

51

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EXPLORE BRAZIL BEST-KEPT WHITEWATER SECRET

INTERVIEW - JAMES BYRD

EVENT LITTLE WHITE SALMON RACE - FOUR YEARS OF RACING

PROFILE - ERIC JACKSON

DESTINATION CROATIA - A PADDLING PARADISE FOR ALL

PORTFOLIO



ERIC JACKSON

Whitewater Legend

The Jackson Kayak brand and the Jackson family are at the forefront of whitewater's public image. Most paddlers know that the leader of that crew, Eric, widely known as EJ, is a master of freestyle. If you've been following whitewater for long, you might even know about his earlier career in slalom, or his many boat designs. But what most of us don't know is this: What drives a man to move his family into a travel-camper, start a kayak company, win 4 world championships, and remain on some form of the USA kayak team for twenty-five years straight? As Eric Jackson trains for another title at age fifty, it might be time to find out.

Words: Tyler Williams - Photography: Courtesy of Eric Jackson



Photo: Bob Schmitt/Anadolu

□ peels out for the virgin run of "Braver Wave," Rock Island, at 23,000 cfs in 2004.

When James Jackson and his 10-year-old son, Eric, showed up at the national championships for remote control aircraft, the event organizer wasn't thrilled. With hundreds of spectators lining the airfield, how could he allow a young boy to operate a model airplane that zoomed along at 180 miles-per-hour? The chief official refused Eric's entry in the competition, but James was fierce in his son's defense. "If you can out-fly him, fine." The gauntlet was thrown.

A tiny landing zone, far smaller than the standard, was indicated on the grass. The organizer, convinced that the debate would soon be settled, went back to checking in other contestants as Eric launched his craft. The whining engine and remarkable speed of the plane turned heads as little Eric Jackson operated the remote-control stick with laser focus. After a few attention getting stunts, he banked in hot, landing dead center on his improbable target. The organizer nodded at James in resignation, and added Eric's name to his list.

"I learned right then," says Eric Jackson today, "that it's all about performance." That drive to perform would materialize, decades later, into 4 freestyle world championships, innumerable extreme racing wins, and more competitive success than has ever been achieved in the world of kayaking. The biggest potential threat to this dominance could come, eventually, from Jackson's son, Dane. And that would fit straight into the generational momentum that has been gaining steam for some time now.

Eric's grandfathers—one was a judge while the other worked in the steel mills—were both hard working Midwesterners from humble beginnings. Eric, too, started life in a single-wide trailer on the fringes of Cincinnati with his parents and sister. Mom, Karen, was a clerk. James, a soldier in the 82nd Airborne (later known as the Green Berets), earned an engineering degree and got a job at Piper Aircraft designing and testing model planes before they went into full-size production. He developed the first variable-control servos, markedly expanding the capabilities of "joy-stick" controllers. James brought his passion home, and most days he and Eric could be found in the backyard building or flying the remote control planes. It was more than a hobby: "We

used the best materials, and we practiced more than anybody else," remembers Eric with pride. Hence, the championship appearance at age 10.

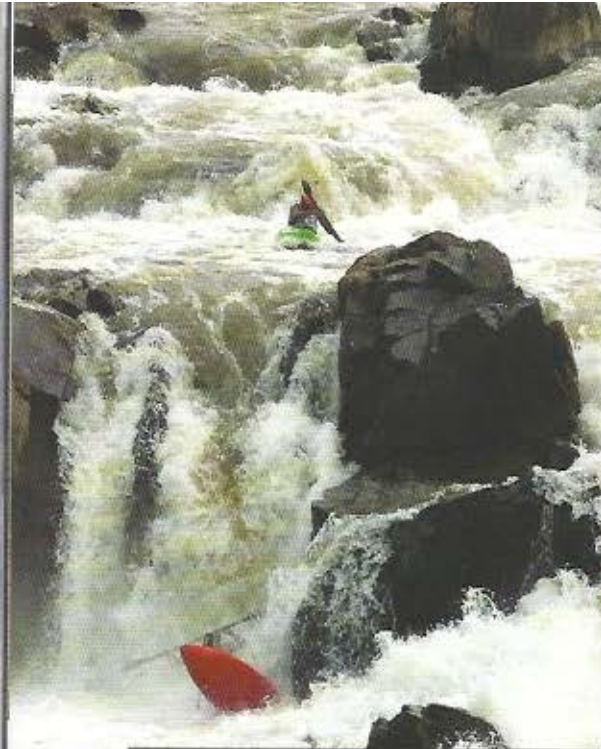
Piper Aircraft moved the family to Pennsylvania, which is where young Eric Jackson got his first taste of river running, tagging along with his dad and some test pilots from Piper as they ran Pine Creek Canyon, "The Grand Canyon of the East." The Jacksons had an aluminum Grumman canoe. Eric cajoled his way into one of the pilot's fiberglass kayaks when he could. His logical progression toward whitewater championships might have followed, but an essential ingredient to his competitive success was yet to be forged, and it did not come quietly.

"His work ethic was phenomenal," says coach Endicott, "set a workout for him and he'd want to double it." After race training, Jackson often rallied his slalom pals for laps on Great Falls of the Potomac.

Piper moved operations to sunny Florida, and the Jacksons followed. The year was 1976, and in the Deep South, mandatory racial integration in schools was being instituted. Eric was 12. He was small, white, and the new kid—the perfect target. His first day of school saw him shoved into a broom closet and slugged

into submission by a half-dozen angry teenagers. The beatings continued almost daily. Searching for a way to elevate through the barbaric pecking order, he enlisted a friend in an afternoon training regimen of wrestling and boxing. After a month, Eric was ready to fight back, and at the next provocation he willingly engaged. He openly challenged his tormenters, and even began arranging organized fights after school. His pent-up fury was finally unleashed on the chief bully. Eric broke the kid's nose against the hard porcelain of a toilet bowl. Little Eric Jackson was never harassed again.

As an escape from the cultural tumult, Eric took up fishing. Bass, croppie, snook, tarpon; he could catch them all, either from shore or from the seat of the canoe. Life went on in Florida, but it was always a bit of a struggle. Emblematic of the period was a Grumman surf mission Eric and James undertook in the tepid subtropical break. They dumped, swam, and were ordered off the beach for creating a hazard. Dissatisfied, they drove home through oppressive sultry air. When the opportunity came to move north to the mountains of New Hampshire, the Jackson family jumped.



EJ (red boat) holding the lead in the finals at the Great Falls Race, until the paddler behind him spears him on landing, putting EJ off the water for a few months.



Married for 25 years, Kristine is EJ's first priority.



Dane and Dad playing chess. After Kristine, EJ's kids are his next highest priority.



This is how EJ puts in at Rock Island everyday, that is when he isn't doing a backflip!

If he was hungry, he'd walk into a McDonald's and start talking to an employee. Before long, he'd say something like, "You'd probably get fired if you gave me a quarter-pounder-meal and a chocolate shake?" For Eric, it worked

Exuberant with the change of scenery, James promptly wrapped the family Grumman on a rock, forcing father and son to go shopping for a more versatile replacement. They came home with fiberglass kayaks, Lettman Mark IV's, and joined the local paddling club. Conservative club members were loathe to allow Eric on the esteemed Kennebec Gorge, and again, James had to fight for his son's acceptance. With that approval, Eric paddled so hard that he strained his back muscles, putting him out of commission for a month. But the hook was set. Within two seasons, Eric had a photo-boating job on the river. On off days, he and his friends—cheerfully nicknamed "Opie" and "Yuk Yuk"—followed a rule requiring them to jump into every hole, regardless of its size or shape. Pourover thrashings became part of a regular day's outing. When the Mark IV finally wore out after all the mandatory rides, Eric and his dad began building their own boats for the club (James was now president), copying Phoenix Savages in their basement. They cranked out nearly 100 kayaks over the next year. "I feel bad for Phoenix," Eric the kayak manufacturer says today, "I'd be really upset if someone did that with my boats."

Still a teenager, Eric gained a reputation as the best play boater around. So then, he was perplexed to see an unknown, aggressive paddler shred the Kennebec's ender wave without launching an ender. "Ender, ender!" Eric barked from his photo spot. As he raced downstream to tell the guy about the opportunity he'd missed, he noticed a USA Kayak Team insignia on the guy's pfd. Jackson was intrigued. "What's that?" "Well, I'm on the team," replied slalom racer Hank Thorburn. "What! There is a USA kayak team?" It was as if Michael Jordan had suddenly discovered the existence of something called the NBA. From that day forward, Eric's goal was to make the team. He got the phone number of coach Bill Endicott. Politely fielding EJ's queries, Endicott asked what races the 18-year-old had won. "None," replied Jackson, "but I'm a good kayaker. I'll make the team." His confidence was strong, at least.

Before he could move to Washington D.C. to try out, however, college beckoned. Despite his early conflicts in school, he'd always managed good grades that groomed him for university. And then there was swimming. He started swimming competitively at age eight, and watched Mark Spitz take home 7 medals from the Munich Olympics. Eric thought he might do the same

someday, and by his senior year of high school, Jackson was the New Hampshire state champion in the 100-meter butterfly. The following season he was on the team at the University of Maine. The coaches prescribed over-demanding workouts that coupled with Jackson's own masochist training tendencies, and tendonitis was soon affecting both his shoulders. He started skipping swim practice to go kayaking. The coaches didn't like this, and Eric didn't particularly like the coaches. His swimming career quickly faded into the past.

During the same period, Eric's mom, Karen, passed away from incurable bone cancer. Achieving measurable success in kayaking never felt more right. He transferred to the University of Maryland to be closer to the U.S. slalom team, where he planned to become one of the top 4 racers in order to win a spot. Coach Endicott was encouraging. "With proper training," he suggested, "you might make the team in 5 years." Eric figured he'd make it in one.

He didn't reach the top 4, but he did make the B team in 1984, good enough to travel with the squad to Augsburg, Germany for the world championships. Even though Eric was just a 20-year-old alternate, his reputation as a play boater preceded him. Germany's Jan Kellner approached him at Augsburg, asking "Can you show me some of your rodeo tricks?" Jackson jumped in the nearest boat (probably a Prijon T-Slalom), and did the best freestyle demonstration he could muster in a long boat and 3-feet of water. "If I had a Dancer," he assured, "I could really show you some stuff." Dancer absence aside, the ripple effects from that small moment carried across the pool of whitewater



Bill Endicott, USA Olympic Slalom Coach hoists EJ up in celebration after his 1992 Olympic Team making run.

PROFILE



Getting his mug shot on the train bridge next to his house.



Getting second to Richard Fox in Brazil at the Malt 90 Cup, 1988. Still sporting his speedo, EJ beat Richard there the following year.



Day one as a dad. Little Emily in DC in 1990.



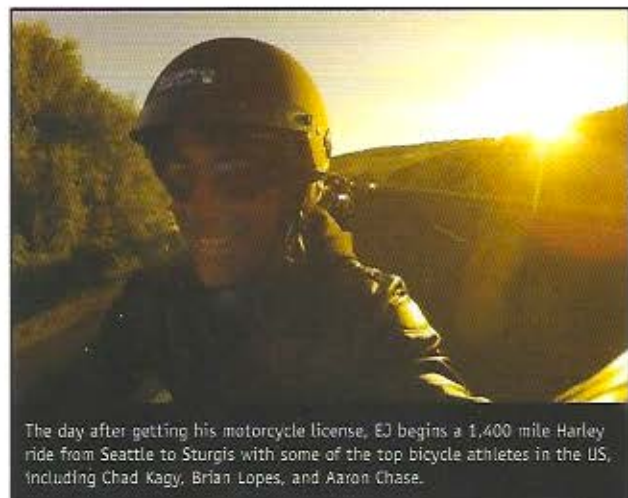
At the GoPro Games in 2013, EJ makes his new 2014 Rock Star fly for the crowd.

progression. Jan profoundly influenced a young Arnd Schaefflin (KS #34) via that same meager hole at Augsburg. Later, Kellner won the unofficial first freestyle worlds, a 1992 event called the stunt boat championships.

Eric returned to the states and dropped out of school, leaving his engineering degree discarded along the path to whitewater glory, so he hoped. This caused some friction with dad, who had floated Eric's trip to Europe. Upon learning that his son was no longer attending school, he presented him with a bill for \$13,000 in back fees for tuition. Eric never paid that, but the point was taken. He was now on his own. And he was broke.

Until this point in his life, Eric usually had more money than his peers. Imbued with a salesman's charm, he'd been an entrepreneur since he was 10 years old, when he made cinnamon toothpicks at home and sold them for a nickel a piece at the school bus stop. He'd haul in \$35 a day sometimes. With those kinds of sales skills, one can always find a job, and Jackson has found more than his share. He sold cars, drove limousines, bicycled rickshaws, worked at pizza joints, and sold insurance. But they all seemed to cut into training time. So Eric made paddling his job, and remained mostly penniless. For the next decade, Jackson survived on his charm, and hustle.

If he was hungry, he'd walk into a McDonald's and start talking to an employee. Before long, he'd say something like, "You'd probably get fired if you gave me a quarter-pounder-meal and a chocolate shake?" For Eric, it worked. He learned where the returned pizzas were stacked at Dominos, and which employees



The day after getting his motorcycle license, EJ begins a 1,400 mile Harley ride from Seattle to Sturgis with some of the top bicycle athletes in the US, including Chad Kagy, Brian Lopes, and Aaron Chase.

would slide them his way. He even coaxed gasoline into his tank from local station owners. This was important, because he usually lived out of his Honda Accord hatchback. EJ looks back on the period without a shred of guilt. "The American economy was investing in me at the time. They just didn't know it."

Most kayakers, in these circumstances, would find a commercial rafting scene and earn a humble living by guiding rafts or video boating. But Eric was singularly focused on making the U.S. team, and to do that you had to practice in D.C. Jackson's exhaustive training regimen was renowned. "His work ethic was phenomenal," says coach Endicott, "Set a workout for him and he'd want to double it." After race training, Jackson often rallied his slalom pals for laps on Great Falls of the Potomac. "He'd go over Great Falls forwards, backwards, with a paddle, without a paddle, whatever," Endicott reminisces.

Eric finally did make the team at age twenty-five, in 1989 (5 years after his start, just as Endicott predicted), but that didn't help his financial woes any. Instead of picking up another random job, he parlayed his U.S. team status into a donation program, going door to door across D.C. suburbs to ask for support. He made a spreadsheet of addresses and donations. He calculated a minimum number of contacts required per hour. He didn't walk from house to house. He ran. When someone answered the door, Eric presented them with a stamped envelope of his kayak news clippings, and offered them a personal sponsorship of his Olympic dream. The fundraising culminated when he took his show to the corner of Connecticut and K Streets in central Washington D.C., where the nation's top attorneys, lobbyists, and politicians walk to lunch. Eric posted up with a stack of autographed 8x10 race pictures of himself, and requested \$20 donations for each. The tactic worked well. It also gained national media attention, and really pissed off the United States Olympic Committee.

For an organization whose image rested on their support of Olympic athletes, it didn't look good for one of those athletes to be begging on the streets of the nation's capital. Eric got a message from the board stating authoritatively, "When we see you at the next event, we'll have a meeting as to how we'll punish you." EJ hardly backed down, and no official punishment was rendered, but the conflict did help shift Eric into the next phase of his career.

Before that next phase started, however, a critical piece was added to the Eric Jackson puzzle. Most elements of his story—the toughness, the competitiveness, the determination and the disregard for the establishment—were reactions to outside influence. But there was one thing that came to him more organically, seemingly fated to temper his manic pursuits. Her name was Kristine.

Eric was gate judging beside a Vermont slalom course when a girl walked past in a candy-stripe swimsuit. "She definitely didn't look

PROFILE



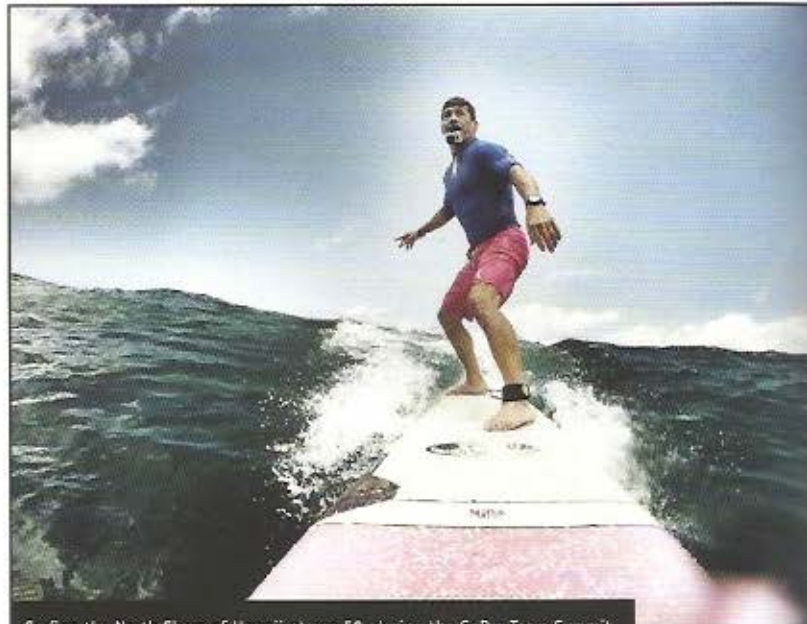
The arrow EJ sports around his neck and on the bottom of his carbon boat is a Norse Rune called Tyr and is for "victory in competition." Kristine gave it to him in 1998 and he won the next 11 events in a row.

like she was from around there," EJ recalls with perfect clarity. At a break in the action, he ran away from his post to go say hello, and by that night he was getting her car stuck in the mud while trying to drive up a ski run at Stratton Mountain Resort. After dismantling a lift shack for plywood to help get unstuck, he drove Kristine home and presented the parents with a hand written coupon saying, "Good for one car wash." They let him sleep on the couch. The next morning, he literally fell out of his breakfast chair when he learned that the girl of his dreams was only seventeen. The stars had aligned, however, and a little over a year later the two were married.

Their union produced daughter Emily in the spring of 1990. It was hardly a typical American family nest. They lived in a rented basement with a shared upstairs bathroom. Eric was in good shape—after paddling during the day, he rode bicycle rickshaws through the hilly streets of Georgetown at night. An inheritance from his grandmother offered temporary deliverance from the financial strain, allowing Eric to quit the night job and train full-time. The extra energy paid off. In July of 1992 Jackson was on a plane to Barcelona representing the United States in K-1 slalom at the Olympic Games.

One thing about Eric Jackson—he sometimes gets so absorbed in the present that his sphere of reality narrows. He becomes exceptionally unaware of circumstances beyond his focus. On the day of Olympic finals this trance-like state reared its ugly head at the worst time. He was refining his line in a quest for perfection when he happened to glance at his watch and notice that his race, the one event that would measure the result of his life's quest, was due to begin in two minutes. He ran to the top of the course and paddled across a long canal of flatwater just to reach the starting line. It was an all-out sprint. Eric says he "probably set the world record for a 500 meter sprint in a slalom boat." As he broke the electronic eye at the start of the course, a surreal blur of television cameras, spectators, and race officials looked on curiously at the American who nearly missed the race. Eric started the course breathing hard, his shoulders already burning. Despite the exhaustion, he had a clean run, and managed 13th place, top among U.S. finishers. Who knows what might have been, but Jackson's fate did not hold gold. His kayaking legacy would fall well outside the narrow confines of a slalom course.

The dream he'd been chasing for over a decade was over. And like so many athletes, he was faced with the sudden imperative—what now? Eric found his epiphany in the many predictable T.V. interviews of his Olympic peers. Everybody spoke of the sacrifice they made to reach their dream, and Eric wondered, "shouldn't the 'sacrifice' be the goal?" This "journey as reward" philosophy can be stated in many ways, but Eric's realization began to crystallize after Barcelona. He is a fan of motivational speaker Denis Waitley, an oft-satirized author known for quips like: "Losers make promises they often break. Winners make commitments they always keep." It might sound silly to some, but the potent ambitions that stoke Jackson simply require parameters like this. Sometimes those boundaries come from a catchy mantra, and sometimes they come from Kristine.



Surfing the North Shore of Hawaii at age 50, during the GoPro Team Summit at Turtle Bay

At one point early in his career, Eric took a break from kayaking to wear a suit, selling life insurance and mutual funds under his own banner called "consumer financial services." He had visions of being a millionaire by age thirty. When he showed up at Kristine's doorstep in a suit and tie, she asked flatly, "What are you doing?" Kayaking clearly made him happier than anything else, yet Jackson felt compelled to succeed through society's measure, whether he wanted the money or not. Making a million dollars defines success in mainstream American culture, and so that is what Eric wanted to do. It was winning. Kristine opened his eyes to the farce. Eric dumped the big money scheme and went back to paddling.

But even the occupation of professional kayaker can be stressful. After he won the first world championships of freestyle in 1993—an event that suited his strengths more than slalom—he and Kristine ran a kayak school in the D.C. area. Kristine answered a toll-free number while raising Emily and their new toddler, Dane, and she rarely missed a booking. Eric ran the instruction, churning through 200 students per week at times. Besides running the school, Eric was traveling and competing extensively in freestyle, still racing slalom, and working for Wave Sport. It was all too much.

He missed the Olympic cut for the 1996 Games by one spot, and finished second in the freestyle worlds of '97. Thanks to the kayak school, the Jackson's were earning more money than ever before. They had a house and a nice car. Yet, the happiness

On the day of Olympic finals this trance-like state reared its ugly head at the worst time. He was refining his line in a quest for perfection when he happened to glance at his watch and notice that his race, the one event that would measure the result of his life's quest, was due to begin in two minutes.



EJ's 50th Birthday Party at the Nile Special Wave, Uganda. They surfed anything that would float and EJ had to sport his speedo for the special occasion.



Marianne Saether brings EJ another round during Oktoberfest 2012, an annual stop after the Sickline Extreme World Championships.



Kristine and EJ with Richie Weiss two days after their wedding in Wausau, Wisconsin. EJ trained and raced for many years with Richie before his accident in 1997 on the Upper White Salmon.



Known as the Ender and Pirouette King, EJ never missed good "0-Deck" levels on the Potomac. The Dancer was his boat of choice from 1984-1990 when he wasn't paddling his slalom boat.

factor was at an all-time low. Their marriage was fragile. Eric wanted to paddle free of restrictions. Kristine wanted to have her kids' dad around. The dream was crumbling when she suggested something creative: Why not move into an R.V.? They could follow the rivers full time, and Kristine could home-school the children, something she embraced. "We didn't even pack," says Eric. "We put an ad in the Washington Post for 'house sale,' and people literally fought over our stuff; toys, kitchen stuff, furniture, televisions, clothes, everything but a few boxes that we'd already packed into our new 31-foot Coachman Mirada R.V."

Wave Sport owner Chan Zwanzig made the down payment on the rig. Eric had been working for the company for a couple years, and clearly their relationship ran deeper than business. Chan had approached Eric during his spat with the Olympic Committee, offering support "against the entrenched authorities of the sport." A few years later Eric was paddling and designing Wave Sport Kayaks.

His first design there, in 1997, was the X, a radical new playboat that was met with skepticism. Before the production team accepted it as a legitimate kayak, Eric had to take the prototype back to

Rock Island, Tennessee, and make a video of himself running through every freestyle move known to man. Within months, both the men's and women's freestyle champions at the pre-worlds were paddling an X. Eric worked on boat designs with his friend David Knight, a Naval engineer and C-1 paddler whom Eric had met at Great Falls in the early '90s. They laid up nearly 100 designs together and although many never made it to production, a few altered the direction of the kayaking.

Following the X came the Y (a river runner), and the Z—a river running playboat revered by bigger paddlers. When Jackson and Knight pitched their evolution of the X, a sly low volume boat called the XXX, they were again met with resistance. Jackson's single-mindedness can sometimes be hard to swallow. If he believes in something—a business concept, a training regimen, a boat design—it is next to impossible to sway his idea. This intransigence nearly ended his career at Wave Sport, but EJ's confidence in the new boat wasn't unfounded. After the XXX was finally made, it dominated freestyle competitions, and made the flat spin a possibility for average boaters.

Jackson's boat designs left an impact on kayaking, but his competitive success in those designs are what fueled their acceptance. Eric has won more whitewater kayaking events than anyone in history, and no one is even in his league when it comes to competitive longevity. In his physical prime, he remained sequestered to slalom. His success in extreme races and freestyle events didn't begin until his thirties. During his forties, when most paddlers are ratcheting back, EJ was at times dominant in freestyle, winning two world championships and two pre-worlds. In 2014, he turned 50. Unbelievably, he continues to compete against paddlers half his age.

It's probably safe to say that Eric Jackson is the most competitive kayaker to ever put on a pfd. The easy-going attitude that prevails in whitewater kayaking is somewhat at odds with the uber-competitive strut with which EJ moves through life. But he is unabashed about his nature, and one has to admire that. As with top athletes in almost all sports, he is hard-wired to compete, and win. Clay Wright, who has paddled and worked with Eric for years, explains: "He is just as competitive at disc-golf or tennis, or anything, as he is at kayaking."

So when he started Jackson Kayak in 2003, there was little doubt that a new force was emerging in the kayak marketplace. Once he found an investor to start the business, it took just 3 years for Jackson Kayak to become a leading manufacturer. Now, they are the top selling brand. Predictably, Eric assembled a dream team of industry players to create the dynasty.

Joe Pulliam and Tony Lee from Dagger, Dave Olsen and Leif Koehler from Confluence, James Macbeath from Liquid Skills; all these guys are now part of the Jackson Kayak team. Clay Wright (KS #46) does R&D. Eric's dad, now 80, works for Jackson Kayak as a hull design engineer. His mother-in-law, Lorraine, is the accessories manager. Whitewater Grand Prix winner and current freestyle champ Dane Jackson often travels with his family, including his little brother, Eric and Kristine's third kid, KC, is now almost six. He's been paddling for three years. Emily (2011 world freestyle champion) and her husband Nick Troutman (2009 world freestyle champ), sometimes round out the caravan with their son, Tucker Nicholas Troutman (TNT), making EJ a granddad. The Jackson tribe is a kinship like no other.

An advertisement for the company once featured Kristine and Eric speeding along in their sportster with Emily and Dane strapped to the roof racks, in their kayaks. The entire clan beams with joy. It's a great ad, but it's also a portrayal of an actual lifestyle, one that was wrested from theory to reality. There is a house now, at Rock Island, Tennessee, beside the Caney Fork River, but the R.V. is still the Jackson home for half the year, with foreign travel occupying another few months. Naturally, the best freestyle paddlers in the world are regulars at the White Nile.

Jackson Kayaks is now in the fishing kayak market, playing on Eric's roots from the Florida backwaters. With classic EJ braggadocio, he says, "In 5 years it will be obvious how interested I am in fishing. I'm gonna win the Bass Masters Classic." That title carries a \$500,000 prize. Maybe Eric will make his million after all, now that he's not chasing it anymore. Or perhaps he won't. One thing is for sure, there will be plenty of success along the way, however you care to measure it.

This is Tyler Williams' twenty-seventh profile for Kayak Session. He is a source-to-sea and whitewater paddler, and the author of seven books. For more, please visit funhoggpress.com or funhoggpress.wordpress.com.