

## Colorado High School Cup Race Series--A Regional Development and Race Program Model that Works

By Denny Adams

(Without attempting to write an in-depth manual on how to start and manage a regional development and race program I will try to briefly offer what has worked in Colorado. The Colorado High School Cup (CHSC) series is a broad based racing program that is notable for being good at promoting junior level wildwater. Since 2003, my first year with this sport, Colorado has placed 29 kids on Jr. US Wildwater teams competing in Jr. Worlds competition. Of those all but 2 of the 29 gained their wildwater racing skills and attained their experience primarily through the CHSC series. In an era where junior racing programs seem to be struggling, with wildwater programs being particularly barren, this program's success and sustainability has been exemplar. For others interested in the future of our sport this piece, though a bit long, is hopefully worthy of taking the few extra minutes it will take to read.)

This spring, our forty or so whitewater racers in Colorado have enjoyed the opportunity to prepare for the summer race season with a series of four spring races. While known officially as the Colorado High School Cup Series (CHSC), it is important to emphasize that the races have always been inclusive of all age divisions: seniors, masters, and geezer included. In recent years we have also seen significant growth at the cadet and cub cadet levels. For all of its inclusiveness, the program is young in spirit (as in with 50's and 60's types showing up wearing surf jams) and is aimed at developing future paddlers and racers.

The broader program is development driven and features off season and early season race camps and clinics during the training day (the Friday before the races) at several of the race weekends. The four weekend Spring race series begins in April and offers awards for the individual races and also a series award, the Rivermeister and River Meisterin awards that are determined by having the most points earned in all three paddling disciplines—wildwater, slalom, and freestyle—competed for over the course of series.

When the camps and weekends are tallied at season's end, our racers' enjoyed twenty two days of organized training and racing this spring. Eleven of these days were focused on wildwater—this is in addition to the ongoing team and individual training they did on their own. Success in the spring can lead on to having more organized trips to summer events such as FIBArk, to the National Team Trials, and to International Competition where these higher level athletes can up to double that number of days in the sport. Between these organized events and included with disciplined day to day practice it is possible for racers with a few years of relatively low cost race training to gain the motivation and skills needed to begin to compete against the relatively few kids who are on the elite levels of US whitewater competition.

It is important to point out that while racing success is an important component of our program it is not the end all. Most of the parents that I know are happy to have their kids learning a high level of paddling skills and safe paddling habits at a young age. Parents and teachers also greatly value the self reliance, the ability to think abstractly, and the social skills and confidence that broader program instills in our kids. These benefits can be profound and result in large part from the quality that the program places real demands upon the participants that in turn can result in real changes. At the same time our kids are clearly with us because this sport is challenging, fun, and meaningful for them. It is a "personal identifier" type experience for them that changes how they think and act and even how they see life.

The CHSC series is comprised of elements that are very basic and which can be found separately in other successful sports programs including other paddling programs in the US and abroad. The success of the CHSC series is not so much a matter of having a magic formula as it is one of execution, of having prime movers with-in the program that are motivated and committed toward doing what needs to be done to make things work. The following are key components of the Colorado High School Cup Race Series, free to all to consider when thinking about starting or reorganizing a regional program yourselves.

1. The Colorado Cup Spring Program is primarily a USACK based program. Our racers are either USACK members, or if not they participate as event members. This allows for liability insurance at our races and the camps. Most of our racers are sponsored and run by a USACK Affiliated Club which empowers (again through insurance coverage) each club to be able to conduct the races and camps and most essentially it allows us to hold ongoing team practices so that we can have active clubs. USACK Club insurance allows ongoing practices to be covered without having to report each practice separately as a separate club event each with an enclosed roster of who attended that practice. USACK insurance also covers on the water mentor from club coaches to visiting senior level USACK racers who may give clinics or even simply show up to train with a team at a club practice or a sponsored event. From a race organizer perspective, I can relax easier when USACK Clubs with USACK members show up at a race venue for a race a day early to practice on their own than I can when non-members

are at a race venue doing the same. Each of these circumstances constitutes a gray area in the domain of race management, race club, and individual racer insurance coverage. They are not realities that come into play in my recreational paddling club program that is operated under the other major national governing organization's club affiliation program using the same insurance provider. For clubs and volunteers who are conducting ongoing practices and running our own races the USACK model is the most race world friendly and is by far the least demanding in terms of ongoing paperwork and management.

For those unfamiliar with what is involved to be a USACK affiliate club, a ten member club would pay \$150 for the affiliation which along with \$25 for USACK individual memberships (for those under 18 years old) would mean a yearly dues of about \$40 dollars each for full coverage for the clubs. Adult racer membership in USACK is higher, so the combined cost is \$70 a racer. This may seem expensive, but when looking at the imperfect nature of our race management world, what is covered it is a true bargain. More information can be found on [USACK.org](http://USACK.org).

2. The CHSC program's races are geographically spread out around the State with each club/paddling area hosting a series races at least once. Spreading out the races geographically and sharing the race organization workload gives a larger and more diverse body of adults a turn at doing race work and lessens the amount of burn-out and attrition. When our organizers and volunteers need to back off for a period of time or even when they leave the sport or move away from the region, they are missed and adjustments have to be made. It is not catastrophic though. This has happened a few times here at the club level and yet the larger program is still running strong because new folks and new groups of racers have stepped forward. In other regions, junior paddling programs have all but fallen off of the map because a key irreplaceable person has moved on.

Spreading the race venues out is good for the kids' preparation. They get to both race at a variety of venues and also have an experience of being one of the host area racers as well. Some will note that not all clubs have local whitewater suitable for a major race. That is true as well in Colorado and it is notable that some of our races are hosted at neutral sites by clubs that do not live local to the race site.

3. The program has greatly benefitted by a prolonged effort made by our clubs and individual racers to acquire race boats, and in particular wildwater race boats, and other requisite equipment for our sport. Acquiring the relative bounty that some of our individual teams have has taken decades and a lot of donations, countless hours of repairs, and a serious financial commitment to addressing the need for boats. At a club racer level being able to take advantage of our fleet requires a level of humility and a willingness to do the extra work that it takes to paddle a wildwater boat. It is a privilege that is earned and one that has increasingly been available for independent racers and racers from clubs without sufficient boats. The reality is that even when we have boats for our racers, developing wildwater racers (and slalom racers and freestyle paddlers) is a very demanding process that requires time, patience, and commitment from our athletes. Many people seem to believe that the primary challenge for developing paddlers is acquiring equipment and all you need is someone who is solid in a slalom boat or rec boat and who can instantly take a few thousand dollars, or even a few hundred dollars, to get a glass wildwater boat and be an instant contender. Those of us that have the equipment and have tried this approach know that it is a lot easier to find and buy boats than it is to find someone willing to do the work it takes to master one.
4. Our individual race organization is generally a team effort. Because most know what it is like to conduct a race themselves, our team leaders (coaches and extra supportive racer parents) are very good about supporting our host area organizers by assisting with safety and helping with things like timing or starting. Similarly, our parents have done a superb job with general support including cheering during the races, taking photos, running shuttles and with helping with the non-racing aspects of holding a race such as home stays for the visiting athletes, organizing group meals, and in generally helping look out for the social well being of the event. If one element of our program stands out more than anything else to me it is how smooth this team approach can be. Sometimes it is so automatic and low-key, reflexive even; that newcomers and outsiders have little or no appreciation of the self-organization that is in place.

5. Our races are multi-discipline weekend events that try to have not just a wildwater/downriver event but also a slalom and even a freestyle event too. This is challenging to pull off at times but the reasoning for it is simple-- offering multiple disciplines develops better rounded athletes. Some of our teams travel up to 7 or 8 hours to make it to a venue. With that much travel time, it makes little sense to do just one event, get it over with, and then turn around and go home. Even a two part (classic and sprint) full wildwater weekend is hard to justify if doing the one discipline were all that we did. Sometimes we cannot do all three events easily or at all. That could be from low water, lack of the necessary features for an event, or weather. It may also happen when our events also host a team trials which demands extra time for that discipline (usually wildwater). Sometimes we substitute clinics and offer more training opportunities or even high quality recreational runs. The common element of all of our race weekends is that they are typically very full events. Teens especially do well with this approach.
6. A key ingredient of the program is to seek to be as inclusive of entry level , emerging paddlers , and developing racers as we can. We currently have events with around 30 or more participants. We could increase our standards to better serve our highest level athletes but that would drop the number of participants down significantly. We could also justify making our events friendlier for our entry and emerging level athletes at a cost of leaving out the more advanced (but not yet elite) racers. What has worked best for us is a balance that allows for athletes at each end of the talent spectrum to have a place in our events. Our newer racers sometimes need a season of practice before getting to race. Increasingly we have more and more entry level racers with skills that match those of our more advanced racers in the past.
7. There is a very important social component to the events of our program. An unappreciated form of this takes place with the bonding that occurs on the long drives to our races. Managing gear and loading trailers or car tops is another social domain. Social development continues with the cooperation and interaction of the racers with each other and the race officials. When off of the water, the racers will interact informally while watching teammates and competitors with new friends from other areas. The process continues with teams and independent athletes eating out together at restaurants or having event BBQ's or pizza and movie nights and ultimately sharing lodging. I have served as a chaperone for school groups that have a lock in—the kids stay up all night. With the racers, the kids are extremely tired, the boundaries are understood, the kids are so protective of each other and the routines are so well engrained that the experience of lodging is more as a family would have—sometimes a very large family. The greatest fear is doing something that would put their racing trips at risk.

Sometimes the lodging aspect is humble and has meant camping on the grounds or on the gym floor of one the schools. A very memorable occasion for the team my kids are in was playing an inter school game of Sardines (a hiding game) in the main building at one of our schools where all the rooms and closets were unlocked and where all the lights were off. On another occasion they enjoyed a very serious dodge ball night with the boaters taking on the boarding students. At other times it may be having home stays where groups of racers from the visiting team are boarded at one of the host racer's home or even at the home of a local who used to race and who remembers being hosted in their race days. In recent years several teams have shared a guest home offered by one of the parents which was very cool. This spring, our wildwater camp had a six day group camp (as in camping out) on the Colorado River over in Utah. Whatever the meal arrangements and accommodations are, staying overnight for a racing event or a camp is always deeply meaningful and fun for the racers. In short the racing community serves as an extended family. As much as for the racing and more so than the T-shirts and awards this family aspect of the sport is a part of a race program that is not forgotten.

The CHSC series has done more for wildwater in Colorado than giving a group of young racers the experience of a lifetime and more than serving as a race series for our older racers. We typically get a group of local veteran racers to show up to each of our races. They do not travel as often as the kids. It as well has revitalized wildwater racing at our summer, ACA based paddling festivals. With FIBArk, the Lyons Outdoor Festival, the Golden Outdoors festival, the TEVA Games, the Animas River Festival, the Ridgeway River Festival, the Gunnison River Festival and the Junior Olympics for Whitewater, Colorado offers eight additional days of wildwater racing. Ten short years ago the summer offerings for

wildwater were simpler—FIBArk and the Animas River Festival. Between the spring and summer offerings we will have 14 days of racing available for Colorado Wildwater Racers. The increase in summer wildwater/downriver events is related in part to the success of our spring series.

The most important of our components and accomplishments is that we have a great group of athletes and volunteers that enjoy their racing and who are happy and accomplished in their non racing lives as well. In encouraging others, I cannot overstate that the Colorado program has taken many years to get to where it is today. It is also very much a work that is still in progress. The getting to where we are has been meaningful and enjoyable. Here is some more information:

The CHSC Series Founders, Fearless Leaders, Driving Spirits, CEOs: Nate Lord, Alexander Dawson School Canoe & Kayak Team and Peter Benedict of the Colorado Rocky Mtn. School. As Nate and Peter are both very humble folk and are both still very much alive, I will spare all the toastmaster type introduction that these two deserve. What is important to understand is they come from extremely divergent paddling backgrounds, each broad and accomplished but in different ways.

Other CHSC coaches and programs include but are not limited to: Nic Borst and Cathy Hearn, Durango; Russ Huff and Scott Shipley, Lyons Whitewater (a new and young club as in with a lot of cadets) ; Allie Gober, Salida (starting FIBArk's youth program with a group of elementary aged paddlers); Denny Adams, Great Blue Heron Canoe and Kayak, Grand Junction; Ian Wolfe, Perin Pring, Spencer Lacy, assistant coaches for Dawson (and each a former CHSC racer); Lisa Adams and Cody Beach, summer coaches for Dawson;

The Clubs: Alexander Dawson Canoe/Kayak Team, LaFayette Colorado (open to other school's students); Colorado Rocky Mountain School Whitewater Program, Carbondale, Colorado (open to other school's students); Durango Whitewater (USACK Club and Center of Excellence); Lyons Whitewater Club, Lyons, Colorado; FIBArk Racing Club, Salida, Colorado; Great Blue Heron Canoe & Kayak Club, Grand Junction, Colorado.

The CHSC Races –2012:

Durango Whitewater Weekend, Animas River in Durango, Durango Whitewater, Nic Borst Race Director;

The Glenwood Wildwater Jubilee, Great Blue Herons, Denny Adams Race Director-wildwater; CRMS coach Peter Benedict, Freestyle Director; Lyon Whitewater , Russ Huff and Scott Shipley, Advanced Slalom

Salida "Runoff Races", FIBArk Racing Club, Allie Gober Race Director

Golden High School Cup Championships (open to all ages), Clear Creek Whitewater Park in Golden, Nate Lord Race Director, Alexander Dawson School Canoe & Kayak Team

Ongoing open informal slalom racing (typically Friday after school when no other event is going), Lyons Whitewater, Russ Huff