

S6. Ep4. PODCAST – COACHING SLALOM WITH GARETH WILSON

Chris Brain 00:04

Hello and welcome to the coaching podcast. I'm joined today by Gareth Wilson, and we're going to be chatting about all things coaching slalom. So, hi Gareth, how are you?

Gareth Wilson 00:15

Hiya Chris. I'm very good, thanks. Thanks very much for having me.

Chris Brain 00:19

Brilliant, thank you so much for coming on. I'd love to hear a little bit about you, hear about what you've been doing and your background in slalom. So, tell us all about yourself.

Gareth Wilson 00:29

Yeah, I'll be brief, so I've been coaching with the program since what I think it was 2011, I started and so what's that 12 years? I've been coaching before that and I started in 2008 with my local Club Holme Pierrepont Canoe Club. And then I ended up coaching the British rafting team as a bit of a hobby and travelling around the world with them which was really exciting and that really wet my appetite to kind of pursue a career in coaching. So, I went to Loughborough University studying a Masters there and eventually, once I started to wind my paddling career down, I stepped into a coaching role with British Canoeing which was super exciting. But before that, I was a slalom paddler but I've kind of done pretty much... well, maybe not every, but I've dipped my toe in lots of different types of paddle sport. I've done marathon racing, open canoeing, river paddling and spend some amazing times in the South Alps and with some good people and just running rivers, super exciting. So yeah, I feel very fortunate to be part of the sport.

Chris Brain 01:47

And tell us a bit more about your role right now. What is it you're doing when you're coaching on the water?

Gareth Wilson 01:53

So, I'm based down at Lee Valley at the White Water Centre which hosted the Games in 2012 and I suppose if you were to look at the bottom of my email, my role is a Podium Technical Coach and what that means is I'm supporting athletes on a daily basis who are working towards goals which might be focused on World/European championships, junior or senior, and what I'm actually doing right now in the coaching space is actually supporting a lot of the academy athletes rather than travelling with the team. So, it's a really nice space to be in because I've been doing the senior coaching for a very long time. And whilst athletes are developing you see a different type of development compared to the academy guys, who are that little bit younger and almost just starting their careers. Yeah, they've got lots going on with University or moving down to Lee Valley for the first time, maybe being here without their parents there's kind of lots of other stuff for them to kind of consider as well, as well as what just happens on the water.

Chris Brain 03:04

Sounds that you've got a really big role there and a lot going on in what you do as well, it's really broad actually. I'd love to dive into, I've got some questions lined up for you and to find a bit more because my background is in white water, but it really isn't in slalom, so I've got loads of questions myself. And I think one thing that I noticed is that there are a lot of top-level paddlers in other disciplines that have got roots in slalom. Why do you think this is and what skill set does slalom give a paddler?

Gareth Wilson 03:38

Good question! So, maybe I'll start by telling you a story about when I was paddling in the Alps. I remember being out with friends and we were going to scout a rapid and I was in my kind of like dagger GTX, there were no kind of thigh brace or ratchet straps or anything, like it was super basic and they said we'll go eddy out over there, we're gonna scout this rapid. I just went and paddled into pretty much the last eddy, the smallest eddy before and just pop myself out and they came and said to me, "Gaz what you're doing? It was really risky, you should always leave one eddy below you so you've got an escape route". Really good learning for me, that was what I was learning from the guys from Loughborough and I was like it was never even a risk,

there was no way I was not going to hit that eddy. There was time, I had so much confidence in my ability as a paddler and that might sound really arrogant but I look at myself 15-20 years ago. It's like, it was an easy move to make and I think that's kind of like what slalom had given to me was that ability to see things and be accurate enough on the water to then be able to go and make that must make eddy let's say before you go into the actual rapid. I don't know if that answered your question?

Chris Brain 05:02

Yeah, I think I get a real flavour of it and I recognize that because I've seen that in slalom paddlers before, they absolutely know what moves they can make and maybe what moves they can't make or what moves are going to be risky as well. So, I've seen that kind of thing first hand on the water before. I mean the other things that I've noticed are an incredible amount of boat control from slalom paddlers, when they venture into white water and other disciplines as well and a huge ability, and I think this is really important to be able to really drive their boat. They can always make their boat go quickly, which of course is important in slalom! Do you agree?

Gareth Wilson 05:41

Yeah, I completely agree. I think that when you're racing, you want the boat to go fast because obviously you're in this time trial situation where you're trying to get to the end of the course as quickly as possible. I think that there's a difference between kind of pulling hard which you might do in Sprint, because you're just trying to get to the end and there's being efficient, but differently efficient in Slalom. You imagine all that power in the water. You can't ever overpower the water and you might be able to bench press 140 kilos, 150 kilos, but you're never going to be stronger than the river and you've got this tiny little kind of tear drop, spoon shape on the end of a stick that you need to connect and move yourself with. So, there's an efficiency there in terms of how you generate that connection and I'm going to say plan, and I'm going to say plan very loosely. It's like how do you navigate the river in the most efficient way? So, when you're looking for little gaps in waves, you're looking for key little strokes which are going to keep the bow light to allow the boat to maintain as much speed on the way down the river. When you pull on the stroke and you move in towards the inside pole of a slalom gate, you're arriving with just the amount of space to clear the gate but maintain momentum, there's absolute precision in everything that you do. But also,

precision needs to come with adaptability because the river changes, right? I'm sure that you've experienced that, it's like I'm gonna be on this line and then suddenly on the edge of the boat. You just feel that little seam of a boil kind of just squeeze against you and suddenly you're in a different position or the momentum of the boat has changed. It's like what do I do next? I know where I need to get to, I know what my objective is but I've got a new situation now to navigate. And how do you then trust your skills and trust knowing what to do next.

Chris Brain 08:05

Wow, super interesting just hearing you chat about that and I'm thinking a great place for us to go to next is thinking about those foundation levels, that starting point for a lot of paddlers and I'd be interested if a coach is working with a paddler like at an early level, they're just getting them out in the water for the first few times or maybe somebody's been in a boat, they've got a little bit of boat handling skills, but they're keen to have a go at slalom. What are the foundation skills that a coach could develop with them and how might they do it?

Gareth Wilson 08:42

Okay, I'm gonna caveat this with a massive kind of disclaimer sign, which is I currently don't coach anybody at that level. However, I'm up for the challenge and I'm gonna say if I were to do that or if I was to make a recommendation. So, I might be considered quite old school in this sense, so I'm going to frame this about 10 years ago, our head coach, a guy called Jurg Gotz, he did this keynote speech at a coaching conference, which described the modern athlete in slalom is born into the stadium, born into a place that has changing rooms. It has the gates already set up for them. It's very unlikely your boat's going to get damaged because of the plastic blocks. It's very easy to get back to the top of the course because you get on a travelator. I think the consequence of that has been we've kind of disconnected from the roots of our sport. A long time ago and I can't remember the exact date but the first World Championships in Switzerland were basically when the guys had come off the mountains and skiing and looking for a sport to do in the summer and, suddenly, they're on a river and they're doing slalom down a river. And I think for me that's what I would be looking to connect with. It's what are the river skills that you need to be able to have and do so, if you imagine you transport yourself to Lee Valley, a World Championships or the Olympic

Games. It's going to be on, not the most challenging, but it's on challenging white water. Some of the key things that you need to be able to do will be able to roll, be confident in the white water, be able to navigate it with the gates and without the gates. You need to be able to interpret the water from the side, as well as being on the river and interpreting what's happening immediately in front of you. And so, for me I would be if I was stepping into that kind of beginner role, I'd be really kind of looking for how you broaden boating skills. But maybe with the context of as a slalom coach, I have these amazing kind of tools available to me which hang from the river and hang above the river. With that amazing ability that these tools have, that they also provide a massive constraint sometimes because it's easy to over-focus on them. So, I'm imagining what kind of games you would play. So, I'd probably be doing gates on either side of a wave. Where you've got to be able to do the upstream and you've then got to cross on the wave and then do the next upstream. You're incorporating the two things, you're incorporating the river skills that you need as an athlete and you're incorporating the sports specific skills, negotiating yourself around a pole cleanly and I think that the other part of that is river skills are really fun. They're really fun. And so, it's like let's just take that example again. Instead of being as quick, as quickly as we possibly can around the two gates which is kind of what slalom is. The winner of this challenge is going to be the person who can stay on the wave for the longest between the two up streams and get them surfing and build it from there, because I think that the risk is and the reason I don't want to kind of over labour this point but it's something that I am passionate about, is if we only focus on the skills which help us get better at slalom and progress through divisions, what are the skills that we're missing that, as we get to the top divisions, we might get found out on? What are the fundamental things that we're missing? Edge control, white water confidence, and there will be other things in there and so in terms of a timing on the blade in terms of when to put it in. How do you feather the blade slowly or how do you build pressure on the blade or the edge of the boat? For it to kind of benefit your performance? I say with quotation marks. But also, just in terms of how do you connect with the sport if the sport is just about winning and losing and going faster and being faster than everybody else. As soon as you start losing, I'm doing quotation marks again, you're probably going to walk away. It's almost impossible to lose when you're just on a river. If you're just going out and just going to have fun and I'm going from point A to point B without any time restraints, but I've got all these eddies, all these waves, these little whirlpools that

I can go on play in and let's go and kind of get bounced around on a big boily eddy. Let's go and let's go and run this river as many times as we can in a day if you want to try and put a challenge on it. It's like, I think my goal in that space would be connecting people to the sport but through the foundations of canoeing the river, connecting with nature, connecting with being really clear about why we do it and then give us the skills to kind of step into a slalom space.

Chris Brain 14:46

I'm just loving hearing you talk there. I was just thinking how much I would have loved to have been coached by you in that kind of way when I was a junior and then I thought, I'd actually like to be coached like that as an adult as well! I really love the concept of connecting people to the sport, connecting people to the environment, to the water and for me games work really well and I actually do that quite a bit in my own coaching, I'm not coaching slalom but I'm coaching other things. I think, not everyone loves to compete and there is that issue that when people aren't winning, how do we keep them motivated, but I generally find that people love to play and that idea of surfing the wave with the constraints of the gates as well is a really interesting concept. Are there any other games or activities that you can throw out that you think might work well or anything else that comes off the top of your head there?

Gareth Wilson 15:44

Kind of like at that grassroots level again? I really like..... So, there's two things that come to mind. I've recently started playing rugby again and done this return to rugby kind of thing and the coaches there have been really keen on kind of building the social element. It made me think how do I build the social element into kind of gameplay if I was doing this kind of stuff, if I was starting to coach beginners again how would I do it? And I sometimes wonder about. Slalom is an incredibly individual sport. Very few people paddle C2, the only kind of disciplines available are individual ones and it's very easy to kind of get sucked into your world, your mindset and what I do, etc. is all that matters. That's just an observation. That's not criticism. I just wonder sometimes in terms of through your gameplay how you can have people appreciate what other people are doing. So, let's just build on that wave playing idea. How do you have people cheering and celebrating what somebody is doing, to build their confidence, build their kind of and personal appreciation of what they can do, but also how do you

sit there and ask the questions around what you notice those people doing, why are they able to stay on, or why did they fall off the wave? All of these kind of powerful questions, which I'm sure you and everybody who's listening to this really knows about. I think that some of the other things that I learned from my coaches when I was a kid before I was a slalom paddler, but I now try and bring into slalom, your environment is your teacher. And we have additional parts the environment with slalom. So, we've done lots of stuff where we try and change the conditions, either change the rules or we change the width of gates and stuff like that to try and enhance the challenge. So, if you imagine a slalom gate is 1.2 metres wide, at the very elite end when people are sweeping the up streams, that means where you go upstream and you use a sweep stroke to propel the boat away and get around the pole and literally only the head and part of the boat is in the gate. So, we've been doing a really cool challenge where we just make the gate really, really narrow, so all you can get through is your head. And you can vary the height of it. You could put it really low down if you want super challenging elite. Or you can put it really, really high so it still goes over your shoulders or all you can get through is your head, and that everybody loves that because it's a leveller, you can do it at any speed. Or you can do it in any eddy and it's hard and then you can raise the challenge, for the people who can do it really well. You just change the idea you make it in a slightly more difficulty and then you step it up and going back to kind of the white water skills, you can do an upstream on a stopper. Yeah, I mean imagine kind of like the way that somebody might start their freestyle run starting above the wave and they drop into the wave. Can you actually get to a position where, as a slalom gate hung above that wave, all you can do is put your head through it, whilst dealing with all the white water around you. And you don't even have to be in a slalom boat for that anybody could try and take that skill on to encourage that level of precision that level of play, that level of enjoyment I suppose because it's a leveller, anybody can try it and it feels good when you get it right.

Chris Brain 20:08

And I'm gonna throw out the challenge here to people listening go and try it, that'd be great to hear people get on with that and, like you say, it could be done in any boat. That's something I'm thinking I'm gonna put into a bit of my own coaching. I've got some coaching coming up soon, I think I could use that with and I've never considered

the idea of shrinking that gate, for me it just appears to be such a standard thing, like that's the gate, it doesn't change, but focusing in on that precision its brilliant.

Gareth Wilson 20:38

I'm imagining or when I was learning to canoe. My instructor, a guy called Norman Croson and Mike Herman from Dronfield, way back in the day, they would just always offer little challenges as you'd be going down the river. And he would be like, you've got to try and get into six eddys. And you'd look down. You're like I can only actually see four and there's a few more than that. So, suddenly you realise that you're trying to find tiny little things. It gives challenge and interests to the person to kind of go out there. I've got two kids, six and four, we took them out paddling last Sunday. And Lexi, she's the older one, she just wants to go fast. She wants to have races. She wants to go really fast and learn how to stop before the side and that's what keeps her interest. Freddie he's four. The way that he is interested in paddling forward is he wants to go and look for ducks and it's like, when I'm 38-year-old adult now, so when I go canoeing, yeah, I really enjoy slalom but I need to kind of tune into kind of what makes it really interesting for me. And I think that that's what we've got to do if we're working one-to-one or we're working one to six, it's how do we connect with each of those people? So, then be like what makes this interesting for you? Even though we might be running a group session.

Chris Brain 22:19

Yeah, and I wonder if I can take it to a more advanced and more elite level or competitive level. What are what the skills, attributes, techniques that you focus on with those paddlers? Is it different, is it the same, the structure, the practice and the training the same? What do you do?

Gareth Wilson 22:44

So, it's a really interesting question and we've probably not got enough time in this podcast to cover it, but what I will try and articulate is, lots of athletes kind of talk about consistency or trying to be consistent. But, in order to be consistent, what that means is that you have to be incredibly adaptable so if you watch some of the best runs that you've ever seen in canoe slalom, if those athletes were to watch them back, very, very few, if any, will say it was perfect and by perfect I mean that was bang on plan,

that was exactly how I envisaged it to be, and so what people are doing is on the way down the course and, we talked about it earlier, is they are adapting in the moment. They are acting around what they are experiencing at that time. So, a lot of our training at Lee Valley is trying to stretch that kind of adaptability. So, if we become more adaptable, we end up becoming more capable of dealing with things that are presented to us, either expected or unexpected, on the river and so I guess the question is, what does that look like? I'd say there's a number of different ways to do it and within the program down here I would say that the coaches all believe in this adaptability element to the sport, that they all do it slightly differently. So, Craig Morris is a really interesting person to kind of chat to about this, his sessions, they constantly he constantly changes the challenge that is set. So, he might move the gates. He might lift the gates up. He might put an extra gate into a sequence to try and challenge the athlete around the skills that they currently have. Somebody else might do it through research where they do the same course a number of different times, but they might put different conditions on it. So, for example, it's like you can only use the left blade. Which, if you're a right-handed C1 paddler, that might be quite tricky but, in a kayak, generally it's like you can just go out there and find out what happens. So typically, a kayak paddler in an upstream situation, will generally be looking for a sweep, I'm making a sweeping generalisation here, nice pun. As soon as you put a condition around something like that where they can't go to the outside blade. It's how do they still deliver the upstream, using the inside blade either just on the rudder or back blade to rudder. Without telling them what they're going to do. It's just like here's the condition. See what you find out and they might repeat that a few times, so those kind of playful sessions, then kind of live within the structure of a week where you also have, what I would describe as more kind of performance focus sessions. So, ultimately, the sport is about getting from the start line to the finish line as fast as you can whilst negotiating up to 25 gates, six of which are upstream, without touching them. So, once a week, we generally, particularly whilst the season's on, we have a session which focuses on all runs and it's almost like a test, you're trying to understand where you see these skills kind of manifesting in the run and that then starts to give you some clues about where you might want to go and spend some of your development time. So, it's like this constant cycle of many plan-do-reviews on a regular basis which sits within this big larger plan which might be one year plan up until the Olympic Games. It might be one year plan up into the World Championships.

It might be a six-month plan working through the winter to get into selected and for other people, who are regular kind of senior team members, it might be extended not with the detail, but it might be extended over a four-year period about roughly what they're going to try and work on through that Olympic cycle.

Chris Brain 27:30

Wow, and I really like the idea of variation there, like you're saying about changing all the variables and creating adaptability. If I'm honest, when I'm watching slalom coaching on the water, maybe I'm doing something else but it's happening on the water near me, what I think I'm seeing is a lot of repetition but it sounds like it could actually be really quite different to that, and the concepts of moving gates and changing gates and switching everything around on quite a regular basis throughout the session I think is a really interesting concept.

Gareth Wilson 28:04

Can I just pick up on that Chris because I've thought about this a lot and spent a long time thinking about this because, let's just say for example you go and do the same upstream on a drop and you do it 10 times and the equivalent is kind of thinking I'm just going to practise like the basketball layup without that defender in the way, it's not very realistic. It's like when you get into the game situation that you're going to have different types of pressure. So, it's thinking about how you can manipulate that one upstream or the conditions around it. You change the width that they're going to come with so they might still be doing the same gate. How do you manoeuvre somebody across the river to change the entry? They're still trying to go around it as fast as possible, but you can try and...I don't want to say force, but you invite opportunity for them to experience something different every time, even though the river is different every time, or it's subtly different every time.

Chris Brain 29:19

Yeah, I love to squeeze in one more question if I can and it's just around a bit of flat water because I see that there's a lot of paddlers who are training on flat water and I always see sections of flat rivers that have got gates hanging over them and I'd just be really interested quickly if we can chat about what's going on on there when you're

coaching and is there anything that a paddler can do that has got access to flat water and could incorporate that into their own paddling?

Gareth Wilson 29:49

Where I am at, Lee Valley, the athletes that I've been working with tend not to do that much flat water work. However, when there's a need for it, the flat water offers a really kind of simple environment for us to be able to take away all of the noise of the white water or the pressure. So, for example, years ago I was working with an athlete and we were looking for ways to enhance that connection on the blade with the forward stroke, and I went to a flat water conference to learn about the kind of Sprint stroke. The guy who ran it, he showed this really cool video and I don't know if you'll be able to find it but this video, basically, he paused it just as the paddle broke in the middle, the shaft broke in the middle and he asks us what happens with the top end? And as all it's a really good question. I think I know what happened, but I wasn't super sure. Anyway, spoiler alert, what happens is his left hand basically hits the water on the right hand side of the boat. Because he's generating so much pressure through that top arm position. And so, I went away from that and I'm working with the athlete I was working with we watched some video of some sprinters, some flat water paddlers and tried to learn how to connect through that top arm differently to what we currently were. Now, we don't have wings and the skill is different but from a fundamental kind of baseline principle that's got to be one of the most efficient ways to move forwards. And so, we were trying to pinch something. So, we spent a good amount of time before white water sessions or immediately after white water sessions when we were either physically in a good place or physically a bit compromised, to try and really work on this top arm connection, to kind of think about connecting the chain from the top hand all down to the bottom, all the way down into the water. So, we use the flat water as an opportunity to practise our skills in an environment which isn't like the competition environment, but will give us an opportunity to then see how they transfer into a more complex session design. From a club perspective, I had a girlfriend a long time ago who her training venue I think it was like six gates on a flat canal underneath the road bridge next to a Waitrose shopping centre. Slalom can kind of be done anywhere. And slalom can be about those decisions/skills of kind of boat manoeuvre in terms of connection with the water, kind of being precise with your body or even thinking about, I don't know how to explain it. Something about awareness of where you are in space.

So, if you're imagine kind of just trying to put your paddle through a gate right now, you probably want to know where everything is. But, as you get better at it on the flat water, you will just strike the water. You'll push the paddle through the gate, strike the water because the boat goes past the blade as you drive through. You're not going to hit the gate as you lift the paddle out of the water. So, I think it's what opportunities does the flat water bring in that sense and for anybody who has access, because I spoke to a guy in North Wales the other day and this is what I think is really interesting and why I'm thrilled to chat to you Chris, is that he asked some of his guys in North Wales like, why don't you do slalom? And he's like, we don't do slalom because it's for the elite, you only do slalom if you want to go to the Olympic Games. And we're like, we need to change that. Some people might go to the Olympic Games and some people become elite. In the same way that some people run rivers and they really enjoy it. But then you have people like the Serrasolses guys who are going and running crazy rivers at the elite end. It's the same but it's different and it's like the way that we do things are the same, the skills that we have and that we can learn from each other, are amazing. My wife, before we were together, her previous boyfriend, he was like an amazing white water boater. I think he was something like Junior Freestyle World Champion. He ran crazy rapids when he was out in Uganda on the White Nile and stuff like that. It's wow so I say this slightly sarcastic. I wonder what I could learn from him? I wonder what psychology is required to kind of sit above a rapid that must be incredibly intimidating, to then push off and back yourself to go and do this, or to have the precision in a freestyle boat to be able to hold yourself on a wave for 45 seconds or however long it is these days, and to link moves together whilst also under the physical kind of pressure of not breathing every so often because you've looped and you're under the water and you're coming back up? It's at the elite end there's lots of transfer between our sports at the foundation end, there's lots of transfer because, at the end of the day, we're all on water, on rivers, kind of going downstream. My mind boggles as to what the possibilities are. I feel so grateful for the opportunities that I got of meeting people at Loughborough who took me down rivers like the Gyr in the South Alps, it's one of the greatest memories I've ever had, but for them to be able to also go into a white water environment where slalom gates are hung over it and have a great time there as well.

Chris Brain 36:46

Gareth, it's been absolutely amazing to hear you chat and talk about paddling in general, but of course focusing on slalom, and I guarantee there are so many things you've said that you'll be able to take away and use in their own coaching and get them thinking about how they're coaching. Thank you very much for speaking to me today. I really appreciate your time.

Gareth Wilson 37:07

You're very welcome and good luck everyone. I hope you have a great time coaching and really happy to chat with anybody going forwards if they want. Chris, please share my email address in the show notes, I'm happy to touch base with anyone.

Chris Brain 37:24

Wonderful, thanks very much Gareth.

Gareth Wilson 37:26

Cheers, Chris.