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## Parsons 6th, a lot wiser



St. John's Jesuit graduate Scott Parsons said he couldn't find his groove in the semis, but now has a better feel of what to expect in 2008. - (BOSTON GLOBE)

ATHENS - Sylvania native Scott Parsons finished sixth in the Olympic single kayaking yesterday. He had advanced to the 10-boat final by posting the ninth-best time in the semifinals yesterday morning.

"I paddled hard and never really found my groove," "I got a lot of experience and now I know what the Olympics feels like. Hopefully, four years from now, I'll be at the top and favored coming in."

Parsons, 25, is a graduate of St. John's Jesuit. Teammate Brett Heyl, 22, fell short of the K-1 finals, finishing 15th in his semifinal run, but vowed to come back stronger and wiser for the 2008 Games in Beijing.

Frenchman Benoit Peschier won the gold by edging Britain's Campbell Walsh, who was leading heading into the last run.

"The idea was to give it all - without restraint - and work as hard as I could physically as well as technically and mentally," said Peschier, whose father, Claude, was the single kayak slalom world champion in 1969.

Walsh took silver after seeing his 0.25-second lead turn into a more than two-second deficit. Defending world champion Fabien Lefevre, also of France, took bronze after being hurt by a two-second penalty on each of his last two runs.

The setting for the event was a paddler's dream: a giant, man-made slalom course roiling with saltwater pumped in from the Aegean Sea that made the eyeballs sting and the super-sleek boats bounce over the rapids.

It was equally fun for the spectators, who packed the 8,000-seat grandstand to cheer as the paddlers fought frantically to make time and avoid contact with the gates. Some fans sprawled on beach towels. Others formed circles to dance the traditional Kalamatianos. And nearly everyone waved a flag, whether Greek, Slovak, Czech, German, French or American.

Whitewater paddling's final day at the 2004 Olympics had the wild flavor of a World Cup soccer match, but without the partisanship. Paddlers raced one at a time rather than against one another. It wasn't so much Czechs against Slovaks or Brits against Germans as it was man against water.

Everybody cheered a good run regardless of the paddler's nationality.

All the action was projected on a giant TV screen set by the course's sharpest turn, accompanied by the fever pitch of play-by-play announcers and punctuated by horns, bells and the roar of rushing water.