

Vail teams on top of worlds
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Vail teams on top of worlds
U.S. powers head to South Korea to challenge rafting's elite squads
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Members of the Timberline-8 Ball team paddle to victory in the Raft Paddlecross race on the Eagle River during the Teva Mountain Games. (Getty Images / Doug Pensinger)

Granite - In most sports, the rule come crunch time is "win or go home." In the world of whitewater raft racing, it's more like "win or stay home."

Travel, for the most part, remains the incentive for the group of men and women comprising the Timberline-Behind the 8 Ball and Timberline Women whitewater rafting teams from Vail, also known as the reigning men's and women's U.S. national champions in the largely unheralded sport. Since there is next to no money in the competitive side of whitewater rafting, the shared experience of seeing and paddling some of the world's great rivers is a major motivating factor behind work that goes into becoming a champion.

The two teams are set for their third International Rafting Federation (IRF) World Rafting Championship (WRC) competition. This one takes place June 27-July 2 on the Naerinchon River in the mountainous region of Gangwon Province, east of Seoul, South Korea. There, they hope to do something no other U.S. rafting team has done.

"We keep getting better, closer, but we haven't won the whole thing. That's our goal," said Chris "Mongo" Reeder, a core member of the 8 Ball team that placed first in the sprint and third overall at the IRF worlds in Ecuador two years ago. "We're in the best shape we've ever been in, so we're looking good."

As Reeder alludes, there's also a fair amount of pride on the line when the 42 member nations of the IRF put rafts in the river and square off in sprint, slalom and downriver racing competition every other year. Only one nationally selected team from each country is eligible to compete in each division of WRC competition, and the men's and women's teams sponsored by Vail-based Timberline Tours earned the right to represent the U.S. by

winning the national championship in the fall in Gore Canyon, the steepest and most technically challenging section of the Colorado River.

Already the winningest rafting team in U.S. history, Timberline-8 Ball will attempt to win its sixth consecutive national championship today on the Class IV-V Pine Creek section of the Arkansas River south of Granite.

"Right now, we're ranked third-best in the world," Timberline-8 Ball team member Todd Toledo said. "If a team can come up and beat us, then great. But I don't see it."

Toledo's confidence is not without justification. Ranked internationally behind only perennial powers Russia and the Czech Republic, Timberline-8 Ball - which also includes Chip Carney of Denver and Mike Reid, Ollie Dose and Brent Redden from the Vail Valley - was not allowed to compete in the downriver race at the 59th annual FIBArk Whitewater Festival in Salida last weekend because they are considered a "professional" team, Reeder said.

Much of the reputation stems from a rigorous workout schedule designed by Topper Hagerman of the Howard Head Sports Medicine Clinic. The schedule has the team paddling flat water four times a week beginning in April, along with regular resistance training and daily cardio workouts on top of long days of commercial rafting trips throughout the spring and summer. The rest comes from an unparalleled ability to beat all comers in nearly every raft race they have entered since forming in 2001.

"It can go either way. It can inspire other teams, or it can dishearten them," Reid said. "I hope there's somebody else out there that can be inspired to take on the big boys and beat us. If you don't have that drive, you are never going to be competitive on a national level. You have to have something motivating you."

Timberline-8 Ball is drawing much of its motivation from the impending breakup of the core group after the trip to South Korea. Win or lose, Reeder, Toledo and Reid are committed to one more attempt at a world title in 2009, but the other members are moving on to make room for what team members hope will be a new generation of whitewater dominance.

"Of course I wish it would stay together and be the dominant raft team for a long time, but at the same time, we're almost hindering our sport because we've dominated for so long," Toledo said. "It would almost be better to put the legacy of 8 Ball behind us and all start out own teams and grow the sport. This is the best raft team the U.S. has ever put out, and it's going to take awhile for anyone else in the U.S. to bring up the level of competitiveness that we've brought."

Lend a hand -- *The Timberline Women and Behind the 8 Ball teams are still seeking sponsors and donations for their world championship bid in South Korea. For more information, contact Timberline Tours at 970-476-1414 or 800-831-1414.*

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