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The king of kayak's royal family

Former Olympian Eric Jackson finds direction in the boating industry

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Salida - It was the best Father's Day ever for Eric Jackson.

His son Dane Jackson, 13, won the junior freestyle kayaking comp at FIBArk. Then his daughter Emily Jackson, 17, took the women's title. And the 43-year-old world champion paddler took the men's title, capping yet another Jackson podium sweep for kayaking's royal family.



Eric Jackson paddles to another victory at last weekend's FIBArk festival near Salida. (Post / Jason Blevins)

It could have been much different. Almost 20 years ago, the young Olympic slalom boater gave up his kayak grudgingly and began selling insurance. He was a newlywed, struggling to unite his dreams of being a champion paddler and a millionaire by 30.

One morning as he grumpily knotted a tie and headed into Washington, D.C., to find that million, his wife, Kristine Jackson, changed the course of their lives, as well as the future of kayaking.

"I told him he needed to close his office and get back in the kayak," she said. "I didn't really like him as an insurance guy. I told him he's happiest when he's in a kayak, so go paddle."

Eric Jackson dropped the briefcase that day, picking up the paddle and landing a job as a waiter at a Washington pizza joint.

Two months ago, he won his fourth world kayaking title, cementing his legacy as the world's greatest playboater.

His 4-year-old company, Jackson Kayak, is one of the world's largest manufacturers of whitewater kayaks.

His kids are closing in on his medal count, and Dane Jackson beat him for the first time at this month's freestyle contest in Lyons. Also, his team of Jackson Kayak paddlers is forging new ground in the sports of freestyle kayaking and expeditionary kayaking.

He recently finished building a house in Rock Island, Tenn., finally moving his family out of the kayak-laden RV they have traversed the country in for several years.

"My whole life is based around having fun as a boater. And it used to be, when I was just scraping by and barely making it, it was all about just surviving, and I had these goals but it was mostly about getting to the next day," he said. "The broad picture for me now is that I don't need to be selfish any more as an athlete, which I felt like I did in the '80s and early '90s. It took a long time before I had enough under my belt going for me that I could really spread out a little bit and start influencing people in a positive way."

His recent successes did not surprise him.

When he sculpted a business plan for Jackson Kayak, the industry was awash in kayak companies fighting for a dwindling number of whitewater paddlers, who tended to hold on to their boats for several years. It was not a healthy industry and the idea of another kayak company (especially one with a plan to own the majority of the market) drew a chorus of naysayers.

"Any businessperson would say it was a bad business move, which is, as you know, the reason it is successful. If it was a good plan, people would have done it earlier," he said. "I knew we could do it differently."

Today, Jackson's boats are ubiquitous on the river. At playparks across the country they are the spinningest machines on the foam pile. It is not uncommon for a team of Jackson paddlers to be atop every freestyle

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"He's brought the industry back to a more personal level. It really means a lot for an owner of a company to say "Thanks for being on my team," said Glenwood Springs' Ben Guska, 21, a professional kayaker who left an industry-founding company three months ago to join Jackson's "Team JK."

"He's not just the best kayaker but he's the best competitor. He inspires his team to reach further. I feel at home on his team."

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