

Chris Brain 00:07:

Hello and welcome to the coaching podcast. My name is Chris Brain and I'm joined here with Tamsyn McConchie and we are going to be chatting about all things coaching freestyle. Hi Tamsyn, welcome to the podcast.

Tamsyn McConchie 00:18:

Hi, Chris. Thanks for having me.

Chris Brain 00:20:

Yeah, I'm super excited to have you on, freestyle is a really big part of my paddling where I grew up, what I started doing and how I got into water in the first place so really keen to hear you chat about it and definitely to chat about what you're doing as a coach on the water. Do you want to introduce yourself? Tell us a bit about what you've been doing as a paddler, as a competitor and as a coach?

Tamsyn McConchie 00:50:

Yeah, and so I'll get started with a bit about how I got started in kayaking actually and started off at University, which is probably quite a lot later than a lot of people assume so my original background actually wasn't freestyle. It was a mix of all sorts of kayaking disciplines some of it competitive. I did all the BUCS University slalom polo and wild water racing even and actually fell into freestyle almost as I went to leave University. I wanted a way to stay engaged with the paddling community that I sort of fallen in love with and that's where I fell into freestyle and I started out with squirt boating which is quite a niche even within freestyle and from there have done more competing. I now paddle for team GB in K1 C1 and squirt boating still and have joined the GB freestyle coaching team and coaching the academy there. I've now moved into coaching freestyle regularly at Holme Pierrepont, I've got fantastic group that come to me weekly and I am seeing so much progress there, it's phenomenal. We're just building that community that I fell in love with right from the start of my paddling journey and seeing that all the way through and I'm actually also now one of the GB canoe Polo coaches, which is a lovely change. It's really rewarding I get to work with the under 21 women's team there and it's a sport that I've not played at that high level but have been aware of and competed in sort of a lower level but also a coaching environment it's very

supportive to work within because the other coaches on the side that we work together really well, so I'm actually getting that sort of input there and I think it's been a really great journey to develop my coaching alongside those guys as well. So not just freestyle all sorts of disciplines there all coming together, but freestyle's definitely where my heart is at the moment.

Chris Brain 02:54:

And I imagine that you bring all that experience from different disciplines into your freestyle coaching as well. Do you think that's the case?

Tamsyn McConchie 03:01:

Absolutely, there's lessons to be learned from all different types of paddling. The flatwater ones, the white water ones all of it feeds in for sure.

Chris Brain 03:10:

And I'm just wondering if to get us started if you could maybe just explain really briefly just a little bit about some of the different disciplines within freestyle. You mentioned about squirt boating before you mentioned about C1 just in case people aren't quite sure what we're talking about so we can set the scene. What's the difference between a few of them? And what's special about squirt boating? I know but I know everybody might know.

Tamsyn McConchie 03:35:

So, when you think of freestyle kayaking what most people picture is k1 or a kayak, obviously a freestyle boat really short but you're sat in it like you would most other white water kayaks. You've got two blades and we paddle it as most people I guess would picture when we talk about freestyle and when we talk about C1 or OC1, that's a canoe. So again, most people be able to picture that in their heads. They'll be kneeling in the boat either with a deck or without a deck and with the one blade they're trying to do a lot of the same moves that we'll talk about mainly in this podcast as the k1s as the kayaks do very similar most people are actually end up taking a kayak and changing the outfitting to fit them as a canoe so they can do a lot of the same tricks and then squirt boating is it's like a kayak you sit in it like a kayak but they are super low volume. They're meant to be sort of neutral buoyancy. So there a lot longer but

they're very very thin. It's like putting on a pair of tights and they're actually the original form of freestyle kayaking where rodeo came from it's like the history the sport and they're fantastic boats for getting cart wheels done and all sorts of surface moves like that. But then the really exciting part about a squirt boat is that you can actually submerge the whole kayak and paddler and use the boat a little bit like helicopter blade and stay underwater for a really long time. So you see it in the big competitions people will get it's called downtime where boat and paddler are underwater gone. It's called a mystery move they're disappeared. It's a mystery where they are and sometimes that's about a minute long in the big competition. So that's really exciting to see really cool experience if you get a chance to do that yourself as well.

Chris Brain 05:24:

I would love to come back to that because I imagine there's something really specific about how you train for under the water moves. So, let's revisit squirt later in the podcast. So getting us started and thinking about foundation skills as a freestyle paddler when you're out there coaching people and they're just getting to grips with getting on the wave and doing maybe a few moves the first time what are the techniques that you're focusing on?

Tamsyn McConchie 05:50:

That's really good question. I think one of the big things is they're very transferable from all parts of white water kayaking a lot of it is just even about sitting up tall and sitting with confidence and we're looking at surfing waves. we can get bogged down in things like angle of approached to a wave, how to get on to it, how to move about side to side and all those things are very important. But what I tend to find with a lot of beginners is that stuff tends to be developed naturally through play through giving it a go and actually the base skill that they need to work on. It's just sitting up tall and holding their core, from keeping their chin up off their chest and when they're doing this with intention, just trying to sit tall in their boat and being aware of their weight distribution, actually, all of that surfing tends to just come along with it. So, a lot of this stuff that we think about is as a beginner most of it comes from sitting up and just being aware of our entire body and how that's distributed in the boat.

Chris Brain 06:55:

So how do you actually coach that then? You say about reminding people to sit up tall and to kind of keep that their head up. Are there any specific drills that you do or anything that you do as a coach to kind of make that happen?

Tamsyn McConchie 07:11:

So, something that's actually really good for that is just giving them specific points to look at when you're surfing a wave what you'll notice is a lot of people get really worried about oh they need to turn left, so they put their blade into the left and they'll look at the boat and they'll look at the blade and they'll get focused on that. So, if I go and stand upstream and I ask them to look up at me and tell me how many fingers I'm holding up or whatever that is or tell me what colour that signpost is over there when they go on to the wave they then have to look up they've got to sit up to see me above the white water course there, so they have to get into those sorts of strong neutral positions to be able to give those answers giving other things to focus on is a big one.

Chris Brain 07:55:

And is that the same when your side surfing a hole? So rather than just the wave if you're in a hole is the same set of principles or is it different?

Tamsyn McConchie 08:05:

It's very similar. Yeah, I quite like the analogy of thinking about have you ever seen how you can pick up a chicken and move its body, but its head stays still? I don't know if you've ever seen that.

Chris Brain 08:17:

I know exactly what you're on about but carry on. If people haven't heard what you're on about and give us your version of events there.

Tamsyn McConchie 08:27:

There's not much more to it than that. If you pick up a chicken, you can move its body side to side and its head will just stay stationary and fixed on a point. It's quite interesting. Look at that one on YouTube if you can find a video. I'm sure there's a clip

of it. But that's an analogy that I quite like to use in terms of surfing a hole because people get really sort of worked up they get shaken side to side and it can be quite a daunting environment if it's a big hole first time in a feature and I tend to use the same principles of sitting up tall, keeping it so the chest and the chin are up and all of that and being aware of where we're sat in the boat, but not fighting what the water's doing. So almost like your boat is that body of a chicken the water's going move it around a bit. But if we keep our upper body our head sort of fixed in a side surf it would be depending on the feature, but maybe just in front of us and then it's taking away a lot of that fear. It takes away a lot of that information that we're trying to get we don't need it. We can get that information intrinsically by being aware of where our body is and will get more and more comfortable. We don't need to be taking in all this extra information with our eyes by looking about by looking at the water because that can actually just detract from keeping a nice composed position on the feature.

Chris Brain 09:54:

This is really interesting because I think what people were hoping to hear you say is some kind of technical solution there. So, if you put your paddle here this will happen or if you do a stern rudder in this way, you'll be able to surf the wave but you've actually chatted about quite a lot of the physical aspects being more important just sitting up and being able to hold your posture in the boat. How important do you think the physical element is of freestyle over maybe the technical side of things that we do when we're talking about what we might do with our paddle or with our boat or do they go hand in hand?

Tamsyn McConchie 10:29:

That's a really good question actually. I'd say especially as we develop our skills and the technical aspect become really importantly small little changes do to transform a movement and as we develop our skill set and it becomes sort of increasingly important to have that technical minute change but I would say that that really is a sliding scale the further along we get specifically technical those elements feed in and support our progression but it's really interesting. You can see two three four five top of their game high level paddlers and they've all got these slightly different techniques. So, it's not the be all and end all of exactly where you place your paddle. What we do is we figure out what works for you and your mechanics and I would say that in the

first instant that physicality like you mentioned is quite a key part of it and I would almost say it's not necessarily just physicality, but it's sort of a mental state. There's an element of sort of calm and composure that comes to it which isn't necessarily your muscles doing a lot of work. But it's just being composed and set and sort of ready for what's coming. So, I'd say they do for sure come hand in hand and it's sort of this constantly sliding scale of where we need to focus on technique and when we need to focus on composure or physicality or whatever it is, I definitely say they sort of come together.

Chris Brain 12:15:

Are there any specific tools that you use and any techniques when it comes to developing physical aspects or the mental aspects. Is there anything that people can do at home or on the bank or is it just all practice on the water?

Tamsyn McConchie 12:31:

There's loads that can be done at home or on the bank. A lot of it is visualisation and it's a really handy tool. So, either just watching the water. You don't even need to be kitted up and ready to paddle you can just watch the water and picture yourself on a feature surfing around whichever tricks you want to be doing? By watching the feature, you can get an idea for the rhythm the speed that we want to be moving in those environments. You can be watching videos of other people doing the same things the same movement surfing the same features and just understanding without picking it apart in detail just by watching and observing you will naturally take in quite a lot of information and it's really uniquely sort of human desire to want to really pick apart and know what the answer is that's gonna make everything click and make everything work and the reality is, sort of no other species communicates with that level of intricacy of this is the thing you need to change to make that happen, but loads of other animals managed to learn skills every day so actually just by watching and imagining these things happening, you're taking in a lot more information than maybe we realise so that's a really huge one, but then on the water it's really quite interesting people get caught up in their head like I say wanting to know the specific details and I know some people will maybe employ this technique is as a river runner when they get a bit nervous or whatever it is when they're facing white water people will often sing to themselves and I've mentioned composure quite a lot already but there's this

song I think is it Alicia Dixon or something called Composure and whenever I've sung that to a few clients, especially when people are nervous and the chin comes down and the body gets a bit rigid instead of staying open and positive presenting to the challenge that's coming this way, asking them to sing they have to lift the chin up. They have to open their airways. They have to stay calm. It's sort of helps promote all those ideas that we've already mentioned. So that's another one that people probably employ in other areas, but it can help in this way, too.

Chris Brain 14:52:

I think we're going to need to see that. I know people follow you on Instagram and what you're up to and I'd love to see a video in the future that would be great to see. Can we go into a move? Maybe something quite specific like a loop. I know a lot paddlers when they're getting started in freestyle wanting to hit that loop. That's one of the first moves people often try and focus on learning what are the key components of that? How are you coaching it?

Tamsyn McConchie 15:19:

Absolutely, so it's interesting. If you speak to different coaches, you'll get different ideas of what the components of each move are. For instance, Bartosz has a fantastic book out "freestyle unlocked". He tends to break things down really well into sort of an initiation and a movement and recovery phase and speaking to Den - Sweetwater Coaching. He quite often cites this set up initiation, movement, recovery phase they're all very similar and let's go through it. So, in terms of that model there and the very first thing that we look at is actually getting set up and into a position where we can throw a loop or start a loop even and that's just about moving around the wave moving around the feature or the hole may be and to get into a position where we can begin the movement which we would call a loop. That would be our phase one then we move into an initiation phase which is I guess the first part of doing the movement according to a lot of people or especially the score sheet if you're looking at in terms of ICF scoring and that would be in a loop maybe initiating the bow between the foam pile and the seam line. So, burying the nose of the boat in the water and from there we move on to the movement phase which is the lifting up of different ways of doing loops, but either lifting our arms up following up with our chest our head and throwing forwards to get this rotation moving and then from there would move into the recovery

phase. So, opening our body back out, bringing our feet back down and heading back into that front surf position. So, it's those final three stages we've talked about there which are the movement as most people picture it and the movement as per our ICF definition. And in reality which sort of most coaches recognize now, it starts a step before that which often said that gets neglected at this setup phase of this figuring out where we are in the future and where we can make that happen.

Chris Brain 17:28:

And I suppose if people have been following some of those tips you were giving earlier. They're sitting up in their boat. They've got their head body shoulders in the right position, which will make it easier to get to that set up point. But when people start to plug for the loop when they go into that initiation part and that's something that I've often seen people struggle with some people make effortless they're just able to push the nose down and the boat goes down straight and then they're ready coming around for a loop. But have you got any tips on getting that initiation in the right place or keeping it straight at all?

Tamsyn McConchie 18:06:

I mean you'll probably hate me for this first one, but it's gonna be about sitting up and keeping your eyes up and it's just having the situational awareness of knowing where your nose actually is. If we're looking at the nose of the boat. We don't know how far up and down that foam pile up and down that green part of the feature that we're on so by keeping our eyes up and taking in that spatial information. We've got a lot better chances of placing the nose of the boat where we want to which leads me on to the next bit of it's easier to place the nose straight in the foamier water. So, if we're trying to push through this big wall of green glassy water, that's a lot of force going down on that nose that boat if we're putting up really high if we're slightly off that green water is going to catch and it's gonna exaggerate any twist that we might get on the boat. So, one thing I would say is to bring it back towards the foam pile where we can bring it in sort of as close to where the green and the white meet that gives us better chance as any to actually feed it in straight and with a bit of intention. But then the other thing is we see a lot of people, getting their paddles out high ready for this of jump phase I suppose and if we could keep one of those either down towards the water or a little bit closer or in or whatever it is. We can use that to feed to keep a straight throughout the

plug. Some people love that some people hate it and it might get to a point where you do it one or two times, but then you get more used to setting up earlier and then you don't need it anymore sometimes you notice you do and sometimes you don't that's a really good one to play about on non-uniform features you see a lot in Nottingham an inlet gate which really straight and it's really easy to plug straight. Whereas you get somewhere else and all of a sudden you're getting kicked off and actually playing around with which blade you want in the water to support you how much pull you want on those is a really good thing to do to get used to doing the same movement in different locations.

Chris Brain 20:11:

Yeah, it's super useful to be able to do both, isn't it? That's one thing I've definitely seen when I've been coaching freestyle myself before is it's not like a right or wrong. It's right to use the blade or its right to not use the blade but you need to have that variation and we often see people get halfway around with the loop which back in the day might have called a pop out or an ender and in my book still should score a lot of points but they're looking to get that full rotation, aren't they? and that's often that moment people plug they get up and then they kind of just land flat on their face again. How do we help people get that full rotation round?

Tamsyn McConchie 20:48:

I'll tell you what an endo still worth a lot of points in my book. If you come along to the Nottingham freestyle league, a fun event like that or european open then you're definitely get a lot of points for an endo still we'd love to see them. They're quite impressive especially where you get a lot of height but trying to bring the loop around is quite a common one, and that sort of starts from that lift. As soon as we're getting that plug initiation. This is the thing with freestyle moves. Yes, there are these distinct phases but they really flow together in one movement. So, we can't think about the initiation and then think about throwing over it needs to be as we're initiating the boat. We're starting to lift up through our chest bringing their hands up quite often bringing the paddles up and looking up so that we've got somewhere to throw forwards from and so as we initiate we need to be pulling the boat up and out of the water using so our chest and paddles as I mentioned and then this throw forwards we ideally want to bring up paddles sort of in towards our waist. So, if we think about our paddle being

the point that the boat's going to rotate around when we throw in we can either bring it to the centre of our body and we know from physics class that if we're rotating around the point in the centre will rotate really quickly just like an ice dancer or whatever. Whereas if people are throwing really far forward in front of them or to the end of their boat. We're trying to rotate around a point that's further away from the centre of mass. So, we're going to do this big slow loopy rotation, which you see from a lot of paddlers, they do this big jump and they throw out or they throw towards their feet and the boat rotates around that point so it comes high it comes over slowly and they haven't quite made it round before they're hitting the water. Thinking about that point of rotation and bringing that closer to our body close to the centre of mass. It's going to get us spinning quicker.

Chris Brain 22:45:

Yeah, and I suppose this is also one of those moves where you just need to get your head wet with it don't you, you've got to be prepared that your first few or several or maybe much more than that, probably aren't going to be there and you're gonna spend a lot of time on your face and rolling but that's just part of it, isn't it? That's okay.

Tamsyn McConchie 23:05:

Absolutely, that's the nature of freestyle. I don't know a single freestyler who has managed to get to where they are without falling on their face countless times. And so absolutely it's probably one of the most fun parts of it as well.

Chris Brain 23:21:

What do you think is shared between some of the other foundation moves? I'm thinking things like spins and cartwheels can we take much from the loop into how we practise those or do you think of them as being quite different moves?

Tamsyn McConchie 23:35:

It's interesting. You've mentioned sort of cartwheels and spins there. I think those two have a lot of similarities in them maybe even more so than with loop. So, I've got these two distinct and foundation moves and as we build into higher point value moves different sort of I guess more experience or high level moves those boundaries become a bit more blurred. But if we look at the spin and the cartwheel, both of those

involve this rotation of the top half of your body away from the lower half of your body. So, when we're looking at a spin, we're trying to spin around the centre of the boat and we can do it with our paddle sure or we could do it clean without the use of the paddle by presenting our body upstream and using that body tension from that rotation. To bring our legs around to meet where we've presented our body or whatever that is. So, it's creating sort of a force either with the paddle or without the paddle in that rotational direction in that sort of horizontal rotation. And then as we go into a cartwheel, we're doing the same movement, but just on edge so we've still got to get that tension that body tension between our sort of chest and our lower body and just instead of being flat. We're doing it with a bit of angle on our boat. So, there's a lot of similarities in those two moves in that respect one's balanced on end and one's balanced on our bums. And so yeah, there's a lot of overlap and then when we go from those moves into something like a lunar. We're starting off with a spinning motion. We're using that same rotation, but then we're also incorporating a back loop movement or a back cartwheel movement to bring the boat all the way around so I would say they're sort of a few key fairly distinct elements and the lines between these blur a lot as we put together new movements.

Chris Brain 25:42:

I'm hearing you talk about some of those advanced moves and it feels like it's really combining some of those elements of the spins and the loop and the different rotations, but the key message so far seems to have been that the body is probably more important than the paddle. Certainly in those initial stages of learning the moves. If you're doing something a bit more advanced and you can choose whichever move you want to talk about here, how do you start coaching with somebody? They've got the foundation skills already and they can do some of the basics but how do you coach something a bit more advanced than that?

Tamsyn McConchie 26:21:

You know what it could be a challenge. I won't lie. It takes some time to break it down and I think it's quite important, especially depending on how advanced these paddlers are and what moves they're looking at people might have habits formed or so set ideas already of what they're aiming for and to sort of challenge those can create a bit of a challenging environment and hey, that's what we're here for and to keep progress

moving forwards, but it can be a challenge so I think as with anything it's having a few opportunity as a coach just several opportunities to observe before I'm jumping in and making a change so if somebody says I really want to work on doing a space loop, linking these two moves. I'm not going to watch one attempt and say what you need to do is x y z it's watching the patterns in their movements and maybe even watching related movements or even just doing the space or just doing the loop and how they do them. Like I said at the beginning actually people have slightly varying techniques person to person and a lot of that is observation and then seeing where the change is or where this breaks down and it doesn't flow so well or maybe if it just looks uncomfortable because quite often when people are succeeding in moves, they look fairly comfortable. So, if there's a point where they look like they're getting and caught up or hunched over quite likely there's something there or just before that point which needs to be addressed. So, taking the opportunity to observe several attempts at something before trying to make those changes is really important I'd say as a coach.

Chris Brain 28:12:

I said we come back to squirt boating so I'd like to fit this in before we finish if we can because I think that is probably the most unique discipline in freestyle and it feels like to me observing a bit more from the outside in that it's had quite a big comeback. You might say it's never been gone, but it feels that there's more people getting involved in it, but it's got such a unique element to it of going under the water and doing those mystery moves and doing moves under the water as well. I don't know if I've got a proper understanding of how on earth you can actually train for that. So how do you train for it? And how do you coach something that ultimately you can't necessarily see?

Tamsyn McConchie 28:52:

That's a really good question and I'll start with the training aspect and I'll be honest a lot of that is just mess around and find out and because you say no one can sort of see exactly what you're doing. Especially if you're with someone in murky muddy waters, you can't see exactly what someone's doing. So, nobody can say you need to do x y z and I think as a paddler it's really helped me connect with my own body my own movements because if somebody says, I find that when I x y z it makes this happen. Then understanding what my body feels like because I can't even see myself

when I'm underwater understanding what that feels like to get that grab from the flow or to get it so I can see the little bubbles sort of rising in front of my eyes those indicators which and I guess are so separate from what we're used to getting and that really has helped me progress as a paddler because now I can bring that awareness two elements such as my other freestyle paddling and white water paddling and even when it comes to sort of paying Polo or using other boats and just that real awareness of how I'm connected what my body is doing what stakes I'm making. Okay, then moving on to coaching it. Again, because you can't see a lot of it it's developing this relationship with the people that we're coaching and it's understanding the language that each of us use to describe what we think our body's doing. And what it actually is doing so it's actually some really positive relationships that build up in squirt boating because you've got to communicate quite well. So, if I say, I think I am dropping my left edge and rotating this way and an opening my body here underwater. My coach knows exactly what I'm doing in my body because he's seen me do that on the surface and he knows that when I say I'm dropping my edge this much. I'm probably only dropping it this much instead whether that's a massive difference or fractionally he's sort of in tune with what I say versus what that looks like on the surface. So that sort of thing is quite a relationship to develop and it's about the paddler being open and being able to recognize and develop those skills for themselves and about the coach being able to listen to what the paddler is saying and really take that on board and the other really quite cool part about it is when it comes to sinking it depends spot on spot it's so variable, right so we can go somewhere where everything we do on the surface. That's it. We go down and we can sit there and all we have to do is sit nice still and the river does the rest of the work or you can go somewhere you really got to work for it, or you can do a trick underwater and that's you doing a lot of the work. So sometimes it's being able to read what they're doing on the surface and just understanding how that's going to translate under the water. And what that spot does so it's a lot of getting to know the river as well. I think it really helps with just river reading and hydrology and all of that bit.

Chris Brain 32:11:

How long can you hold your breath for then?

Tamsyn McConchie 32:13:

The all-important question I don't think and I've ever put that one fully to the test. I've definitely gotten to the point where I've tapped out and come up for air but I think that's more caught out by surprise and going deeper. I should like to challenge myself at some point.

Chris Brain 32:28:

Inspiring Tamsyn, it's been absolutely great to have you on the podcast. I know there's gonna be people listening have taken loads away from that and hopefully a few more people getting into squirt boating and trying a few more play moves as well. Really appreciate having you on thank you so much for coming and joining us today.

Tamsyn McConchie 32:47:

Thanks so much for having me, Chris. It's been a great time.