

**A Short History of Winter Pool Sessions  
by the Penn State Outing Club Canoe Division  
Appendix: PSOC National Champions and U.S. Team Members**

**The Beginning – Glennland Building and The Nat**

PSOC pool sessions for indoor winter paddling and Eskimo rolling practice were first held in a small swimming pool at the Glennland Building on Beaver Ave. These sessions began in mid-1960s and were terminated following construction of the PSU Natatorium in 1969. The Glennland pool was also used by the PSU men's swimming team and the general public. Pool remnants can be seen in the Glennland basement, which now houses medical offices; see <https://centrehistory.org/article/glennland-building/>

McCoy Natatorium – aka “The Nat” – opened in 1969. Ernie McCoy was Director of Athletics (1952-70) and Dean of the College of Health, Physical Education and Recreation. The backstory – perhaps apocryphal -- is the University requested funding for a swimming pool but was turned down by the state legislature as an unnecessary expense. The head of general services told McCoy that the next budgetary request should be for a “natatorium” since few legislators would know what that was. It worked! See <https://gopsusports.com/sports/2018/8/8/facilities-mccoy-natatorium-html.aspx>

**Pool Sessions in the 1970s and the Annual Indoor Pool Slalom**

Winter pool sessions were held in the Nat on Sunday mornings beginning in 1969 and ending about 1995. Given the Nat was new, special care was used in launching of boats and maneuvering in the pool. Seal launches (!) and crashing into the side of the pool were verboten. As described below there also were Tuesday and Thursday night slalom practices from 10pm-12am, beginning about 1980 and ending in the mid-1990s.

The Nat has two pools – a smaller practice pool and the larger competition pool. There also is a diving tank with underwater windows. PSOC used both pools, but rolling practice was mostly confined to the swallower practice pool. A single gate was set up in the competition pool and used for English gate practice. Boats and other club equipment were stored in the basement hold. Descending into the Nat hold was always an adventure. That space was shared with the scuba club, among several other groups. Even a small iceboat was stored in the hold for a period. Instructional videos by Russ Nichols showing Eskimo rolling in the Nat's diving tank are at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b\\_IGG\\_tOs5k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_IGG_tOs5k) and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pktZB6\\_30HA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pktZB6_30HA)

The English gate was the invention of paddlers in Great Britain, where it is known as the “wiggle test.” According to the UK newsletter *Whitewater* (Winter 1960), the wiggle test was introduced by Jack Spuhler (Chalfont Park Canoe Club), and used to compare times across paddlers, boats, and clubs. There was a suggestion that two gates be used, but this never materialized. The first U.S. article describing the gate sequence was in the Autumn 1962 edition of *American White Water*, “Test Your Slalom Skill in Still Water” by George Siposs. See also “English-Gating at Dartmouth” by Jay Evans, *American White Water*, Autumn 1964. A video of English gate practice at the Nat – with John Sweet and John Burton – is at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiXoC2kzreg&t=4s>

Beginning in 1972, three- and four-gate slalom courses were set-up in the practice pool and timed runs were made from 1973 to about 1979. Five-gate courses were developed about 1980. Course maps for these set-ups have been preserved for posterity by Jon Nelson.

The first PSOC indoor pool slalom was held in 1966 and continued annually to about 1993. Five gates were set-up in the Nat competition pool, with multiple passes through each gate for a complete course of about 13 gates. Two 360 degree rolls were required and there was a 50 second penalty for flagrantly hitting the side of the pool. These races were always hotly contested and sometimes featured top paddlers from other clubs, such as CCA's Dan Isbister and Jon Lugbill; see these paddlers in the 1977 pool slalom at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fo9miYh9qCE> The 6th annual pool slalom in 1973 had 82 boats from nine canoe clubs. The 24th annual slalom in 1989 had only 31 boats, with the K-1 class won by Brad Nelson, K-1W by Barb McKee, and C-1 by John Sweet. A two-part video of the 1971 pool slalom is at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-7lfwCIOHs>

### **Pool Sessions in the 1980s & 1990s and the End of Public Sessions**

Beginning about 1980, evening slalom workouts were added to the Winter schedule. Holes were drilled in the support pillars along the sides of the practice pool to facilitate gate hanging. Five gates were hung, with multiple passes through each gate for about 10 gates total, including reverse gates. Intense timed workouts were held with attendance limited to more serious slalom paddlers. Usually there were about 8-10 paddlers in decked canoes or kayaks.

Following John Sweet's departure from the State College in 1988, there was a noticeable decline in winter paddling activity. As indicated above, the pool slalom ended about 1993. Evening slalom workouts ended about the same time. Only a few paddlers continued to come to the night sessions and the last one was in 1993 or 1994. The Sunday sessions continued but were largely devoted to rolling practice. These sessions ended about 1996.

In 1997, the U.S. Canoe and Kayak Team (USCKT) sponsored a Pool Slalom National Championship, using a standard five-gate set-up. Multiple passes through each gate resulted in a course with 20 gates total. There also was an English Gate competition, but this attracted only a few entrants. Times were recorded for race boats, plastic rec boats, and open canoes. The 2001 USCKT event featured 103 race boats, 146 plastic boats, and 30 open canoes. Ten clubs were represented and PSOC had class wins by Brad Nelson in K-1 Race Senior and Jon Nelson in K-1 Race Master and K-1 Rec Master. The national competitions continued annually to 2009, although PSOC did not participate every year. The fastest time for the USCKT course was set in 1998 by CCA's Eric Jackson at 81.9 seconds; see <https://www.daveyhearn.com/>

After 2009, no further indoor slalom races were held by PSOC. The indoor pool sessions always attracted participants from the Centre County paddling community as well as PSU students and employees. The Jerry Sandusky affair in 2011 led to changes with respect to use of University property, and outsider use was restricted. The Canoe Division activities were always somewhat separate from the main club, but paddling activity was merged with the greater PSOC organization. The hold at the Nat was placed under lock-and-key and eventually club boats were moved to another location on campus. About 2017, all Club activities were severely restricted; see <https://reason.com/2018/04/22/penn-state-outing-club-safety/>

Some sessions in the practice pool continued to be held for students. Rolling and wet exit practices were also held at other pool locations near State College, including the State College High School, Minitab, Village at Penn State, and YMCA pools in Bellefonte, Burnham-Lewistown, Lock Haven, Altoona, and Clearfield. Attached is an appendix listing PSOC national champions and international team members. Almost all names listed also participated in pool sessions.

**PSOC NATIONAL CHAMPIONS** (at the time of Championship or closely related; number of golds)

Bill Bickham (15 golds)	C-1 Men Slalom	1959, 61, 62, 63, 65
	C-2 Men Slalom	1961, 62, 63 (non-PSOC partners are omitted)
	C-2 Mixed Slalom	1962, 63, 64, 65
	C-1 Men Wildwater	1966, 67
	C-2 Men Wildwater	1961
John Sweet (23)	C-1 Men Slalom	1970
	C-2 Mixed Slalom	1979, 80 (w/ Barb McKee),
	C-1 Men Wildwater	1968, 70, 71, 72
	C-1 Men Slalom Masters	1979, 80, 81, 84, 85
	C-2 Mixed Slalom Masters	1979 (w/ Pat MacKeen)
	Open Canoe C-1 Men Slalom	1975, 78, 79, 80, 82
Open Canoe C-2 Mixed	1975, 78, 80, 82, 83 (w/ Barb McKee)	
Barb McKee (10)	See John Sweet for C-2 Mixed & OC-2 Mixed	
	C-2 Women Slalom --	1983 (w/ Lee deWolski)
	Open Canoe C-1 Women Slalom --	1982, 83
Norm Holcombe (4)	C-2 Men Wildwater	1969
	C-2 Mixed Wildwater	1970, 71 (w/ Barb Holcombe)
	C-2 Mixed Slalom	1971 (w/ Barb Holcombe)
Barb Holcombe (see Norm Holcombe, 3); Pat MacKeen (see John Sweet, 1); Lee deWolski (see Barb McKee, 1)		
John and Hanna Coraor (1)	C-2 Mixed Slalom	1984
Tom Irwin (1)	C-1 Men Slalom	1973
Russ Nichols (4)	C-2 Men Slalom	1972, 73
	C-1 Men Wildwater	1973
	C-2 Mixed Slalom	1973
Paul Grabow (6)	C-2 Men Slalom	1980, 81, 85, 86
	C-2 Men Wildwater	1980
	C-2 Mixed Slalom	1981
Brian Zimmerman (2)	C-1 Men Senior	2000
	C-2 Men Masters	2000
Richard Weiss (8)	K-1 Men	1987, 88, 89, 91, 92, 93, 95, 96

**Others Who Were PSOC Members at One Time, But Earned National Titles While Paddling for Another Club:**

David Kurtz/ Les Bechdel (WBC, 3)	C-2 Men Slalom	1966, 67, 68
Les Bechdel (WBC, 1)	K-1 Men Slalom	1967
Steve Draper/Frank Schultz (WBC, 1)	C-2 Men Slalom	1971
Gay Gruss Fawcett (BRSC, 4)	C-2 Mixed Slalom	1969
	C-2 Mixed Wildwater	1966, 67, 68
Rowen Osborne (BRSC, 2)	C-2 Men Wildwater	1965, 67
Jim Raleigh (CCA, 1)	C-2 Men Wildwater	1966
Tom Southworth (WBC, 7) & Dave Guss (1)	C-2 Men Slalom	1964 (w/ Dave Guss, WBC)
	C-1 Men Slalom	1964, 66, 67
	C-2 Mixed	1966, 67, 70
John Hummel/ John Bryson (WBC, 1)	C-2 Men Wildwater	1968

**PSOC WORLD and OLYMPICS TEAM MEMBERS** (some had moved on to other locations by time of various Worlds):

Bill Bickham – C-2 Mixed Slalom, 1963 -- 8th place (non-PSOC/WBC partners are omitted here)

John Sweet – C-1 Men Slalom, 1967 -- 19th  
 C-2 Mixed Slalom, 1971 – 8th (w/ Anne Shuster)  
 C-2 Mixed Slalom, 1981 – 2nd (w/ Barb McKee)  
 C-1 Men Wildwater -- (years ?)

Anne Shuster & Barb McKee – see John Sweet

Norm Holcombe -- C-2 Men Slalom, 1969 -- 15th  
 C-2 Mixed Slalom, 1971 – 7th (w/ Barb Holcombe)  
 C-2 Mixed Slalom, 1973 – 2nd (w/ Barb Holcombe)

Barb Holcombe – see Norm Holcombe

C. Russell Nichols – C-2 Men Slalom, 1972 Olympic Games – 14th  
 C-2 Men Slalom, 1973 – 12th  
 C-1 Men Wildwater – (years ?)

Louise Holcombe -- K-1 Women Slalom, 1971 – 7th  
 K-1 Women Slalom, 1972 Olympic Games – 15th  
 K-1 Women Slalom, 1973 – 14th; K-1W team -- 1st

A. Elizabeth Watson -- K-1 Women Slalom, 1975 – 17th

Brad Nelson -- K-1 Men, 1988 Junior Slalom Worlds – 6th; National Team member, 1991.

Don Morin -- C-2 Men Slalom, 1977 – 16th (w/ Steve Draper, WBC)

Paul Grabow -- C-2-Men Slalom, 1981 – 3rd; C-2 Men Team – 3rd  
 C-2 Men Slalom, 1985 – 11th; C-2 Men Team – 3rd  
 C-2 Men Wildwater, 1989 (other years?)

Richard Weiss -- K-1 Men Slalom, 1985 -- 54th; K1-M Team – 6th  
 K-1 Men, 1987 -- 6th; K1-M Team – 6th  
 K-1 Men, 1989 -- 5th; K1-M Team – 11th  
 K-1 Men, 1991 -- 31st; K1-M Team – 7th  
 K-1 Men, 1992 Olympic Games -- 16th  
 K-1 Men, 1993 -- 2nd; K1-M Team – 11th  
 K-1 Men, 1995 -- 20th; K1-M Team – 4th  
 K-1 Men, 1996 Olympic Games -- 6th

**Other Local Paddlers on World Teams, who used PSOC Facilities or were PSOC members at one time:**

Dave Kurtz (WBC, 1963, 1965, 1969); Gay Gruss Fawcett (BRSC, 1967, 1969); Les Bechdel (WBC, 1963, 1967, 1969, 1977); Dave Guss (WBC, 1963); Hank Yeagley (WBC, 1963); Steve Draper (WBC, 1973, 1975, 1977); Mikki Piras (WBC, 1973, 1975); John Hummel (WBC, 1969); John Bryson (WBC, 1969); Jim Raleigh (CCA, 1967); Tom Southworth (WBC, 1963, 1965, 1967, 1969, 1971, 1972 Olympics); Evelyn Van Horn (Mach 1, 2012 Jr, 2013 Jr, 2014 Jr); Alden Henrie (Mach 1, 2017 Jr, 2018 Jr, 2019 U23, 2023 U23); Ethan Van Horn (Mach 1, 2013 U23).

Sources: **US Slalom and Wildwater Results:** Susan L. Taft, *The River Chasers* (2001).

**World and Olympic Results:** <https://www.canoeslalom.net/doku.php/de/start>.