

Chris Brain 00:16:

Hello and welcome to the coaching podcast. I'm joined by Sarah Keight today and we're going to be chatting about canoeing. Hi, Sarah. How you doing?

Sarah Keight 00:25:

Hi, Chris, good thank you. Thanks for having me here.

Chris Brain 00:27:

Brilliant, it's a real privilege to have you on the podcast. I know you're a super recognizable face on the water. People have seen you paddling loads, you're really active as a coach and going out there as a paddler in a whole lot of different disciplines, but I'm really keen to chat to you today about how you coach canoeing. So could you give us a bit of an intro to yourself? Tell us about where you coach what you do where you go paddling?

Sarah Keight 00:55:

Okay, so I live in Ross on Wye but used to live up in North Wales. I get around all over the country actually and like you said I paddle kayak, SUP and canoe but canoeing for me, it's such a big boat and it's really satisfying to get it, across the flow and get into those small eddys and I just find that it brings a smile to my face and I want to share that with other people so I coach here and at Simmons Yat this week and all over the country.

Chris Brain 01:28:

Brilliant. Let's dive into it and give the people what they're here for because we want to find out about how you coach your canoeing and what it is you're actually doing when you're out there on the water. So, what do you think are the most important core technical skills for a canoe paddler?

Sarah Keight 01:45:

For me, I will keep saying this, the boat's massive. So an efficient forward stroke is for me the most important technical skill.

Chris Brain 01:56:

Great stuff and how do you develop people with that? How do you actually get them moving forwards steering that boat keeping it straight?

Sarah Keight 02:05:

So if they're going to solo paddle, I actually try and get them to Tandem first so they can understand how to steer the boat from the front and the back. Once they've had a go at that perhaps I get them in the stern and we start to look at a bit of steering whilst the bow paddler is paddling forwards and just kind of pushing away from the stern and pulling into the stern. Just the basics really. Then if they do want to solo we need to look at it in a little bit more depth and so once they've understood how to turn the boat. we need to get them trying to get a vertical paddle shaft. Now to achieve that their body position's really important. So it could be that I get them to experiment with where they're putting their body in the boat and it could be that I get them in the shallows and look at their connectivity. So if I'm holding the blade in the water or giving them a bit of resistance just looking at how they're driving that boat around with those connection points.

Chris Brain 03:08:

And I'm gonna throw you in a bit of a curveball here. I don't know whether this will throw you off track or not, but I wonder as a coach myself how important is that J stroke? Because I think we can spend so much time focusing on it and I know I focus on it a lot. I've seen other coaches do that. Is it all it's cracked up to be or the other ways that you can get the boat moving forwards or do you develop people's forwards paddling in a completely different way? What do you do?

Sarah Keight 03:38:

How important is the J stroke? Well I think you can get by without the J stroke. There's lots of white water paddlers out there that will just do a powerful forward stroke and a Stern pry. However, if you're going on a longer journey, it's going to be quite clunky and not very efficient and so it's worth developing your J stroke definitely.

Chris Brain 03:59:

And do you get really into the fine detail about I don't know which J stroke does what and how it works and the recovery phase and the power phase and all that. Do you do

that or do you just spend time focusing on making your boat being able to turn move control. How do you do it?

Sarah Keight 04:21:

Well I think I'd like to kind of rewind a little bit actually because I don't get into depth in all the different variations. I like to get people to develop a sense of feel for what the blade's doing in the water and what it's doing to the boat. But before we get them to correct at the back, we need to really get them to develop that forward drive. So a few techniques that I may use to develop that in paddlers, we may actually go on to the bank to look at winding the body up so if I'm paddling on my right hand side getting them to really wind up their trunk reach forwards and then as they reach and catch the water driving down on their top hand. To kind of help them develop a sense of feel for that I may actually use a sling so they hold a sling with their bottom hand and they'll reach for it forward for it. And then as they unwind their body and drive down they'll be pulling me over and off my feet. If that makes sense.

Chris Brain 05:25:

Yes, I think it makes sense. And it gives that resistance that you're going to get in the water. And I think for a lot of people they probably find it easier to practice that rotation on the bank where there isn't that risk of falling in or moving around the boat. Very interesting actually.

Sarah Keight 05:45:

Right, and I think a lot of people actually don't always think about what their hips are doing in that motion as well. So not only their shoulders but their hips are also rotating towards when they're reaching and catching the water.

Chris Brain 05:59:

And what's going on with the knees when you paddling forwards, are you pushing in the same kind of ways you would do in a kayak. In a kayak if I was paddling on the right virtually always I'd be pushing with my right foot. Are you thinking about pushing with your right knee if you paddle on your right in a canoe or is it both or am I overthinking it?

Sarah Keight 06:19:

Personally, I don't think so much about the weight on my knees, and I don't tend to coach that as much but for the paddling that I've done I really tuck in and really kind of grip into the boat. And so I encourage the students to think about their connection points and how they're driving through those points. Because we really need to get connected to that 15-foot boat if we're going to drive it where we want it. And in order to achieve that vertical paddle blade we need to get in the right body position, too.

Chris Brain 06:51:

And you're talking about driving the boat there and I know what it's like trying to get a canoe up to speed and get it moving. Often for beginners people new to that, that the hardest bit it possibly feels like it might be easier to paddle it slowly rather than to actually get it up and moving but as soon as you create that momentum it steers off course, have you got any tips for the coaches listening in looking to develop that idea of drive and momentum with their paddlers? What can they do to get people moving that boat fast?

Sarah Keight 07:25:

Yes, so I think I like to develop an idea of different gears whilst they're canoeing. So to begin with it's really frustrating you put down your first Power Stroke you suddenly off straight away so we can do a draw towards the bow. It's known as a C stroke so you can draw the bow into counteract that to get started with. But you've got to balance if you're putting power in you've got to correct with the same amount of power almost so if they're powering down to begin with I would teach them a power pry, so they've at least got one way to get around. And that I would say doesn't feel quite as uncomfortable as the J stroke to begin with.

Chris Brain 08:10:

And what are your thoughts on swapping sides when do you introduce that or is it even allowed?

Sarah Keight 08:16:

Is it allowed? Definitely! Yes, so super important from the start really to get people learning on both sides. Especially then when they progress to go into more challenging environments if you're crossing a lock in Scotland, and you've got the wind on your right hand side, it's definitely going to be more manageable if you're paddling on your left hand side downwind. So we want to develop our paddlers to be able to operate in those environments in the future. So yeah, very important. Equally if we're on white water and they're progressing and going in more challenging, grade three environments they'll need to start thinking tactically as to what side their paddling on for when they eddy out.

Chris Brain 09:02:

Great, and you've mentioned there about white water. So let's go down that route. What are the core skills that people need to develop when they're transitioning from flatwater and we're talking about traditional canoe, when they are transitioning from flat water in traditional canoe to taking it out on some white water. What are the key skills that they need? How do you do that?

Sarah Keight 09:23:

So I'm thinking again. I live by the river Wye so lots of people get on the moving water there and it's about being able to look ahead. And turn your boat to where you need to go a safe place and being able to propel it to that safe place, your eddy, away from any hazards. So again going back to that efficient forward stroke and being able to understand how to turn your canoe to begin with. Before I take anyone on some faster moving water that is a core skill that I want them to be able to do so I know that they can get themselves to a safe place at least.

Chris Brain 10:02:

And do you find that it's easier to teach a complete canoe novice to do those things or is it better if they maybe come from a kayak or a SUP background or they've got a little bit of paddling experience behind them. Do you think?

Sarah Keight 10:16:

That's a really good question. It can be both a help and a hindrance I think so if they're already a kayaker, paddling on white water, they'll understand how to Ferry Glide and

think about angles and breaking in and breaking out and perhaps they're feeling a bit more comfortable in that environment. So a little less anxiety that's gonna impact that. However, kayaks on white water are much smaller, so you can wait a little longer before making your moves to break out and so trying to get people to think ahead a little bit more and do the pre turn in advance can be a bit harder.

Chris Brain 10:54:

So, talk me through some progressions that you might make so if you had an hour with a bit of flow eddy on either side and you've got somebody who's like, I'm really keen I'm a beginner and I want to get going what might you do with them for that hour that would get them exploring the flow and enjoying being out in the canoe on white water.

Sarah Keight 11:15:

So eddy either side definitely just getting them to gently paddle out into the flow get a feel for what happens when they're bow connects with that flowing water and just letting it drop downstream a little bit and then put the power on again. Getting them to experiment with that angle would be quite good to develop that sense of feel. To begin to set them up for a bit success I would nudge them towards having a downstream paddle for sure but it's worth trying the upstream just to feel the difference and then we would experiment with perhaps where they're starting in the eddy going out with a little bit more speed and just starting to think a little bit about trim but not too much as they're just starting out and just start some simple S turns. So paddling out into the flow letting the bow drop, getting their eyes on the target and then just driving the canoe over to the eddy. And what's really important I think throughout that when they're learning is to not over complicate things, but just to really encourage them to look at where they want to go and then hopefully the edge will come naturally with that.

Chris Brain 12:27:

It sounds to me like the way that you're doing that is by giving people some challenges, some outcomes that you're looking for. Make your boat move over there. Let's see if we can break in high and break out low or break in high and break out high as well. Just giving people some challenges rather than focusing as much on the technicality of what they're doing with the paddle. Less about are they using a J stroke or a power

pry and more about is that boat going into the right place at the right speed with the right angle. Have I got that right?

Sarah Keight 13:01:

That's a hundred percent. Yeah, I hate to bog people down with all the technical ins and outs. I think it's really easy to send them into a cognitive overload. So just really setting some fun tasks getting their boat from one side to the other moving it downstream and encouraging that sense of feel.

Chris Brain 13:23:

Yeah, and that sounds like what you've got there is a whole lot of different skills and exploration in that bit of flow. But off the foundation of being able to make that boat move forwards and turn using the skills that you mentioned before. What about when we get into more advanced white water and I'll let you define what advanced might be are we talking above grade two, three, four?

Sarah Keight 13:53:

Yeah, I think grade three in a canoe is a respectable grade especially if it's consistent. Again, it's a really big boat and the eddys are small and you haven't got that time to stop and think ahead then that's really challenging. So we're going to be using the same techniques that we're going to kind of circle back around and start to look at how we're gonna develop them further to make our learner more dynamic in that environment. So, the skill now that we need to develop really is that reading ahead, looking at the features and being able to pick the lines as well. So if we're going down a bit of a drop are we going to catch our Stern? If we're going through a wave train, are we going to go slightly off the wave train so we don't swamp? And I think a skill for me when you're starting to get to that kind of more challenging water is actually you may start needing check and set.

Chris Brain 14:54:

Talk to me about that.

Sarah Keight 14:56:

So when we break out the flow our boat turns 180 degrees and when it's sideways to the flow, we're really quite exposed again big boat and if we hit a rock we're gonna get pinned. And so if I'm in an eddy, I then need to come back into the flow turn all the way around before I get to the next feature, but sometimes there's just not enough time for that. Or I don't want to be in that vulnerable position. So I choose to check and set instead. So I identify the eddy that I want to break into and I angle the stern of my boat to point towards that eddy and I put my paddle on that upstream side and start to paddle backwards. It's important to be bow heavy so I actually lean forward slightly and I'm prying off the back of the boat to direct my canoe into that eddy.

Chris Brain 15:51:

I imagine initially when you're introducing that somebody that sounds possibly counterintuitive to some of the stuff that you've been doing earlier in that session if it was one session. Because it sounds really different to what you've done before. How do they receive that and how do they develop that skill further? How do they practice it?

Sarah Keight 16:14:

I think if you start in some gentle flow first and get them to try it paddling on their downstream side, upstream side, see where they get some success, eventually they'll discover that you need to get on the upstream side really and to pry it over and then once they've done it on gentle flow start to. When I'm taking them down on a journey, for example, I'll say OK can we get into that eddy? But can you check and set into it?

Chris Brain 16:41:

Brilliant. It feels like a unique skill for canoe. I mean am I right do we do that in other craft or is it pretty much a canoe exclusive manoeuvre? I'm sure you could do it in a kayak, but

Sarah Keight 16:53:

I think as a kayak coach or leader you may choose to reverse into eddys or reverse ferry glide just to hold the position perhaps to be able to keep an eye on your group but no, I don't think it's used too often.

Chris Brain 17:09:

Moving me nicely on to one of my other key questions that I wanted to speak to you about which was about some of the unique skills that a trad canoeist might develop which are I suppose the trad canoe skills like tracking lining, sailing, for a coach that was looking to get their head around how they introduce those to the people they are coaching, where do we even start with that whole menu of skills that are really unique to canoe? Where do you start?

Sarah Keight 17:41:

I try and start somewhere where you would actually use those skills rather than forcing it into an environment that doesn't lend itself to it. For example, if you're tracking your canoe, so that means you're moving your canoe upstream. I may use that rarely to be honest, but perhaps I've got a paddler upstream and I need to get back to them. That could be one way or I'm just doing a crazy expedition somewhere where I'm actually travelling upstream but to begin with perhaps choose somewhere where the learners not having to think about their footwork too much, so not too many slippery boulders, hopefully and the main things we want to get them thinking about is getting some momentum. Angling their canoe so the bows actually pushed away into the main flow and the stern's closest and then you really want to adjust your trim. So you need to be downstream heavy.

Chris Brain 18:42:

And just give us a visual of what that might look like because if somebody's listening to this and they are thing thinking, I dont quite know what it is that we're doing, what is it that we're doing?

Sarah Keight 18:55:

We're pulling our canoe upstream. The problem is you have a rope attached to either side. You don't want them joined because that would be a snag hazard in moving water but if I just pulled the ropes the problem is the bow would come in to the side of the river and it would keep getting caught. So we want the bow to stay in the main flow. So If Upstream is 12 o'clock, we need it to angle it around one or two o'clock, but

I wouldn't want to fix anything to that time on the clock because you need to adjust it depending on the flow.

Chris Brain 19:32:

I once heard another coach describe this as a bit like flying a kite, but the canoe is the kite. Does that analogy work for you as well?

Sarah Keight 19:40:

Yeah. That does! another scenario where you may use it is in open water, and it's useful there if perhaps you need to get back up wind and it's just become too tiring.

Chris Brain 19:53:

And I remember myself as a paddler here rather than a coach being introduced to tracking and having a really great experience and thinking that I'd got it and then somebody said, will you show me that I was like, yeah, I could definitely show you that and then it felt like it was nothing like what I had the experience of just previously because it felt like he was quite difficult to do I'd clearly forgot some parts of it and how to attach the ropes and set it up so, talk me through I suppose some of you ropes set up there, do you use a bridle do you not, do you do something different that maybe I haven't seen?

Sarah Keight 20:31:

Yeah, there's a few ways. So when I last used it was on the Findhorn, it was quite fast flow. So I actually put some rocks in the downstream end of the canoe to adjust the trim and I have used a bridle in the past but it's a little bit fiddly. It takes a bit of time and I was with another coach actually on the day and he shared with me how he just clips it to the lacing in the side of the canoe nice and quick. I it's at the front, at the upstream end, it does have more of a tendency to come into to the side of the river. So just slightly down from the end perhaps in line with your bow seat would work quite well.

Chris Brain 21:12:

And as a coach if you're getting people started with this, do you set them up and then say here hold this and get a feel for it or do you let them kind of get set up and then maybe have possibly quite a bit of failure a bit of struggle, how do you approach it?

Sarah Keight 21:29:

There's a balance I think there because canoes are really expensive and they're heavy and we don't want people to get injured. So depending on the venue that you've managed to find I'd love for them to explore and play around with how to pull your canoe upstream. But if the environment is a bit more challenging it may be that they see a demonstration of it.

Chris Brain 21:53:

Talk to me about poling. Are you a fan of poling up or downstream? Do you do it a lot? Do you coach it a lot?

Sarah Keight 22:00:

I think in Britain you can have many fun days out on the water and probably not need to pole. But it is really fun. And I've definitely had a lot of laughs doing it. In the summertime again on the Wye I do use a pole just to change things up a little bit. Poling requires quite good balance in your canoe. So to begin with perhaps just in a bay on a lake I may get people to stand up in their canoe and start moving around and getting a feel for how far can they take their canoe which is always fun and they can also use a half pole. So sit down or kneel down on their thwart and use a half pole to push them along and I think the key concept that we need to try and encourage them to do is that they're not reaching forward like they would with their paddle but they're actually making contact with the ground behind them and ideally as far back as possible so they can push off it. From the half pole we can then introduce perhaps a full poll and get people playing around standing up but again either with not too much flow or in a nice sheltered bay to begin with, helmets on are ideal and I think with that one.

Chris Brain 23:17:

Yeah, from first-hand experience, I know that as well. Do you spend much time exploring about body/foot positions are they important? What about how you're

pushing the pole and moving your hands? It is all that just about somebody exploring experimenting with it and getting a feel for it or do you think that there's techniques as coaches that we could just introduce people to as step one step two step three.

Sarah Keight 23:47:

I think there are some steps that you can introduce. But again, I try not to just tell people the answers I try and get them to explore. But I think if you are square on. It's bit better than one foot in front of the other. So you're able to edge the canoe both left and right and having something connected to the boat will really help with the power transfer. So I tend to have the kneeling thwart on my shins just helps me with my balance as well. So I'm not falling around. And then getting them to explore how to turn their canoe using the pole and also using edge so it tends to work better with an outside edge when you're turning and using a pole. So weighting the pole and driving with the foot that's on the outside edge to drive the canoe around. Things like that help. I also get people to go on the bank and play around with kind of planting the pole into the ground and thrusting yourself forward and thinking about how your hips are involved in that as well as your arms and your trunk.

Chris Brain 24:57:

Yeah and you've hit there on one problem that I've seen quite a lot of with poling which is where people stand up so straight that they plant the pole and then basically just push themselves over and the other one that I've seen is where people lean back on the pole without it actually being on the ground.

Sarah Keight 25:18:

Yeah, so checking that. Yeah, I encourage them to check that it's properly planted before committing to it. And then you really do want them to commit to that pole. To be able to almost thrust forward.

Chris Brain 25:30:

And what do you think the limit of poling might be? Are you poling upstream or even downstream on grade one grade two or is it something that's probably better reserved for easier water maybe?

Sarah Keight 25:45:

I think grade one is achievable and then it's just difficult, people start to use their knowledge of eddys to be able to kind of tactfully move upstream as well. But grade two starts to become a little bit harder.

Chris Brain 26:01:

And I suppose it depends on the rapid as well. Doesn't it? It could be past it even if its grade 2. We've got a last few minutes to squeeze in a question about sailing because I imagine for a lot of people that's something that they would like to try, maybe haven't tried and the same for coaches would like to coach it, but maybe aren't really sure where to get started with the students. Have you got any tips for us on that?

Sarah Keight 26:33:

Would you want me to talk about solo sailing or group sailing?

Chris Brain 26:39:

I'm thinking solo sailing, but feel free to explore both avenues there.

Sarah Keight 26:43:

So solo sailing is great fun. But the thing as coaches we need to remember is that their canoes they're not sailing boats so they do have their limitations. And again, I try not to overcomplicate it. So giving students just some of the basics before they set off can help with anxieties. But if we just start where there's a gentle breeze, so it's not going to be horrendous if they get it wrong. What I quite like to get them to do is experiment with how far their sail is out. Or bringing it in and where the body weight is. So I don't tend to coach them using the paddle because that's a bit too much to think about and we end up tripping over the paddle. So the main things with the sailing is that if we're going downwind we want it stern heavy. So we move our body weight backwards and if we want to go across the wind we pull in the sail fairly tight and we move our body forwards. We can't really go too close to the wind because we haven't got a dagger board. So we end up getting pushed sideways. That there's lots of fun to be had with that. So getting them out in a bay. They need enough wind to be able to feel what the

difference is and perhaps setting a bit of a circuit or just incorporate it into the day the journey and we'll do some downwind sailing and try a few zigzags on the way.

Chris Brain 28:05:

And I suppose a similar question to what I had before with the tracking. Do you kind of set them up and say here hold this this is going to work if it's in this position, or do you just let them explore with and experiment with where the sail is or how tight it's pulled?

Sarah Keight 28:21:

Where possible I let them experiment. I'll give them some key questions to think about to help guide them, but I try not to tell them everything straight away so they can go and explore for themselves where possible but it's all student dependent.

Chris Brain 28:35:

And you mentioned about group sailing, talk to us just for a last minute about that before we bring this to a close.

Sarah Keight 28:41:

Group sailing can be great fun. Especially if you've got a big lake to get across for example a loch up in Scotland, but the problem is it can be quite time consuming to set up a big sailing rig. So where possible get the group involved with the lashing of the poles and the spar across, it's really important that if you've got a couple of rigs set up that you all leave at the same time and you've got a way of managing to keep it all nice and safe. So you've set up a procedure that if you blow your whistle they drop the sail and paddle towards you so you need to make sure you set these things up before you beach. Have you got a way of slowing it down for example, or if you have somebody go overboard have you got a way of getting back to them and retrieving them.

Chris Brain 29:29:

And how are you setting the boats and the sail up for that just talk to us briefly about what the setup actually looks like.

Sarah Keight 29:36:

Depending on how many boats you've got. So you could start with a catamaran with a spar across if the conditions are quite meaty, you want quite a gap between so the water and waves can flow between them. So that spar goes across the two canoes and it's lashed to the thwarts. You can then get two canoeing poles that you lash together at one end to create an A frame and you lash them to the seats. The key is before you lash them to the seats, you need to attach somebody with a bit of a rudder at the back. You want to get it stern heavy as well, also thinking about your trim going downwind. Lots of things there I'm just running through.

Chris Brain 30:23:

Yeah, there's a lot in it and I suppose the key thing would be going out with a coach who's familiar with that sort of setup who knows it to be able to give the students some ability to explore it as well, which is great and it's exactly what you do. Thanks so much Sarah, it has been fantastic having you on the podcast and there has been so many golden gems and tips that you've shared with us, I really appreciate it and know people listening will really value everything you said there so thank you so much for being on today.

Sarah Keight 30:56:

You're very welcome. Thanks for having me along.