of a field of 60 who will be racing for a spot on the U.S. senior slalom team in trials that begin today. Other locals competing include Maria Kallman, John Gerstenberger, Mary Marshall Seaver, Rogan Brown, Sarah Kunz, Kier Samuelson and Lucas Palko-Schraa.

Cathy Hearn is right at home kneeling on a rock at the edge of the Animas River.

In the cool early morning shadow, she holds a clipboard and a watch in one hand. With the other hand she gestures to five shivering boaters gathered around her in dripping paddle jackets and spray skirts, raising her voice over the roar of the river as she doles out pointers and advice.

And all the while, she keeps one eye and the stopwatch on another boater working her way through the gates on the river.

Hearn, who was hired this spring as the new U.S. national whitewater slalom canoe coach, is happy to be home in Durango after coaching the Italian national team for two years.

But with the U.S. Whitewater Senior Trials scheduled to open on Friday, she hasn't seen much of town outside of the stretch of river flowing through Santa Rita Park.

"It's good to be back in Durango. Good to be back in my own country," she said after presiding over a race simulation practice with 28 boaters on Tuesday morning. "I've always wanted to work to continue the American tradition of excellence in whitewater."

Coaching has been a natural next step for Hearn, who moved to Durango in 2001 with her husband Heinz Roethenmund when she retired from a prolific paddling career. An Olympic performer in 1992 and 1996, Hearn was a three-time World Champion in women's kayak, and won 12 World Championship medals over a period of 21 years. With national titles in all three disciplines - slalom, sprint and wildwater - in both kayak and canoe, Hearn brings a lifetime of competitive experience to her new position.



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Cathy Hearn enlists the help of Durango kayaker John Gerstenberger to help track times during whitewater practice on the Animas River on June 2. Coach of the Italian national team for two years, Hearn has returned home to Durango as a national-level U.S. slalom coach.

"I've actually been coaching since 1975, so I've been coaching throughout my career," she said. "Italy was great. They have a high level program and a great team of athletes and coaches and support staff. I have no complaints at all about coaching there.

"But Italy is different; they have an election within their sports federations every four years. The politics changed, and the support staff I had been working with was going to change. When the Americans got it together and offered me a job, I decided to come back."

Hearn brings her skills to a canoe program that has been somewhat neglected in recent years, and she also brings a set of effective coaching philosophies that can be applied to canoeists and kayakers alike.

"I use the Feldenkrais method," Hearn said, referring to a form of somatic education that uses gentle movement and directed attention to enhance human movement and functioning. Originated by the late Moshe Feldenkrais over many years, the method has gained acceptance as a tool to help people recover from injury and cope with chronic pain.

"I use it differently as a coach. I use it with healthy athletes to help them relearn or repair all of their potential movement patterns."

The benefit, Hearn explained, lies in helping her athletes become more responsive and effective in their movements on the water.

"We get used to doing things the same way, like leading with the same foot going up stairs. That bias leads us to always doing it the same way. Just doing it the opposite way will cause the nervous system to burn new pathways, and that's great for slalom. You need to read the water and react differently depending on the conditions and your orientation in space."

Hearn, a certified Feldenkrais practitioner, added that by extending a boater's awareness to the whole body, and not just the upper body, she has seen some radical improvements

in performance.

"It's made a big difference in my technical coaching," she said, pointing at a group of kayakers working their way through three gates on the Smelter course. "I can see it from here. If a boater is having a hard time crossing, for example, that makes me ask, 'What is he doing with the lower body?'"

"It's not just a matter of paddling or upper body strength. It can be easy, or it can turn into a gruesome struggle."

Another of Hearn's coaching abilities is her penchant for helping athletes to help themselves.

"Cathy has a very unique coaching perspective," said Durango kayaker John Gerstenberger, a junior boater who will be competing for a spot on the senior squad this weekend. "I've always thought of it as a Socratic method applied to kayaking. She lets the kayaker figure out how to do something without telling him how to do it."

Hearn acknowledges that assessment, insisting that "the athletes are the best experts on themselves, although sometimes it can be hard to convince them of that."

With an eye honed by years of competition and coaching, however, Hearn can also be quick to spot a problem with technique. That ability earned her the respect of one existing U.S. team member before she was hired as national-level coach.

"As part of the hiring process, Cathy came in for a coaching session with the team," said Brett Heyl, who competed with the U.S. team in the Athens Olympics. "The thing I was impressed by was, even though she'd been coaching in Italy, she came to that session and said, 'I've been watching you for the past three years, and you need to do this.' She knew who we were and what we needed to do. Most of the other coaches had nothing to add."

While she's focused on the upcoming competition, Hearn is looking forward to working with many of the Durango-based boaters who will be vying for a spot on the senior squad on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. So far, she's particularly impressed with some of the younger ones.

"Some of these boaters are just wonderfully mature athletes and performers," she said. "There's no reason we can't be producing home-grown whitewater champions in this town. We have everything we need right here."