

Chris Brain 00:15:

Hello and welcome to another episode of the coaching podcast. My name is Chris Brain and I'm joined today by Beth Wallis. Hi Beth, how you doing?

Beth Wallis 00:23:

Hiya, lovely to be here.

Chris Brain 00:25:

So, it's gonna be great today because I've been really excited to chat you for a little while actually because we know from quite a long time ago, when I used to coach with you and your canoe club, I was quite a bit younger you were much younger, but still out there loving being on the water and I could see the enthusiasm from really early on and it's been so great seeing you develop and become a coach and a performance coach as well recently, which is really, really exciting. Let's get chatting about your canoe coaching. Bring me up to speed what you've been doing recently and tell us more about yourself.

Beth Wallis 01:03:

So, as you say I've been hanging out in boats for a really long time. We all did want to be just like you when we were kids, you're like the coolest person and I've kind of done a slow migration from white water kayaking into all kinds of boats and a migration north from sort of Lancashire and all those Lancashire venues that lots of people will know of and have landed up in central Scotland, which is pretty ideal. And I'm really happy now to paddle anything, going sea paddling, hanging out on the river. I've got into canoes kind of by accident, which is a surprise to me, as much as it is to lots of other people. There's folks with stories about me swimming down the river for two days rather than get in a canoe, because canoes are silly. So, it's a surprise to me that most of my work stuff now is canoes and that has gone through doing that performance coach journey in white water canoe, which was chosen because it would maximise the learning. It was the one that would stretch me rather than the one that felt comfortable and embracing all the adventures that you can have in canoes because it turns out, they're pretty good and they go to quite cool places.

Chris Brain 02:19:

Absolutely they do. I'd be really keen to hear if I can just a little bit about who you're coaching, what kind of groups you're working with? Where does your coaching take you?

Beth Wallis 02:30:

Yeah, I coach a huge mix of people. So I've just had a week with some 7 to 10 year olds doing actual canoe coaching and going off on huge adventures not very far away from home, which has been very excellent but then right up to things like delivering courses and working with folks that want to push into I guess what you'd call the more advanced environments, folks that want to take their canoes on journeys into lonely places and want to try and explore some slightly steeper rivers, and windier lochs to kind of be on the what feels like their edge of what they can do in a canoe and then a little sideways into working with folks that wouldn't otherwise go on adventures of any kind. I wouldn't see themselves doing outdoor things at all, and that brings actually maybe the most joy and the most satisfaction, because they're starting from just nothing. I don't know what this is. I've just sort of arrived and are totally open to whatever it can become. So, it gives me a whole heap of freedom which is kind of exciting.

Chris Brain 03:53:

So, let's get going with that as a concept. If you've got freedom to coach your paddlers, where do you start with those skills? What do you think is useful as a first thing, as a starting point? Where do you go?

Beth Wallis 04:09:

Isn't that the big question? I think being comfy in boats is my first start with anybody regardless of what level they're at, being able to be like, this boat's actually sort of stable, I can move around in it, I can understand the shapes it makes in the water. I can understand what happens if I move over here or if I move forwards or backwards, where are the limits of it. So, I remember growing up, we spent just so much time messing about in boats mostly in the water, and standing up jumping around, running around the edges. And I think sometimes we lose that especially when we start

working with adults, but the foundations of understanding your craft seem to come from that. So, my start point is always in as playful a way as I can coax people into and is having that understanding of what this boat does. If I stand up, will I fall in? If I lean over there, what will happen to it? And from that, I think once we can do that everything else works, much better.

Chris Brain 05:24:

And to make the magic happen there how are you doing that? Give me an example of a few different things that you might do to really bring that to life. You mentioned about moving around in boats. Do you have an answer that you're trying to get to, something that already really works that maybe you're guiding towards and what is that?

Beth Wallis 05:45:

Yeah, I'm always looking for folks to feel comfortable. Moving themselves kind of close to the action. So, sort of going, if I'm paddling, especially in canoe, if I'm gonna put my paddle out to the left of me, it probably works better if I'm a wee bit closer to it. So, I want folks to feel like they can slide along their seat and be on that side. If they're gonna break in or out of the flow, and that's gonna require some sort of edge swapping, I want folks to feel like they can move their knees and really engage their whole body in getting over there rather than sort of sitting really stiff in the middle because they're a little bit tense and the boat wobbles, and oh I could go over there, but I don't quite want to commit. So, I'm a fan of the silly game and Canoe Twister is my current favourite.

Chris Brain 06:32:

Oh, tell us more about that. I want to hear Canoe Twister.

Beth Wallis 06:36:

It is actual Twister. So, I've got a Twister board and a bunch of re-peelable stickers and I stealth around before sessions and stick them on people's boats, and we get the Twister board out and some lucky person gets to be the spinner and we play that as we journey. Sometimes we play it right at the start but sometimes we just throw it in as we journey, ah let's see if we can get our left foot on that red one and still paddle. Maybe! I'll probably fall in!

Chris Brain 07:02:

Oh, so you're still moving at this point?

Beth Wallis 07:05:

Yeah. Yeah, we play on the move. It's fast! So, getting folks to share paddles, I love tandem paddling and people hate it and that makes me sad. So, lots of getting folks to move around and can you share paddles? Because to do that, you've got to move and you've got to talk to each other and the boat's gonna do something funky. Can you paddle sat on the back of it? And all of a sudden, the boat feels different and it turns differently and goes straight differently and that's really exploratory. I think that's the word and letting folks go. I wonder what happens if you do that and my answer is always like we'll try. Let's not stick with, I wonder, it's like, let's give it a go. We might get wet. That might be sad depending on the time of year but we can probably fix it.

Chris Brain 07:52:

So, you've got people playing Twister, they're shifting their bum, they're moving their knees, they're near their paddle, maybe changing position in the boat. Where next after that, once they feel comfortable?

Beth Wallis 08:06:

I reckon 90% of doing this stuff well, in any craft is can we make the boat go? So, in my head, my shortcut word is forward paddling, but that's actually nonsense because we don't do a huge amount of pure forward paddling. It's always little combinations of stuff. So my better phrase for it is efficient power transfer. And my palatable to guests phrase is making boats go because that sounds nicer. And so I major pretty hard, and maybe it's more technical than lots of folks might do with beginners. And I think I'm okay with that. I think if folks feel really confident that they can put the boat at least in the vague direction of where they want to go, folks, feel much freer to try. And, we know that from being on the river, I'm much more likely to have a go in that hole if I'm reasonably confident I can get myself out of it. I'm much more willing to go and stick my nose out in the wind if I'm reasonably sure that I can make my boat turn and put myself back somewhere sheltered. I guess it's the same as in lots of countries. They teach people to roll really early in white water kayak, in that whole taking a little sense

of the fear out of it, because I can do a thing. So, I major really hard on can we make the boat go. Whether that's forwards backwards, turning.

Chris Brain 09:32:

So, you know I'm going to push you now on this one because I want to get into the details. How do we actually make that boat go? And I know this might not be the same for everybody, different people do it differently, but how do we make a canoe go?

Beth Wallis 09:48:

I've got these little steps in my head and I guess the disclaimer is I spent a bunch of time when I sort of disappeared from sort of recreational boating because I went and spent some time making long pointy boats go fast, which was excellent and massively plays back into what I'm doing now in recreational paddling and I've got this little sequence in my head and I start with connect and that's about getting folks with a good posture, as much as they can, that's comfortable for them. It's probably diluted from what I want. But that's people, so that's okay. And making sure folks are sat in the right place. So, they've shuffled their bum across before on one side, turned our knees, got our body sort of facing where we are and if folks are using hip pads and stuff like that in the right place, lots of folks like that in canoe. Are people's knees and feet connected to that boat. I've been experimenting in my boat with almost a little ledge behind my feet in my canoe. So, I've got something for my toes to slightly push against. which I'm still hit and miss on it, but I think I like it and kind of giving folks a little option of it might be easier for you if you can create some sort of physical connection, it might just help you feel things better in your body. And I'm kind of alright with playing with that as long as we're not getting stuck. It's a bit of a balance and once we've got that connect, I'm then thinking about setting or getting people set up so that pre winding my body which feels a bit backwards because you have to start going the wrong way to go the right way. So that when my paddle goes in, it's gonna be depending on which way I'm going it's gonna be vertical or horizontal, but the whole blade is going to be in the water and primed and ready. And I think there's a lot to be said for the primed. I teach people to be patient a lot and not to kind of put their blade in and just rip it straight back and wait for it to feel like there's load on it, it's got connect and set and then that load, which I do think is important. Wait for there to be some pressure on the blade and then we can go. So, the go bit is easy. People are really good at the go bit and

people are dead good at being like, yeah, I'm gonna put my paddle in and I'm gonna move everything past it and I can do that bit. I think the setting and loading, I spend a lot of time on with folks and sometimes that's off the water because it's sometimes hard to feel, and sometimes it's between pier posts. I work quite hard to find places with posts of piers or buoys, where I can physically put my paddle behind something. And that means my paddle can't move. So, I have to move my boat past my paddle, and I find it's a bit of a mind shift for people. We often might speak, certainly in the past. And if we're being a bit lazy about putting your paddling and pulling, and that for most folks that's about pulling my paddle. Because that's the bit that moves and I think if I can help people to think about setting my paddle and moving everything past it, that seems to help. So sometimes it's creating that physical thing to stop the paddle moving. Oh yeah, look my boat's moved past my paddle. This works. I like this and we can kind of scoot along. Okay, can I now do it without the physical thing and adding in markers, I often use listening, I can tell if people are paddling well and you can give folks that. Can you hear the water ripping? If the water is ripping, we're probably over pulling and pulling the paddle through the water. So, can we do it without that squoosh noise? Seems like a really good marker for people and can we do it and physically unwind our body. And feel the change in tension through our body. So, a lot of time helping folks, feel like holding tension through your body and I think that's where that push thing works really well and sometimes that's bigger than what I can do, in my coaching sessions, I can't do that.

Chris Brain 14:08:

Are there ever any problems or challenges that people have with any of that and how as a coach you overcome them?

Beth Wallis 14:13:

Yeah, lots and sometimes it's just what we've done before. The reality is if we use forward paddling as the sort of shortcut word, we don't spend a huge amount of time on it. We maybe do a bit on our first ever sessions. And then we go on to more exciting things. So sometimes the difficulty is for folks not unlearning just refining. And it's a real balance then isn't it of not bashing people because you could rip people's paddling apart and leave them feeling awful and that's not what we're here to do. But you could really quickly go down that line and then they feel terrible. So, kind of often the difficulty

is that this is a thing I thought I was really good at but actually maybe there's ways I could refine it and make it better, and some of that selling that wants versus need thing, but wouldn't you feel better on the river if you knew you were going to make that eddy? Wouldn't you feel a whole lot bolder if you knew you were gonna make it? You just knew because you knew that when you put your paddle in, your boat goes. So, it's a bit that and then it's the physiological stuff. Lots of folk probably don't do the amount of physical stuff that I do or you do and stuff like holding body tension is difficult, we just don't know how to do it. Lots of folks roll their eyes at the whole yoga, pilates stuff, me included but then when I do it, I'm like oh, it's actually quite helpful this stuff, isn't it?

Chris Brain 15:57:

I think I'm actually realising that being able to hold body tension in a boat, whatever craft it is, is probably just as important as what I'm doing with my paddle. For me, it's become much more on my radar recently, especially after doing the podcast and chatting to people about it, it's such a common thread.

Beth Wallis 16:15:

Yeah, I think it's really important. Lots of folks don't know how to do it or don't know what it feels like. I can give you shortcuts by doing bits with how you connected to your boat and stuff like that but sometimes the answer is this really good 15-minute pilates thing on YouTube? Maybe give it a go for a few weeks. Give it a try. Maybe it might help.

Chris Brain 16:40:

And we've got to say some of these things as being long term as well. It can't just be a quick fix and it's done. We might be able to teach people a certain skill and they can do it. But, actually things like, getting up our body involved, using our core, holding tension, like you say that does take time. I'm interested in where you might go next with that. Because in my mind I feel like what you've done is, you're sat in the right place, you've wound people up to paddle forwards like you say make their boat go well, but in particular with canoe, there's that idea of steering and changing or holding direction with what potentially could be a limitless supply of different strokes when it

comes to canoeing. So where do you go with the beginner? Do you keep it really simple? Do you give them something more advanced?

Beth Wallis 17:34:

Paddle doubles is usually my answer and then folks are like we don't want to do that. Cool, we've made it hard for ourselves, fantastic! And I think it depends what people have got from before. So, lots of folks come to canoeing often from kayaking. And have a really good concept of that stern rudder stuff. So sometimes the first step is that, let's transfer that thing you know into this and don't think there's anything wrong with that. I think there's definitely people of an older more experience generation that would be really sad if I was like, stern rudders are great in canoes because that's not what we do. But if I've got some folks that really want to go over there and know how to do a stern runner, great, why not? And it's really easy to teach. It's like sometimes we want to give people quick wins. So why would I not? And then I might start going like, there's this other thing we can do, you might see people doing this fancy J stroke. You've probably watched some videos on YouTube of it because people have, would you like to try it? Sometimes it feels a bit odd. So sometimes I'll change paddles with folks away from that really traditional canoe T grip shape. Which actually feels quite awkward to do J strokes with to being like here have this, it will feel a bit easier, something a bit more open palm and then helping folks if they want to go down that J stroke lovely route because it feels nice, let's be honest it does feel kind of cool, is getting folks to understand that the paddle can roll in their hands. It doesn't have to be a fixed wrist thing.

Chris Brain 19:17:

And you think it's helpful as a canoeist to be able to do both of those strokes equally and to use them at the right time or do you think we need to be migrating a beginner towards the J stroke as the premium outcome there?

Beth Wallis 19:33:

I think it depends what they want to do. There's no getting away from that J stroke does feel really nice when I'm touring on the Loch and it's not super windy. And I want to maintain as much momentum as I can because I'm going really far, but I often see folks then on the river being really frustrated that they're steering isn't working because

they're using a J stroke. And I'm like, that stroke relies on a little bit of time and a little bit of pressure on the blade that isn't quite what you want on the river. You might choose to do something that's a bit quicker or is just a bit bigger, it has a bigger response, quicker. This is lovely for cruising but if you want to do that sort of stern rudder which turns really nicely into a little push away might actually be the one for you. Giving people both is fine. And some people just don't like it, I'd see people doing all kinds of funky stuff with paddles and canoes. There's a dude, sort of local to us that uses a kayak paddle in his canoe. If it works with him, if a J stroke works and that's comfy for people. I think that's great, but if it's messing with people's brains or they've not got the right paddle to do it comfortably. It's all well me giving folks a paddle that feels good. But if the paddle, they're taking away is gonna feel really uncomfortable to do that with, probably doing them a slight disservice. Until they've got something else, that feels good. Might be the catalyst for them to go spend some money. That might be a good thing, I don't know.

Chris Brain 21:22:

So, once we're on the river and we're introducing people to these different skills strokes, the whole environment, what are your main technical focuses as a coach? Where do you put your attention?

Beth Wallis 21:36:

I mean, slightly sideways I'd start with tactical. I really want folks to be able to start to read the water. And just to understand what they're seeing, I think it's scary if we don't know. Things are scary if we don't know and the river is unknown, we all stand with people and they'll look across the flow and be like, I don't know, it's all going that way. And we see six or seven different things happening in there. And I think if we can point those things out that takes some of the mystery away and people can relax and go, look that bits an eddy and that bits a flow. And what's that bit doing over there? And I kind of think a bit of that information, even for complete beginners to the river takes out a bit of the tension, like, you're not just gonna go down forever, there's an eddy there. That's a place you can stop up and you can get to it whenever you want. That's my start and then the technical stuff. I am really, really keen on helping people get between the eddy and the flow and it sometimes feels like a hard place to start, I guess there's lots of potential for unexpected things to happen when we start crossing eddy

lines. It can feel like a bit of a tricky place to start with, throwing people into the potentially unexpected but in terms of looking after people on the river, I really need people to be able to get in and out of the flow. And in terms of their learning, it's the same. So why don't we just start here? Let's make this bit good at getting in and out of the places where we can pause and think and have a drink and learn and then we're not going to spend the rest of the session falling in every time we go over an eddy line.

Chris Brain 23:28:

And what do you think of the key components for a paddler to move from the eddy to the flow?

Beth Wallis 23:33:

Knowing where the eddyline is, that's pretty crucial and actually where it is, is it wide or is it narrow? We always see folks get stuck on especially, I'm on the Tay which is great for it. Folks just get stuck on eddy lines because they're a metre wide and it's annoying. So, knowing where it is, understanding that this sounds really simple but the the eddy and the flow are going in different directions or one is still and one's flowing and got a backflow in it. So that in a canoe especially the front of my boat is going to be affected differently to the back of my boat. I think that's really, really crucial for folks to understand that I'm gonna get the front of my boat into some flow. And that is most likely going to want to push it downstream. But the back of my boat might not be in the same thing. So, then I'm kind of going, right? We would either want to use that to our advantage. You can have a chat with folks, I'll leave in the back of my boat in the sticky water. And the front of my boat in the flowy water, means I'm gonna get a great turn. That'd be cool. Or being like, I don't really want that turn. So, I want to get both ends of my boat out into that flowy water. Ideally reasonably quickly. And then how do we set up? By making our boat go, that seems important. Setting up that we start that in the eddy and starting that on the eddy line might not work as well as we want to. Having a bit of an understanding of what we're trying to achieve when we cross the eddy line. You see folks just kind of float out don't you and then be like I didn't get where I wanted to get to. Did you really know where you wanted to get to? No plan equals no real result. I think that technical aspect of being like, in my mind, do I need to boost my boat over the little fence that is the eddyline. So having the technical ability to get my boat set up in the right direction and create some kind of boost whether it's

a one stroke boost. Because it's a dead narrow eddy line, or it's a three-stroke boost because it's kind of wide. And I need to generate some of that in the eddy so that I've got half a chance of sort of gliding over it. Whether I start that on the upstream or the downstream side of my paddle of my boat, but I think it is that making the boat go thing. It's all about the boost over that fence.

Chris Brain 26:07:

It seems to be the thing that binds everything together, the canoe does what we want it to do because we can make it move.

Beth Wallis 27:38:

Yeah, they're massive. I probably heard this phrase a long time ago, but I might not have been listening well so wonderful Steve Mac said to me quite recently that paddling a canoe is effectively like paddling a barge with a matchstick. And I was like, that genius, of course it is. So, when I'm doing stuff, I need to have that in my mind that I need to set things up and if I'm gonna make it go, I really need to be able to make it go. I want that to be really effective because otherwise I'm gonna work really hard. And probably not get anywhere. And then I'll be sad and grumpy and I'll hate canoes and just want to spend my time swimming along next to them instead of paddling them.

Chris Brain 27:04:

So, I'm getting a real sense that you're super playful with your coaching and that you're always out there experimenting with your students, but I wonder if you spend much time focusing on some of the skills that I know canoeists can sometimes avoid, some things like surfing and maybe side surfing, or even taking a wetter line rather than a dryer line. Do you do a lot of that? And how do you coach it?

Beth Wallis 27:30:

Yeah, I'm mad for that stuff, especially the wet line rather than the dry line I think from spending so much time racing where you have to take the dry line because it's fast. Let's go in the wet line, it's fun. I really like using fixed sites which I don't see lots of folks doing up here especially in canoes, because they're such journeying craft. But I sometimes think for a day where you've got learning in mind, using a fixed site in

canoes is class because you can be like let's go and max out that wave and we'll probably get quite tired so we can just stop for a rest. And then go and have another go. We can watch each other. We can jump in doubles. Surfing a boat when you're paddle in tandem is so much easier. And like really fun. And kind of going, let's mix things up. And I think people are much more willing to mix things up if they don't feel like they've got to travel far. So coaching things like surfing, it's sometimes a bit of a hard sell because it's like why would we do that? Because it's fun. And often my way of coaching it is going, do you want to jump in my boat for a bit? That'll be really fun, and then I don't get out of it. And we go and have a great time. And people say I didn't know I could surf a canoe. Yeah, and I find it quite uncomfortable. I like to play so in those breaks in coaching days, where folks stop for a drink or whatever, I'm like this is my play time. And I find it a bit odd, but I've learned to live with it because it makes me better because I've just let my brain just chill out for a bit. So often it's me going surfing a wave and often failing in the first few times because that was canoe life but just having a go and people being like, okay, that's a thing, is it? I might have a little go at that and then it's that sense of if we try it what might happen? And my answer is always let's give it a try but often folks know how it feels, we all know how good surf feels. It kind of just being like, if you do two more strokes, that's gonna feel easy and people like things that feel easy. I like things that feel easy and so kind of coaxing people, I feel like it's often got to be quite gentle. And I've discovered you can make people feel a bit nervous, if you go too hard with words like play and fun, which is a bit sad. But once they're there, they love it. So tandem I think is often a great game. Rafting. Right, let's see if we can get across the river, rafted that'll be great. Why not? And coaching it in a way that puts it in context for people. So, one of my often stories is if folks are paddling the Spey and want to camp around the washing machine or some of those places where they're slightly more interesting water. Often, the flow of the day means you can get to those places like mid-afternoon. And if you're gonna camp there, that feels like a long night in camp. There's only so much sitting about, if you got there early you could dump the stuff out of your boat and you go and see if you can catch some of those waves. So, I kind of often put it as, this is an added bonus I can coach you, if you can paddle forwards really well, you can probably get on that wave. If you can maintain your direction using a little draw stroke, at the front of your boat, you could get a really sweet slide across the river using that wave and draw stroke, oh you don't know one of those, great, let's learn it just now because it's pretty simple and all

of a sudden, you'll fly across the river really easily. It's kind of little bits of context and then be like technical coaching moment quick, get it. A draws stroke looks like this and it feels like this, ah you've got it, great. Let's do it.

Chris Brain 31:38:

Beth, it has been absolutely fantastic speaking to you today. I'm definitely going to have to go to Scotland and see some of this in action and you've absolutely inspired me. And I'm sure many others to buy a Twister board as well. You've given me a proper good idea that I can use really soon on my coaching as well.

Beth Wallis 31:59:

It's great. It's a win. Fantastic on SUPs as well.

Chris Brain 32:02:

Even better, even better. Thank you so much for your time. Thanks for sharing your wisdom with everyone. Really appreciate it.