# Interview with Steve Giles, 2000 Olympic medalist

Steve **Giles**, Olympic bronze medalist in Canoeing, C1 1000 meters, at the Sydney Olympic Games, and 1998 world champion in C1 1000 meters and Penny **Werthner**, Interviewer, University of Ottawa, Canada.

## Abstract

I sincerely thank Steve for being very forthcoming in this dialogue about his international career in the sport of canoe/kayak. His thoughts and insight into the process of his development as a high performance athlete and Olympic medallist are extremely revealing and will, I believe, be very useful for athletes, coaches and for those who work alongside them. It is clear from this dialogue that the road to Olympic success is often long and requires a great deal of perseverance, the development of a significant level of self-awareness, an strong belief in one's ability, and plenty of physical and mental work.
Email: werthner@uottawa.ca

## 1984-1988

**Penny:** When did you start paddling?

**Steve:** I started paddling seriously in 1984. That's when Tony Hall came to Orenda Canoe Club. In 1988, when I was 16, I went to the Western European junior championships and I won gold medals in 1000m and 500m.

**Penny:** Those were pretty good results. And Tony Hall was coaching you?

**Steve:** Yeah. Tony was coaching me. In 1988, the Continental Cup was in Ottawa, and I also got two golds, in the junior races, in 1000m and 500m. And I finished second in one of the senior races — I raced it as an exhibition race— and was second to Larry Cain. This was my first time against the senior athletes.

**Penny:** You talked about was not expecting any of this. You said, 'I knew I was pretty good, but…'

**Steve:** Well, I had no idea. I had never raced against Larry or anybody from outside of Canada. All I knew was people were really good. I knew I was decent and that I could do some good times, but, beyond that, I wasn't going there expecting ... it just kind of happened.

**Penny:** What about the Canadian trials in 1987, when you were 15 years old?

**Steve:** Yeah, I was 15. I was fourth overall. I was fourth in 1000m in juniors. And they didn't take a C4 to the world championships that year, so I didn't get to go to junior worlds that year.

## 1989

**Penny:** In 1989 the junior world championships were in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia and you came third in 1000m?

**Steve:** Yeah, and fourth in 500m. Before those championships, we raced in two different regattas in the spring. One was in Czechoslovakia, where I got killed. (I raced well in '88, but there were a lot of guys I didn't race against because it was the western European countries). I had never seen the Russians, the Hungarians, or the East Germans, and they beat me pretty bad. It was a bit of an eye-opener. I got a little more serious about the racing — this wasn't going to be so easy; I wasn't going to always go out and win. I had to realize that there were people out there who were better than me. At the second regatta — the Hungarian trials — I did pretty well. I was maybe a bit more focused, more into it, more aware of what was going on.

**Penny:** But you were still pretty young; you were only seventeen.

**Steve:** Yeah. At the junior world championships, in the final, the East German was in the lane next to me, and right off the line, he was ahead of me and he won by a lot. I really wasn't expecting that to happen. Even now, I don't think I raced very well. I don't think I had a chance of beating him, but I probably could have come second if I'd been able to keep my focus and not pay so much attention to him.

**Penny:** So is that what you think happened? You focused too much on what he was doing?

**Steve:** Yeah, all I could think about was how bad he was beating me, how I couldn't catch up to him. It was lucky for me that there weren't a whole lot of other people in the race who were that good. I really didn't race that well. I was lucky. The fourth place guy was pretty close to me.

## 1990-1991

**Steve:** In 1990, Larry Cain was the best Canadian paddler in my events. He had been the silver medallist at the world championships in 1989, a close fourth in the 1988 Olympics, and gold medallist in 1984 Olympics.

**Penny:** At that time you were not thinking that you could beat him?

**Steve:** No, I don't remember if the thought ever crossed my mind. I was first year senior, really last year of juniors but there were not any junior competitions that year, so I was just planning to go and see what would happen. (I was also racing C2 and we had no expectation of racing at the world championships or anything like that).

I beat Larry. I beat him three times that year and raced at the world championships in 1991. in Poznan, Poland. I remember being in the boat bay, and Tamas Buday, one of the national coaches, probably thought I looked a bit nervous, and he wanted to make me feel better and he said, 'Just go out there and do your thing. Don't worry about winning the race. This is your first time and you will have lots of chances. Just go and try to learn something.'

**Penny:** And did that help?

**Steve:** No, because I didn't want to listen to that. I said to myself, 'I beat the guy who came second last year, so that means I'm at least that good. So if I race well, then I think I can win the race. So that's what I'm going to think about. I'm going to think about

winning the race.' When the race started, and all of a sudden I wasn't winning, everything fell apart.

**Penny:** So with your engineer's mind, the analytical mind, you had it all figured out analytically. 'I beat that guy last year, so I should beat him this year, so therefore I should win the race.'

**Steve:** Yeah, absolutely for sure. And I find myself doing it even now. "I beat this guy, and he beat this guy, so therefore I should.' And I know it (sport) doesn't work that way.

**Penny:** But did you know it then?

**Steve:** No, I didn't. Now I do.

**Penny:** So now that you understand the problem — that kind of thinking doesn't usually work from a sport performance perspective — you have learned how to change that kind of thinking?

**Steve:** Yes, I can change that thinking now. But in 1990/91, as far as I was concerned, if Larry had been there, he was good enough to come second, and I beat him, therefore I'm good enough to come first.

**Penny:** Too bad it doesn't usually work that way. So then what happened in the race?

**Steve:** I packed it in about halfway through the race.

**Penny:** What were you saying to yourself?

**Steve:** I just started to think that I was getting high (boat rides high in the water), I was getting into wash, and I just decided it wasn't worth keeping going, that I might as well just stop. I was coming ninth, and ninth is ninth. And if I quit and come ninth, then that is the same as going hard and coming ninth. So that's what I did. And, yeah, I have to forgive myself for that.

**Penny:** You can forgive yourself for that.

**Steve:** Yeah, I know, but …

**Penny:** Is it fair to say that the reason that happened (giving up in the race) is because all you were thinking about, going into the race, was winning? And when that wasn't going to happen, nothing else was important …

**Steve:** Yep. I wasn't winning, so …

**Penny:** What did you figure out from that race?

**Steve:** I don't know if I learned anything right away. I was pretty upset because I gave up. At the end of the day, when I was sitting in my hotel room going over my year, I felt I had nothing to show for it. I didn't know how I could have done and I really didn't even try, in the end, and that really upset me. It took a while for me to really figure out what exactly went wrong. I had a couple of similar experiences in 1991, not at the Worlds, but at a couple of different regattas. I didn't actually quit, but I knew I wasn't going to win. I was going hard, but not really paying attention to what I was doing. I was looking around, just feeling pretty inferior to some of the guys.

**Penny:** What races were those?

**Steve:** European international races in '91. There were no world cup races back then. Tamas got pretty upset with me because he knew I wasn't really doing the best I could. He told me he was starting to see a pattern form — I quit at the world championships and now I was quitting in other races — and he gave me a pretty good talking to, for

Tamas. He wasn't yelling and screaming, but he let me know he wasn't very happy, and that woke me up a bit.

**Penny:** I remember dropping out of a race as a track athlete, and it was so difficult in the next race not to quit at that same spot in the next race. It's so powerful, so easy and powerful to fall into that pattern, isn't it?

**Steve:** Yeah, absolutely. And it was really good that Tamas talked to me. The next day I went out and raced the 10,000m (in Segezd, Hungary) and I just said, 'I don't care what happens. I'm just going to finish this, as hard as I can, no matter what.' And I came about 10th, but I felt good about it because I had gotten past that.

I didn't end up racing at the world championships that summer because Larry (Cain) beat me a couple of times in Europe. I went home and we raced at the trials, and I raced really well and beat him twice there. We had a race-off at the national championships, and again he beat me and I ended up coming fourth. Once he got ahead of me, I just kind of felt like … this was a race-off for the world championship team — the point for me was to go to worlds and that was not going to happen. I let some people pass me who shouldn't have. It was the same sort of thing as the previous year at worlds. You focus on one thing and when that doesn't happen, it all falls apart. That race, the 1000m, was on Friday night and I lost the race-off and I was feeling pretty sorry for myself. The head coach at Orenda Canoe Club said that he could use me in the junior war canoe. I didn't really want to do it, but I thought if they needed me in the boat, then I would go. It was the most painful race I've had in my whole life. You can watch the video. There are these twelve guys in the boat who had been training all year and knew what they were doing, and then there was me. I was second on the left and the last two hundred meters, I was just barely hanging on - just hanging on in a junior war canoe. It was bad! But it was good because it got me out of my depression. I went out for dinner that night with the team and came back the next day and just decided … I had never done very well in the 500m - I always felt I could - I just decided I was going to go and race as hard as I could and see what happened. And I won. And I beat all the guys going to the worlds. It was just really exciting! It was a big breakthrough for me. I could easily have … I was so upset about not going to the worlds. The whole year had gone. A couple of races in the spring were good and I thought I was doing better, and then I crashed and burned again.

**Penny:** What were you thinking in the 500m?

**Steve:** 'Just go race it.' I remember thinking, 'This is just for me. Do it for yourself. Don't care about what anybody else is doing. Don't think about what anybody else is thinking. Just do it for yourself. Make yourself proud.'

**Penny:** And that kind of thinking helped you race your best?

**Steve:** Yes.

## 1992

**Steve:** 1992. Barcelona Olympics. I had almost learned the lesson about not having to win. I definitely learned it for the 500m. I think I raced fairly well in the 500m, coming 6th, which is my second best result ever, internationally. I was really nervous. I got sick before every race, but I still felt I raced pretty well.

**Penny:** Was Tony Hall, your personal coach, in Barcelona?

**Steve:** No, Tony was not there, and I missed him a bit. Back then, I always felt really alone, especially on the day of the finals. In the 1000m Olympic final, I remember it was kind of the same feeling. I don't know if I was thinking about winning, but I wasn't really prepared for how hard I had to go. So I came in from the race - I came ninth - and I remember thinking I probably could have gone quite a bit harder than that. There was a long period of time, in the 1000m, where I couldn't seem to make myself to get over that hump. I'd start to feel tired in the race and so I'd slow down, and not try to get past that fatigue and pain.

**Penny:** Did you have a plan on how to race, at that point in time?

**Steve:** Yeah, I did, but I didn't do my race plan. I had it in my head. I rehearsed it, but I didn't spend much time on it. It was pretty basic. Do a pick up at 500m, start your finish with 200m to go. Not at all the way it is now, with all kinds of technical cues, and one-word cues to put me in the right spot of each race. That was another thing. I went there dreaming of getting a medal, not really expecting a medal, but thought it would be really cool. Then I didn't win a medal in the 500m, and so I thought, I've got one more chance, so thinking about winning a medal was a little more on my mind in the 1000m than it probably should have been … and that affected my race as well.

**Penny:** You were still outwardly focused on the medal, on the winning?

**Steve:** Yeah. Not as much, getting better but … I felt the biggest problem was that inability to push myself, in the race, past where I needed to be.

**Penny:** And why do you think that was?

**Steve:** Well, as you said, it was a bit of a pattern. I had quit a couple of times in the past. And during that time, there were not a lot of races, in Canada, where I was being pushed, where I had to go through it. I could slack off a little bit when I started to get tired and still win the race.

**Penny:** But in European and international races that wasn't the case. You couldn't back off when it got hard and still be up there?

**Steve:** Right.

**Penny:** Did you ever talk with your coaches about that issue?

**Steve:** No. Because I always figured it was just a matter of going harder in the race. It should be simple and I should be able to do it. There is nothing wrong with my training; it was just me on race day. To a certain extent that was true, but …

## 1993

**Steve:** Then in 1993, in Copenhagen, at the world championships, I won a medal that year. I always forget. I came 3rd in C1 500m and 4th in C1 1000m. It was a good year. I raced really well. I didn't really think about where I was at during the race.

**Penny:** In both 500m and 1000m?

**Steve:** Yep, in both races. Well, more in 500m than 1000m. In the 1000m final I ended up in the lane next to the Russian, who won by about 20 boat lengths, and he said after the race, 'You know, I came off the line and looked around and wondered why everyone else stopped paddling.' I thought, 'Thanks a lot.' It did disturb me a

little bit, in the race, that he was so far ahead, but I handled it ok.

**Penny:** What did you do in that race to 'handle it' so well?

**Steve:** I don't remember very well. I remember thinking that I just wanted to stay as close as I could. I could see that I wasn't in 9th place. I knew he was beating me, but I wasn't last, so it was still worth going hard. In 500m, I was just fast. I didn't worry about winning because I didn't really think I had the ability to win.

**Penny:** So in 500m, you didn't put the pressure to win on yourself?

**Steve:** Exactly. I just went into it to have a good, hard race. Which made 1000m even worse because I always figured 1000m is my race, and I did well in 500m, so therefore I should do better in 1000m. Which I think is why, for the first ten years of my career, C1 500m was always my better race, even though I knew C1 1000m should be my better race.

**Penny:** Would you say then, that one of your issues was about your thinking of what you *should* be able to do and focused, perhaps too much, on your expectations around winning?

**Steve:** Yes. Another good example of having high expectations of doing well (and how that can hurt a performance) was in C4. We had raced in Duisberg, Germany, and we won. Every country wasn't there, but … we thought we were pretty good. And at the worlds in Copenhagen, we went out there and got washed out. We got behind, panicked, didn't paddle well.

**Penny:** So when you say 'panicked', think of that race and tell me what 'getting panicked' means to you.

**Steve:** It means I'm just thinking about pulling harder so I can catch up. And I've got to catch up as quickly as I can because we are too far behind.

**Penny:** So it is very much related to an outward focus — on other boats, other crews, other competitors, rather than on your own race.

**Steve:** Yeah.

**Penny:** Did you talk about this, after the race, with the other three athletes in the boat?

**Steve:** We talked about it a bit, but the big problem was that none of us were very good at staying focused and being on task.

## 1994

**Steve:** At the 1994 world championships in Mexico, I came 8th in C1 500m and 9th in C1 1000m, and it was horrible. We had a training camp in California, in the mountains, at altitude, prior to the worlds. It was freezing cold. I got there, and I was feeling really good, the best I'd felt in a long, long time. And I started thinking, 'I've still got three weeks to go here and a week in Mexico, and I'm feeling pretty good now, but that's probably a little bit early to be feeling good, so I think I'll go do some heavy weights and then I'll start feeling bad and then I'll be able to come back up and feel good at the worlds.' And that's what I did. And, sure enough, couple of days later I was feeling bad and I thought that's good, but I just never came back.

So I went to Mexico and the first heat of 1000m, I remember being in so much pain. The heats were set up so no one got eliminated. I started out hard and just ended up packing it in, just racing it to get the oxygen. I knew I was in big trouble and I was right. Things just went downhill from there. It was kind of a spiral. I started thinking 'Well, I'm not feeling good and I'm not racing well. Things probably aren't going to go well. I'll just try to make the best of what I've got.' That's what I tried to do, but that kind of meant I'd given up on fixing anything. One of the things that I've found works, when things are going bad for me, is to try thinking about why they are going bad, maybe work on my technique.

**Penny:** Try to consciously and calmly figure things out.

**Steve:** Yeah. Instead, I kind of said 'Things are going bad. The races have started. It's too late to change anything so just try to go hard, muscle through it, be tough, and see what you can do.'

**Penny:** But don't change anything?

**Steve:** Yeah, don't change anything. I wasn't even thinking about changing anything.

**Penny:** Often, as an athlete at this high performance level, when things aren't going well, you really do know what the answer is, how to fix things. The key is developing the ability to be calm, step back, think about it and figure out a solution. Perhaps it's not always possible, but more often than not it is possible to figure things out, if you can remain calm and objective. It's a skill. The problem is athletes often just usually keep rolling, try harder, panic and try harder still.

**Steve:** Yes. The 1000m just went badly, I don't remember the race. I didn't even bother to look at the results. It was just so disappointing. But I remember in 500m, I went out with the idea that 'Things are going bad, so just be tough, go hard, muscle through it.' Halfway through the race I was sitting fourth or fifth, and I thought, 'I'm going to go as hard as I can now to the finish and maybe I will win a medal. Maybe I can just get ahead of these guys if I really go for it.' (This was totally outside my plan for my race). It was way too early. I went hard for maybe 150m and that was it, I had nothing left, and I was passed by four or five guys.

**Penny:** So that year you went from third and fourth in the world to eighth and ninth. What were you thinking and feeling at this point in time?

**Steve:** Well, I was a mess. I was just wondering what was going on, why I had screwed up so many times.

**Penny:** So, as a bit of a summary for this point in your canoeing career, you would have some really good performances, and then others put expectations on you and you put expectations on yourself, and then you would did not have an effective way to deal with those expectations. You're always thinking about the outcome rather than execution of the race, and then you would race poorly. Did you begin to think, is this worth it?

**Steve:** Yes, I thought that.

**Penny:** What helped you get through that? What helped you continue in paddling?

**Steve:** A couple of things helped. One was Tony Hall, my coach at home in Nova Scotia. He was always good at motivating me, letting me know how good I was, and making training fun. There was always a good atmosphere during training. We had a

really good training group at that time. It was fun. It was somewhere I wanted to be. The other thing that helped was I just *knew* I was better than that. I knew I had the potential to be good. I just felt I hadn't raced up to my potential. I just wanted to get to that point. And I wanted to win medals at that level and be the world champion.

**Penny:** When you say 'I just knew I was good', how did you know you were good (especially when the results were not always there)?

**Steve:** I knew simply because the feelings I had in a race and the feelings I had in training are just so completely different. A good day in training compared to a race at the World Championship — there was just no comparison.

**Penny:** So, two things helped keep you going. You knew from your training that you were so much better than what you were able to put on the line in a race. And Tony, your coach, created a great training environment that helped a great deal.

**Steve:** Yes, for sure.

## 1995

**Steve:** The plan for 1995, the year before the Atlanta Olympics, was that Dan Howe and I would race C2 and I would race one of the C1's. The three of us (Tony, Dan and I) sat down and looked at the schedule and the races. I was doing better in 500m at that point. I would race the C1 500m and Dan and I would race the C2 1000m. That turned out great because the competition in C2 1000m wasn't that stiff. My motivation in doing this was that it would help with my nervousness. I was still throwing up before most races. I thought it could help by giving me a partner to share things with and take some of the pressure off me as an individual competitor. It also gave me someone to train with right up to the day of competition. Because one of the things that had been happening was that I would train with this great group of teammates all year and then I would go off to the world championships and be by myself. Sometimes I would train with the C2 guys, but the closer we got to the races at worlds, the more we needed to separate to do our own final training, and I would be on my own.

**Penny:** To come back to throwing up, did you throw up at all your races, or just at the worlds?

**Steve:** Almost every race. I would usually throw up at the trials, and sometimes at the European races, and then always at the world championships.

**Penny:** It's great that it doesn't happen anymore!

**Steve:** Yeah. It was not fun at all. I was not having fun at all at the races. Which is another reason I was doing bad was because all I was thinking was 'let's get this over with.'

**Penny:** But you would go back to training and it would be so much better, and you just knew you were better than what you showed on race day, and you were thinking, 'I'm way better than this. I've got to just figure this out.' Is that a fair analysis?

**Steve:** Yeah, for sure.

**Penny:** What happened in 1995 at the worlds in Duisberg, Germany?

**Steve:** In the C2 we didn't make the final. I was pretty upset, but it was our first time at the worlds. We had only raced two interna-

tional races before that and we didn't race that well. It was an experience thing. I wasn't that nervous. I had zero expectations, and we just didn't make the final, probably because we hadn't raced together enough as a team.

**Penny:** Looking back now, why do you think you didn't make that final?

**Steve:** Well, there were a few technical things. We had only been together since the spring, we didn't have a lot of race experience; it's the same kind of thing. You always feel good going when you have to go 90%, but then when you have to go 100%, it's so different.

**Penny:** That is so true in crew boats, isn't it? It takes a lot of time to get it right.

**Steve:** Definitely. And that 'feel' in the boat when you are going at 100% is so hard and so different from training speeds. It happens all the time in winter training in Florida. You're going along at 40 strokes a minute and think this is great, really smooth, really gliding well. And you keep paddling like that until it's time for the racing to begin and then you feel so bad out there at a higher stroke rate.

**Penny:** So it's a mistake you made, not going hard enough in some training situations, and not having enough races together (although not enough races is not really within your control)?

**Steve:** Yeah, definitely. In C1 500m I came 5th. I was pretty happy. It was a good race. I raced well from start to finish. I didn't look around. I was focused on doing my best. It's kind of funny; a couple of times, in 1995 and again in 1997, I was so disappointed with the previous year that I was just thinking (in that next year at the world championships), 'I've got nothing to lose; I'm not expected to win, so I'm just going to go out and think about my own race, and see what happens.' That works well. And then the next year, having done well the previous year, I would think, 'Now I should do well.' And then I wouldn't race well.

**Penny:** So were you starting to see a pattern, particularly a thought pattern that sometimes was working for you, but, more often than not, was working against you?

**Steve:** Yeah, I was starting to see it. But I still threw up in '95.

## 1996

**Steve:** In 1996, I thought things are going to be different. I wasn't going to be nervous. Yet I still did throw up. I did so well in races prior to Atlanta and the Olympic races. I've thought about this a lot. All year long in '96, whenever I would start to get nervous, I would say, 'Don't think about it. It's just another race. Pretend you are somewhere else.' Finally, on the day of the final, I couldn't get away from it. It just hit me.

**Penny:** Steve, that is a really important point. At the Olympics, and probably at most important competitions, you just cannot *not* face the possible tension and stress that you are feeling. You need to face it and resolve it. Otherwise, when it comes down to race day, when you actually have to race — there are no options, it's 3pm today — and it all falls apart, which is what happened to you. At that point you were not willing to look at what the issues were. You were trying to push them down inside you, hoped they would stay there, but instead they all exploded as you were on the dock.

**Steve:** Yeah, absolutely. After one of my first heats in Atlanta I said, 'In Barcelona I

thought too much, so here, in Atlanta, I didn't want to think too much. And now I don't know how and what to think.'

**Penny:** Let's just go back a bit. I started working with the team and with you after 1994?

**Steve:** Yeah. It was after 1994, and I said, 'I need to get some professional help.'

**Penny:** When we first started to work together, in 1994, my impression was that you were quite receptive and things progressed well.

**Steve:** Yeah, for sure.

**Penny:** And then, my sense was that in that 1996 season, leading up to the Atlanta Olympics, you really didn't want to meet. What you said each time was, 'Everything is good, no problems or issues. I know what to do.' And in that situation, if you, as an athlete, are telling me everything is ok, I cannot say, 'I don't think it is.' I have to assume then that everything is ok. And, most importantly, I'm really hoping it is.

**Steve:** Right. That's fair enough.

**Penny:** Why do you think that happened? Were you afraid to talk about what was going on in your mind?

**Steve:** Well, I thought everything was fine. I really thought I had found the solution for me, going into the Atlanta Olympic Games. If I just didn't think about it (competing, the stress, winning a medal), it would be ok. 'Don't ever think about getting on the podium. Don't ever think about being in Atlanta, being at the Olympics.' But then I'm looking around and seeing gold medallists. So the morning of the final I remember feeling sick, and again throwing up before I got in my boat. Then I felt better and was a bit more relaxed. I went up to the line and I remember thinking, again, 'Just go hard, do what you can do. Follow your race plan. You're good in the second half, so go as hard as you can in the first half of the race, and keep going.' I stuck fairly well to my race plan. It was a good race plan. I just went a little too hard at the beginning. I was winning at the 250m, but then I was tired. Whether it was because I went out too hard or because I had been nervous all week, I don't know.

**Penny:** Looking back, why do you think you went out so hard so early in the race?

**Steve:** Honestly, I think I was tired from being under stress all the time, from trying *not* to think about it all. I was fine until the Olympics started and then I started to get nervous. I'd turn the TV off, and walk around trying to ignore it all, but I would hear people yelling about some performance or another.

**Penny:** So the trying not to think about the competition is as tough and fatiguing as thinking too much, isn't it?

**Steve:** Oh yeah! Definitely.

## 1997

**Steve:** 1997, Steve's life: a bad year and then a good year! In 1997, I did not actually throw up before my races. We had started working together a little bit better, and I had started working more seriously on my race plan, thinking about things and putting myself in different race situations. And I had Angela, my wife, to help me remain calm. Still, the morning of the C1 1000m semi-finals at the worlds, in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, I was in pretty bad shape. I remember feeling, this isn't much fun, and thinking

'Well, I really want to be in the final.' Everyone was there watching and I was thinking about that. I didn't want to be disappointed and not make the final. It was my first time, in a couple of years, racing 1000m - I only raced 500m in 1996 - and I didn't know how I was going to do. I was really nervous. I went out and by the time I got up to the line I was feeling better, mostly because the conditions were really tough. There was a huge crosswind, it was really cold, and it was raining. I had so much stuff to think about, other than how I was going to do in the race, that I just said, 'All I can do is go out there and deal with the conditions and whether or not I make it to the final is kind of out of my control.' And the semi-final went really well. And I ended up 6th in the final. But probably I had over-learned from my mistake in 1996. Instead of going out too hard, my plan was to go out really easy and then finish really hard. I went out really easy in the first half of the race and when I hit the 500m, I just started going crazy and caught a bunch of people and passed a few people, but I had got myself too far back in the first half and ended up sixth, a close sixth, close to fourth and fifth. I was happy, but a bit disappointed that I hadn't really figured it out. Then in 500m, I didn't look around at all. I just put my head down. I hardly remember the race. I was feeling pretty good, I was paddling really well and the boat was running well and I ended up fourth. So that was a good year.

**Penny:** That summer you told me that you were starting to feel and to understand that there was so much more in your life than just paddling.

**Steve:** Yeah, that was a big part in helping me perform better. I had always known that I had more in my life than just canoeing, but I needed reminders of that. And Angela helped me with that. However, at that point in time, even in that 1000m, the reason I didn't go out as hard as I could was because I was afraid of the pain and afraid of dying in the race. So I convinced myself that I needed to go out easy the first half and hard in the second half.

**Penny:** Did you have that in your race plan?

**Steve:** Yes, I executed my race plan exactly.

**Penny:** So, in retrospect, a different race plan would have been better?

**Steve:** Yeah, for sure.

## 1998

**Steve:** At the training camp in Belgium prior to the 1998 world cup races in Duisberg, Germany, I got so sick and didn't eat anything for three days. I was feeling quite bad when we got to Duisberg. And it was a selection race for the C1 1000m entry at the world championships in Hungary later that summer. I had to beat Gavin Maxwell for the entry so I knew I was going to have to race whether I was feeling good or not. I got through the heats, through the semis, feeling pretty weak. When I went out for the final, I knew I wasn't going to feel physically fit so I convinced myself that, no matter what, when I started to feel tired, just to keep going, and make it through. I said to myself, 'You've got to do this.' I went out and after 250m I was dying. I was breathing hard, and I thought, 'This is it, I'm not going to make it.' But then I said to myself, 'Well, it's just because you are sick. You've got the fitness; you just don't feel very good. Keep going and it'll be okay.' I broke through to that next level, where I started feeling good again. About halfway through the race, I was getting ahead, and I thought, 'Man, what's going on? I'm supposed to be sick.' I

just kept going and I won by about two boat lengths. I just amazed myself.

**Penny:** You prepared yourself for it to be ugly and tough, and it was. But because you had prepared yourself for that, you didn't give up and feel sorry for yourself when it did get hard. And then you were able to go beyond that point. Did you recognize that? What did you think after that race?

**Steve:** I thought I really have to go harder at the start of the race, because I can do it. I should plan my race a bit differently. So that's what I did for the worlds. It was pretty much the exact same race. I came through the 250m feeling awful and just kept going and it got to the point where I was feeling more relaxed and people started dying and I just kept on going. And I won. I was world champion in the C1 1000m in 1998.

**Penny:** Fabulous. Can you tell me a bit more about that race and what you were thinking and feeling?

**Steve:** At the start, as soon as the gun went, I took a few strokes and drifted a little bit. I wasn't paying as much attention as I should have been, and I remember saying to myself, 'Steve, this is the world championship final. Let's go for this.' From that point on it was all business, just in my race plan, in my own boat, doing my technical cues. Earlier in the spring, in Copenhagen, Martin Doktor passed me in the last 200m of a 1000m, and Angela said, 'Why do you always let him do that?' So in this race, with 200m to go, Doktor was right there in the next lane about half a boat length behind and I thought, 'If he passes me this time Angela is going to be mad.' So I went harder.

**Penny:** Coming back to the race plan, you made some adjustments after Duisberg in the early summer. How often would you go over it in the course of training and competing?

**Steve:** Almost every practice, after I was finished working out, I would paddle up to the 1000m mark and turn around and paddle down easy, going through my race plan in my head. Some days I would go back up and do the 500m race plan in my head as well. Almost every day I did that. It would depend on how dead tired I was, but almost every day.

**Penny:** Not paddling hard, but doing the distance, and going through your pick-up points and seeing it and feeling it as you were going through it?

**Steve:** Yeah, seeing it and feeling it as much as I could. In the early part of the season I didn't do it very much on dry land, but as the summer went on, I did it more and more before I went to sleep, as well on the water.

**Penny:** One of the great strengths of running through your race plan almost every day is that you are then capable of remembering, for example, Angela asking why you always let him beat you in the last 200m. You can think those kinds of thoughts and still be capable of maintaining or re-gaining your correct and best focus, because you have practiced it over and over again. If you haven't practiced that skill really well, those kinds of thoughts take you and keep you out in the wrong place; in this case, on Martin Doktor and how he always beats you in the last 200m.

**Steve:** Yes, absolutely. And the other thing I found was that in 1998, I could be in the race and I could look around and see where I was, and it wouldn't affect what I was doing. I could be in fifth place in the middle of a race and not think, 'Oh my god, I'm not going to make it.' Rather, I developed the

ability to think, 'You're doing what you are supposed to be doing. Just keep it up and good things will happen.'

**Penny:** You were able to execute that in 1998. Your confidence was building. Were you able to do it earlier?

**Steve:** A little bit in 1997. It was building. I was doing some of it in 1997, but I think I just didn't have the best race plan in 1997. I was starting to feel more confident, doing what I wanted to do. I started to feel I could compete with the other athletes. Before that year, I never had the feeling that if I really wanted to win, I could have. That's not a great way to say it, but in '97, for the first time, I felt that if I had my best race, it would be good enough to be competitive. I had reached the point where I was relaxed enough so that I could think about where I was, I could look at people and see what position I was in and not panic. If I was in a lane next to a fast guy, I could pace off him a little bit and still stay within my own race plan. You know, it's one thing to say that you have to stay focused on yourself, but it is a race and you have to pay attention to what is going on.

**Penny:** You bring up a very important point that is extremely relevant to racing. You, as a competitor, have to figure out how to go about having an awareness of what is going on around you in the race and still be able to maintain or re-gain your own focus.

**Steve:** Exactly. And in '97 I really started to learn that. In 1996, and before that, I always figured that my problem was concentrating too much on everyone else. What I was always thinking was, 'Stay focused', and I always drifted, and then I panicked. In 1997 and 1998, I found I could allow myself to be aware of the other competitors and still stay focused.

**Penny:** And you could do that because you had developed a solid and effective race plan and then spent a significant time, each day almost, going over that plan, for both 1000m and 500m?

**Steve:** Yes, I agree.

**Penny:** It starts to become ingrained; it starts to become how you will race, even if you didn't get it quite right in the beginning.

**Steve:** Yeah, absolutely. The other thing about '97 was that, prior to that year, I had never been able to be in the middle of the pack and keep going harder and come fifth. If it didn't look like I was going to be in the medals, I would just give up. This time, I was in the middle of the pack, I went hard the whole way, and I came sixth, and I was happy with that. That was a big step for me, to be able to race and not get carried away with the outcome, not to be solely focused on, 'I have to win a medal.' It could still be a good race even if I didn't medal.

**Penny:** So finally you were starting to feel that you could be competitive internationally. In the earlier years your confidence came from the training, but you couldn't seem to put it together in a competition. Now you had the missing piece — you had pushed through in a race, you actually did it —so your confidence built. You were also tough enough over the years to not quit the sport altogether when it took so long to get it working for you.

**Steve:** Yeah, and it started to get a little more fun too. It was now a race. It wasn't just me going out trying to do my best and fearful of what might happen, particularly if I didn't medal. I could now go out and say, 'I'm going to go with this guy, and if he goes harder, I can go harder.' It's more of a game,

and it's more enjoyable; it makes racing a lot more fun.

**Penny:** Again that worked because you knew what you needed and wanted to do, overall, in any race. And you had lost that fear of thinking you were not capable of going hard throughout a whole 1000m.

**Steve:** Agreed.

## 1999

**Penny:** Now what about 1999? Pan American Games in Winnipeg and World Championships in Milan, Italy.

**Steve:** I wasn't really excited about racing at the Pan American Games. I did win C1 1000m and was second in C1 500m, but I didn't race very well. I was disappointed. It hurt me to race there. It was a week out of my training and I never felt like I was paddling very well from that point on. Even at the world championships, I didn't feel I was paddling well, but I was prepared to do my best. I wasn't panicking because I was world champion. But then, in the final, I had a false start that didn't get called. (Steve thought he had moved before the gun, so hesitated after the gun, expecting the race to be called back. It wasn't, but he had hesitated, and found himself behind).

**Penny:** And you're convinced that the poor start was just a mistake you made?

**Steve:** Yeah. There were things I probably could have done better. I do remember thinking during the week leading up to the final, 'I'm not feeling great so don't get your expectations too high. Go out there and go hard. Keep racing no matter what. If I come fifth, I come fifth.' Looking back, I probably should have tried a bit harder to figure out what it was that I was doing that wasn't right. I had been thinking about it for weeks, and I couldn't make the training and the feeling click on the water. Sometimes you can't figure out whether it's training or whether it's technique.

**Penny:** If you could do that season over, what would you do differently to try to feel better on the water?

**Steve:** I don't know. I always kept trying, but I just never felt up to par. I hoped it would come together on race day - and sometimes that does happen. But it didn't in Milan.

## 2000

**Steve:** So then it was on to the year of the Sydney Olympics. I won a bronze medal. It was a good year.

**Penny:** One of the things you said to me in the time leading up to Sydney was that you felt there were six men who were capable of winning a medal in C1 1000m and you were one of those six. And if you raced your race the way you wanted to race, that would give you a really good chance of a being medallist.

**Steve:** Yeah, that was true, and that had been building for four years. I had some trouble in the spring of 2000 at the first selection trials. I didn't race well. I had some stomach problems and I wasn't eating very well. I was a little nervous. It was a selection race and selection races are always more stressful because you have to win — there is no way around that!

In those first trials, I was second in both 500m and 1000m - it was a big right's wind (advantage to those who paddle on the right. Steve paddles on the left). I think I raced pretty well considering the conditions. I was

upset, but not totally down and out. There was a second chance, a second set of trials. Max Boilard, who beat me at the first set of trials, hurt his shoulder so I ended up with selection for the Olympics in C1 1000m. In Europe we raced in Szeged, Hungary, and Duisberg, Germany, where I came second in both races. I watched the video of the Hungarian race and I thought, 'What the hell are you doing out there?' I was sitting up straight, with a stroke rate of about 65. I really didn't think I was paddling very well. Then we had a training camp in Hungary and for three weeks I did video almost every day with Tamas (Tamas Buday, national canoe coach). After a week and a half, I felt like I was paddling well again. And I was. I had done video before, but not much. It was pretty boring in Hungary and there wasn't much else to do so it was good. I saw a lot of video and got good feedback from Tamas. When I raced in Duisberg three weeks later, I did really well. I came second in1000m and I think fifth in 500m. It was good. I was happy. I went home and had some good training with some team members. Then came Sydney.

**Penny:** So tell me about keeping things together for Sydney.

**Steve:** I decided that I couldn't hide from the Olympics so I was preparing myself for them, trying to imagine what it would be like at the Olympics and going through my race plan over and over and over to make sure I had it clearly in my head. Again, I ran through it on the water after every workout, and then probably a few times a week I would sit down outside of practice and go over it. Once we got to Sydney it was everyday. I went to the opening ceremonies for the first time. Angela was there. We did some fun things even though I was training twice a day.

**Penny:** Tell me about the races.

**Steve:** I had a heat and a final in C1 1000m. The heat was easy, top three went straight to the final; everyone else went to semi-final. I knew I was in top six overall so there wasn't a lot of pressure. I came second in my heat and then I had four days off before the final. I was nervous for the final but not too bad, and I didn't get sick before going out for warm-up.

**Penny:** Take me through the race.

**Steve:** I was nervous, but not so nervous that I couldn't do my warm-up, which had happened before. Sometimes in the past I had been so tight and tied up that I felt I couldn't to the warm-up. But that wasn't the case here. I felt good.

**Penny:** When you say you were nervous, what were you thinking and feeling?

**Steve:** Well, the expectations were there. I was thinking, 'I really want to win that medal. This is probably my last chance.' I allowed myself to feel those things because I had learned from the past, the hard way, that you can't hide from those thoughts and feelings. When I started to feel those emotions or thoughts, I would remind myself to get my thoughts back in the small circle. *

**Penny:** That image of what you can control — your race plan and your cues — in the small circle, and almost everything else, all those expectations, winning a medal, the things you have little if any control over, in the bigger circle, did that image help?

* (*The visual image of the two circles and their interconnection is helpful for athletes in understanding what to focus on and then in developing the ability to concentrate effectively on a consistent basis. The small*

*circle is the focus, usually containing thoughts and feelings related to execution of the race or of a game strategy, specific technical cues and confidence-building thoughts, all of which are within an athlete's control if they are physically well-prepared. The bigger circle contains all the things that athletes cannot control, such as specific issues or conflicts they might be facing, expectations from themselves or from others, results, the wanting to win the medal. The interconnection between the two circles is the athletes' development of the ability to recognize when their thoughts are on outcome or in the bigger circle, and to then bring their thoughts and emotions back into the little circle because that is what they have control over. With that sense of control they can relax, breathe, and give their physical body the freedom to execute the well-learned skills).*

**Steve:** Tremendously. That's the thing that helped me the most, because, as an athlete, you always get nervous.

**Penny:** Yes, it's helpful in understanding those almost inevitable feelings of nervousness, recognize that almost all athletes feel nervous before a competition - you are not the only one - and then find a way to accept and then put aside those feelings, those expectations, particularly thoughts around the outcome of the race (so they do not impact your performance negatively) and come back to a focus on your own execution of your race.

**Steve:** Yes. And the image of the big circle and the little circle helped so much, coming back to those things I could control. I put my race plan in the little circle. Whenever I started to get nervous and think about expectations and winning a medal, I would say, 'Ok, just go through points of my race' and that was enough to bring me back to being more calm. Not serene, but calmer. Otherwise the nervousness is like a one-way train, and it just gets worse and worse.

In the Olympic final we came off the line, and the Russian, Opalev - I was in lane three and he was in lane eight - went out like a rocket. At one point I think he was three boats of open water ahead. I was in the lane next to Dittmar (the German) and I can see that Dittmar is ahead. But I'm not worried about it because I know that if I can stay with him I'm going to be ok. And I'm staying with him. And a number of other guys are also ahead of me, but it's a bit of a blur. So I'm thinking, 'Ok, I'm thinking sixth, fifth, but that's ok.' But there was a point there, between the 750m and the 500m mark where I started thinking, 'Well, you're coming fifth; this is all happening again. You're not going to win a medal. It's all going to get worse from here; it's all going to go bad.' Then I started thinking, 'So what. You're always saying you just want to go and race hard, so race hard for fifth and be happy with that. So that's what you are going to do.'

I could hear the guys on the shore pumping the horn (the horn from Senobe Canoe Club —a big blue box — a symbol of the race being near the end. They blew it for me in 1989 and I thought it would be great to have it in Sydney so I asked if I could bring it with me and they said yes). I came through the 500m mark and I said, 'Let's just go. Put your head down and race for fifth and see how many guys you can pass.' So I did. I didn't look over at all. I just went. I could see that I was catching people, but it was like a blur. I could tell I was gaining on people, but I didn't know if there were three guys over there or one guy. It turned out that it was just one. I passed him and that gave me a little boost to actually move up on people and pass them. I didn't know where I

was until I actually crossed the finish line. I knew I had a medal, and that was good, but I didn't know if I was second or third. Still, I was disappointed because I wanted to win. I thought I could have beaten Dittmar, but at the same time, this is the Olympics.

**Penny:** At the 500m mark of that 1000m race, when you started to doubt yourself, how did you turn that around? What was happening there?

**Steve:** There were a few strokes where I was definitely doubting myself, and I started to slow down, which was not in my race plan. Then I got back into it. The one thought I remember having was, 'I'm not leaving here disappointed. Whatever happens, do my best, whether I come third, fifth, sixth, ninth whatever. This is probably your last chance so …' I remember in Barcelona (1992 Olympics) standing in the shower listening to the national anthems being played and thinking, 'If only I had done something different.' In this race I thought, 'I don't want that feeling. I want to be sitting watching the closing ceremonies knowing I did everything I could.' So that's what I did.

**Penny:** Did the race plan help in the first 500m when Obalov was so far out there, and you knew that?

**Steve:** For sure. I did stay pretty close to the race plan the whole way.

## 2001

**Penny:** How did 2001 go?

**Steve:** Well, this year has been a bit of a strange year. I've really been focused on school and doing well at that, trying to be my best at both school and paddling. At the worlds I was 5th in C1 1000m and eighth in C1 500m. There were times when I could have trained more, but I was in school full time so I was willing to accept the consequences. I think I raced pretty well at the worlds.

**Penny:** What does the future hold for you?

**Steve:** Well, we're going to have a baby. It's a new challenge. It's something else that I can prove to people that you can go to school fulltime and have a baby - basically have other things in your life - and still compete at a world-class level. What I would really like to do is have the baby, graduate, get a full-time job and still keep training hard and doing really well at the world championships. I'm twenty-nine years old. I've been doing this for seventeen years. I don't need to train as hard as I used to. I don't need to beat myself up every day on the water. If I do it at the right times of the year, I'll be good.

**Penny:** Is there anything you want to add regarding the things that you have learned over the years of paddling and competing nationally and internationally?

**Steve:** The visual image of the big circle/little circle helped me a lot. It gave me a way to focus and a way to control my nervousness, not let it get away with me. When I look back, that is the one thing that worked for me. It might not work for everyone, but when I go out to schools and talk to kids, I tell them that this is what worked for me and they might want to try it.

**Penny:** It is a learning process, isn't it? I think it helps to have gone through some tough races, tough competitions, when things fall apart, to really understand, appreciate, and know all the aspects of what can be in that 'big circle' and why and how those aspects inevitably hurt your perform-

ance. But it does take time to fully appreciate that, it seems.

**Steve:** Yes, I agree. For a long time I thought the problem was my training program because for some reason I was getting to the world championships and I was not racing very well. Yeah, I was getting nervous, but big deal, that wasn't the problem, I thought I needed to train harder, and probably there was something to that. But really, the biggest part of my success was learning how to focus on the right thing, on the race, on the plan for my race.

**Penny:** Yes, and practicing those skills everyday in your training, physically and visually. It is a training process, and you trained your self to be 'in the small circle', 'in the execution of your race.' As a result, you were able to take in other information during the race, such as how other competitors were racing, which is relevant information, not panic, and be able to come back into your focus, your own race.

**Steve:** Yes, absolutely. For a lot of years I just said, 'Stop being so nervous.' But I just couldn't do it. In order to stop being nervous, I needed something else to think about. So a focus of key technical things within my race plan, within that small circle, is what I practiced and what worked for me. The other thing that helped me succeed was learning how to work through that physical and psychological pain barrier of the 1000m.

**Penny:** And that happened initially in 1998, when you were sick for days prior to racing?

**Steve:** Yes, that's true. When I was a kid, I used to be able to go as hard as I could the whole way through the race and not think about the pain. But at some point I started worrying about the pain, and I got into a pattern, in Canada, where I didn't have to fight through it in order to win. For many years, when I got to the world championships, I wasn't well prepared at all for working past the pain, until that race in '98 where I broke through to the next level within a race, and moved through the pain to where I started to feel good again.

**Penny:** Those two aspects are very much related aren't they? Over the years you learned what to be focused on and how to effectively focus, and that, in turn, helped you keep going in 1000m when it started to hurt, because you had technical aspects of your race to focus on.

**Steve:** Yes.

**Penny:** Great, Steve. Thank you for your insightful analysis of how you developed into a great C1 paddler.