



Georgie Cubin



About Georgie (they/them)

I'm an accessible paddling instructor based in Leicester and spend most of my time paddling on the River Soar. I love coaching canoeing, but have enjoyed working alongside a weekly evening paddleboard group since 2022. Doing that has taken me on lots of paddle adventures with wonderful people of all abilities. Our group is currently working on the world record for the longest SUP chain!

Can you tell us a little bit more about your experience as a neurodivergent paddler?

It took me a while to get into paddling, I used to kayak when I was younger but as I grew older I moved away from watersports. Having autism and dyslexia it made it a lot harder to keep up the same learning pace as my peers, I was struggling to understand the verbal instructions out on the water and it began to feel like I couldn't achieve the same things until I realised that I needed to learn in a different way. The sensory experience is also a very challenging aspect when paddling, dealing with change in temperature, getting wet and the amount of layers that are sometimes needed!

What has helped or supported you the most to continue paddling?

Having 1:1 support when I got back into paddling was a huge help. This meant I could learn at my own pace and in the way I needed to. This instructor helped me to build up my confidence on the water, from feeling comfortable paddling to performing rescues.

Knowing that it's okay to do things differently. Especially as an instructor, I have found ways to run sessions that work for me. Sometimes this can be small adaptations like using earplugs at work or wearing gloves, other times it might be teaching the group hand signals for when we're out on the water.

What common misconception about neurodivergence do you want to dispel?

That people don't want to learn or aren't trying to join in. Often we don't know how and need to be shown, it can be hard to get involved when you're full of questions and in an uncertain environment. Learning sometimes isn't possible when you're in a noisy location or there's lots of distractions around. Being aware of these factors and finding ways to reduce them will help in making paddling more accessible, and create a positive learning environment for neurodivergent participants.

What should people consider when supporting neurodiverse paddlers on the water?

Everyone learns in a different way. Ask about the ways that you can support people and check in to see if that's working or if you need to try something new. To first get people on the water, something as small as wiping down the canoe seats or paddles so that they're dry could be just enough to get someone to try it out.

Make people aware of what the plans are for the session, just knowing the schedule step by step can reduce a lot of anxiety. This could be a verbal discussion beforehand, an email sent out in advance or picture cards on the day.





About Nerys (she/her)

I began my paddling journey in 2017 at Wey Kayak Club. After 6 years in the sport, I've learnt an incredible amount about myself. It's kept me going when life off the water has been challenging.

In my junior career I've had success nationally and internationally, even gaining a European bronze medal. More recently, I've been focussing on starting wider conversations about neurodivergence in the paddling world to ensure that our sport is accessible to everyone.



Nerys Hall

Can you tell us a little bit more about your experience as a neurodivergent paddler?

ADHD is a huge attribute of mine, I have such intense interests that canoeing is almost an obsession, a positive thing mostly. But at times, the pressure has held me back from performing. I've found that I have to make adjustments regardless of others' opinions. In some spaces I have felt supported to do this, in others there is still work to do.

Within months, I went from winning national medals, even an international medal, to being too anxious to get on the water. So, I'm now focussing on managing my ADHD, lifestyle and mental health to allow me to be successful on the water long-term.

What has helped or supported you the most to continue paddling?

A trusting coaching relationship with mutual respect and open communication. Someone that I can take feedback from and have difficult conversations with. I can find being 'told what to do' difficult, this is known as demand avoidance. I like to have an element of control and for people to give reasons why decisions are made.

It causes a lot of anxiety if I feel that there is any external expectation of me, even being set a training plan becomes difficult. So having a coaching team that you are able to approach the challenging things with at your own pace is awesome.

What common misconception about neurodivergence do you want to dispel?

That we are weak-minded or lazy. I understand how it looks, something doesn't get done, or it takes longer than you think it should, someone is late or seems disengaged.

It's easy to assume it's a lack of effort. Our energy can be hard to regulate and is used up on little things, things neurotypicals may take for granted. Masking ADHD traits like lateness that people consider 'inconvenient' takes up so much energy.

People being forgiving of these traits means we keep headspace for the bigger things, like the training session itself. This allows us to make the most of our amazing neurodiverse traits, which are often the reason we are as capable as we are.

What should people consider when supporting neurodiverse paddlers on the water?

It's important to consider reducing anxiety, processing time, sensory input and exhaustion. Being clear about plans and expectations, and repeating instructions is helpful - having it in written form too is even better. On training days, I always worry about being late or getting things wrong, so having it clearly written down in advance clears some headspace that I can then use to execute the session to the best of my ability.

I think that patience and understanding is a huge one too. Making sure your athlete knows that you are there to support them. If someone needs to take off a layer to avoid sensory overload, use it as an opportunity for everyone to have a water break, or just don't bring negative attention to someone trying to meet their own needs.

It's ingrained in most of us that doing things differently is a burden to others, so a reassuring head nod or thumbs up can be good to acknowledge that it's okay to have time outside/on the bank, or whatever it is they need. Simple things like that can give someone the confidence they need to keep advocating for themselves in the future.

