

Chris Brain 00:15

Hello and welcome to the coaching podcast. I'm joined today by Hannah Brown and we're going to be chatting about all things Racing. Hi Hannah, thanks for being on board today.

Hannah Brown 00:24

Hey Chris. Thank you for inviting me.

Chris Brain 00:27

So, can you tell us a bit more about yourself, what you do as a paddler and an athlete, as well as what you do when you're coaching?

Hannah Brown 00:35

Yeah, certainly. I guess I sit here today with you having more years of my life in a boat than not. So, I'm gonna class myself as a lifelong paddler and for sure it's taken me around many avenues across racing disciplines. I spent a lot of time racing internationally with some really nice successes in wild water racing. I was fortunate enough to become a funded athlete within the Sprint canoeing program. So, I've also spent some time in a high-performance environment and I find myself in that bubble now on the opposite side as a coach within the Paralympic setup, recently obviously come back from the last cycle in Paris. So yeah, I find myself having been on the water, on the bank and sat round various working groups, committees that also try and promote the sport. So hopefully here to offer a fairly well-rounded opinion of it all.

Chris Brain 01:30

And this is really interesting for me today, because obviously, I'm out there on the water regularly coaching myself, but the disciplines that we're talking about are ones that I really don't know a huge amount about and I don't know what it's like really as a paddler and I definitely don't know what it's like to coach them. So, I'm super interested to hear what you've got to share today. So, what does a race coach actually do?

Hannah Brown 01:53

I reckon a race coach, I don't want to use the word expert, but you've got to have a broad spectrum of skills, and I think you've also got to have quite a curious mindset because if you unpick the problem in front of you, you're generally sat in a relatively unstable craft, craft kayak or canoe, out in a changeable environment, even if it's flatwater racing, it's never flat water. And you're also trying to get the maximum output from a physiological point of view to get the boat moving as fast as possible, at the same point being efficient and effective. So, you've got multiple aspects to incorporate in your coaching practice which I think if you come in with a closed mindset, it's quite tricky. But I also think if you try and believe you're the expert in all of those areas, it's impossible. So, it's a really nice puzzle to have, but I think you do need to be curious at asking for help or challenging your prior experiences and beliefs. But it is a tricky subject, and I think, in the high-performance world, we're spoiled by having tools and time more than anything to unpick it. I think on a volunteer basis at clubs, you get challenging locations, time of day and sometimes frequency of seeing your athletes that you have to work with the whole different picture. But at the end of the day, you're trying to get someone to go from A to B faster than they've gone previously. It's that simple really.

Chris Brain 03:22

And how much do you find as a coach that you're teaching technique? Or is it more helping people structure their training and their practice, like what's the makeup of your coaching session?

Hannah Brown 03:34

It's an interesting question. So, I think every coach will have a different philosophy around this and I could probably quote, the Paddle UK sort of coaching manual around TTTP because it kind of breaks it into some really nice categories; technical, tactical, physiological, psychological and for me, as a coach, I see it as you have sessions where you can dial up and dial down those contents. You're probably always working on those aspects if you truly unpick your session content or your progression design. But you probably need to prioritise one or two of those within a

session and I think, if you aren't clear on that, the athlete hasn't got hope in hell of being clear on that either. So, it's like a go back to it, a nice puzzle to have, but I think if you wanted to work on the technical aspect, that should be your primary aim of the session, you'll naturally get some physiological benefits from it. Same as if you want to challenge a physiological change, you'll naturally get some technical change because of the time spent in that zone or the fact that you are challenging it under fatigue. But it gives you that nice structure to not just have to look at one session. I think if you want to see progression, either technical, tactical or physiological, and psychological, you need to program it over time and even if it is one session on a Wednesday evening for the next six weeks, or the fact you might get six or seven sessions a week on the water and you're going to repeat that over a four-week block, you've got a background to map out, challenge progression and re-check points. But, and it's my bias, which I should have led with is, we are a hugely technical sport and I think if you don't lead with a technical change in a technical bias, you could be the fittest, strongest athlete out there and not make the boat move very quickly.

Chris Brain 05:24

Could we focus a little bit on the technical side of things? Because that's something we're really trying to look at through this series of the coaching podcasts. So, when you're saying technical, what do you actually mean? What are you getting at?

Hannah Brown 05:37

In my mind, it's you, your craft moving as efficiently through the water as possible. In racing terms, it's forward paddling technique, be it canoe, kayak and crew boat. I think we have some wonderful frameworks and models and language around it that I think is internationally renowned. But the problem or the thing you're trying to solve as a coach is how to make that athlete or that paddler in front of you more in tune and more efficient with their makeup, be it morphological or current sort of set up and equipment space that they're in. So very much forward paddling and very much using the whole chain. But the same point, if you're not connected well into your craft, it's wasted. So, the basic setup of footrest, seat, posture and position, paddle length, paddle choice are some of the basic elements I think people skip ahead when you look at technical change, because if those aren't fundamentally within a range of comfort or correct position, you're setting yourself up to fail, almost.

Chris Brain 06:49

So, walk me through some of those aspects then for a forward paddling stroke, like, what are we doing with the paddle and with our body? And then maybe into what we're doing inside the boat? Give me more detail if you can.

Hannah Brown 07:02

Yeah, it's a really easy one to show, and it's a really tricky one to describe, because actually a really nice sort of underpinning thread of coaching is that the description element, and the coaching side, is hard and where I think coaching gets a little bit, yeah, tricky is in this element. So, I've given myself an excuse now, but effectively, for forward paddling technique, you are trying to lock that blade within the water. We call it functional reach moment. So, as far away as possible, but without losing connection behind that, I've been a big believer in creating static frames across just sort of body setup which allows you to effectively utilise your whole-body movement to move yourself past that locked blade. The key element I'd say in race paddling is optimising the time that the paddle shaft is at or close to vertical. And actually, if you look at the plane of movement, the plane of visuals that you get around the athlete and the boat and the body, there is a lateral and a sort of vertical side. So, you've got two planes where the paddle shaft can be close to or optimised to that vertical. So, you are trying to maintain good angles, good connections and systematic tension all the way through the boat yourself and the paddle that allows an effective movement past it. I'm a massive fan that it's a rotational movement, driven from the lowest connection point. And I say that because, in the world of para that I work in now, it's not a guarantee that you've got two feet on the footrest. Actually, it's a guarantee you probably haven't got two feet on the footrest for more cases than not, so actually trying to work out how you connect from your lowest part and your lowest connection point up into torso, upper limbs, paddle and then paddle into the water.

Chris Brain 09:01

I imagine you're working with people who maybe already feel like they've got a lot of these things in place, they probably had quite a bit of time in a boat. So, how do you get into the detail to make them that little bit better? Because would I be right in

saying that's what they're looking for, just that those small percentage gains? How do you do that?

Hannah Brown 09:22

Yeah, it's a really interesting point because you'll quite often come across individuals who believe their technical model's the best it needs to be. I think within racing, and this is a really nice one to draw into flat water racing especially but is applicable with river racing, is the effectiveness or the efficiency of the stroke and what does that truly mean? And actually, as a coach, we've got beautiful visuals but we can actually have quite a lot of data to hand. So, setting aside constraints model, what and how is the boat moving at set stroke rate zones will show you, and quite often give you, evidence to provide to athletes or paddlers how effective they truly are. And this is all nice and dandy when the body is fresh. Add the layer of challenge that physical fatigue can add and you have a whole other scenario there. Because, even under or say in the nicest way, you have that perfect technical model, what does it do when it's stressed? And how does it withstand such stresses is the next chapter, which I think someone can paddle beautifully, at a low rate, a controlled environment, and low intensity effort. The challenge in racing is what happens when the metaphorical stuff hits the fan. Be it physical fatigue or the elements are against you, or the fact that you are racing over a duration that is going to provide high levels of fatigue. It then is about becoming the most effective, efficient paddler, whilst everyone else is also in that sort of hurt box as such because, at the end of the day, the person that crosses the line first wins, but it is a testament of physical and technical fatigue resistance.

Chris Brain 11:10

I really find myself drawn to the idea of using data for working out whether your paddling is efficient and effective because I feel, from my recreational background, so often it just feels very subjective. We go on maybe what it looks like from my perspective or the paddler's perspective, what it feels like. But you're working with really hard data to say whether or not what they're actually doing is working. Could you give us a bit more about the data side of things?

Hannah Brown 12:08

I can because I can also say, one end of the pointy performance pyramid you're spoilt, you get on-water data units that will give you high-resolution data there is the steps backwards from that but as any level coach you can utilise. I think wearable GPS watches will give you relatively accurate speeds and the timing element is excellent, but there are devices that can link to paddles. They can give you stroke rates. And then, actually, if your speed and your stroke rate, you can quite quickly work out how far you are travelling per stroke. So, without having these high-level data sources, you can get quite a lot of information at the paddler's hand. There is another layer though. If you just set constraints within your coaching session of how far you can move your craft in five strokes, 10 strokes, 20 strokes from a marked course that might be on a canal or river, you can almost self-measure how effective you are and actually, with kids, it's one of the best sessions you can do of seeing how far one can travel in five strokes and stability challenges but also just competitive edge. Sort of problem solving. But yeah, there is a range of data you can use and, at the upper levels, we get a fantastic, spoilt almost, level of that. But there are elements that you can bring out at every sort of levels down the pathway and even from youngsters getting in the boat, setting fun challenges with that is a really interesting way to introduce it at a low level.

Chris Brain 13:18

So, if we wanted to give some tips to the coaches that are out there coaching at that earlier level with some of their paddlers, what might you suggest for them to work or maybe they haven't got some of that technology to bring out some of that data. What could they do in their sessions to help develop their paddlers?

Hannah Brown 13:37

I think some of it is making sure the language is there, the awareness. Quite often we go, especially in racing and racing clubs, is we go out and work really hard and technical coaching is something that happens infrequently at clubs, mainly because the location and the setup can be quite tricky for that. And I think the space for introductory sort of athletes and club coaches is just to bring awareness that

technical changes or the technical model is important. And, actually, you talked about it nicely before; what does the stroke feel like in the water? But what does the body, so foot rest? How are you sat on the seat? How are you moving for your torso? So, what are you trying to do when you're putting the blade in the water or move past it can create a really nice learning circle there. We are also spoilt in this day and age of having reels and reels and reels of international footage. And a really nice thing to do after a session and before a session is to watch some of the best paddlers in the world paddle. And, before you know it, people inherently try and copy it. Not everyone's different learning styles, different learning and always wanting to work will come about. But for some, that's a really simplistic way of just teasing in technical change. But I think if you never talk about technique, you can't expect the athlete to also understand it as an important element of it. So simple top conversations.

Chris Brain 15:10

Do you use a lot of video in your coaching either as a reference? Like you've just said then, watching somebody else paddle or videoing your athletes and paddlers and showing them, is that a key part of your coaching?

Hannah Brown 16:24

Huge part. And for two or three reasons; one, there is absolutely no way in hell I can reflect on someone that's travelling at 120 stroke rate. What is exactly happening in that stroke cycle? Because they're theoretically taking two strokes a second and I've got relatively good eye sight and relatively quick processing skills, but there's no way you can break it down and feed that back. So, I think from my own awareness, I do film a lot and just film from a mobile phone on a bike or on a bank. Use the little sliding tool to slow it down and give me some confidence of what I thought I saw, I can validate that. I really like using video feedback for athletes. Tell me what they see. I think part of this process as a coach is, you aren't just prescribing and telling, you should be hopefully educating and providing an opportunity for the paddler in front of you to increase their knowledge, both of their technical model but also what are they trying to attain? And then a really sneaky way of videoing. I know a lot of people have Go Pros and helmet cams nowadays, but from a river racing makeup. The conundrum of river racing is you're trying to learn a river and then race it as fast

as possible. You generally are trying to do that whilst conserving energy in the training space, so, if you are away learning a new river with the thought that you're racing it in two days' time, you can theoretically paddle that river from a helmet cam footage 2, 3, 10, 20 times with no physiological cost. If you had to just paddle that again and again to give yourself that memory piece, that would come up quite a big energetic cost when it came to race day. So, it's a really nice tool for river racing to learn rivers and for coaches to kind of talk and share, and relive moments but also just your own validation of what you're seeing.

Chris Brain 17:23

How important is the coaching that you do off the water with your paddlers? Is that something that you're heavily involved in or is that something that maybe a different person in the team does? I imagine that's a really big component of making this paddler, this athlete, as good as they can be.

Hannah Brown 17:41

Yeah, it's almost an aspect in the high-performance world were spoilt. I'm in a privileged position to coordinate an SNC coach, a physiotherapist, a psychologist to help build a package that will create a better athlete. Each of them will bring their own expertise which I think is really, really insightful, challenging at times. Don't get me wrong, I think everyone will have their sort of understanding belief that I need to create this and change that and incorporating four levels of expertise into one plan don't always come together well, but I think it gives you a really nice opportunity to challenge sport specific movements, sport specific challenges as such and also just generic training principles that an SNC or a physio might bring into the space. I think from a coaching side off water though, it's another fantastic way of teaching technique. If you unpick it, you are asking the body to do a series of movements which are abnormal. No-one goes about their everyday life in technical, forward paddling sort of movement styles. So, it's something that's incorporated really heavily into the paracanoe world is a concept called movement skills, where you unpick the basics of movement patterns that might happen in your upper limbs, your torso, your rotational movements and we tear it apart. Pick the basic movements and play with it on land and then slowly layer that with challenge or constraints, or additional movements. So, actually the athletes we have get to build the greater awareness of

how their body might move within the technical model. So, we're not just water-based coaches, but very much use the land to unpick elements that will feed that.

Chris Brain 19:28

If somebody was training, maybe not for competition, and was just getting into the sport and really enjoying it, is there anything that they could do off the water that you think has the biggest impact? Are we talking about gym work, cardio work? What do you think has the biggest impact for somebody getting going?

Hannah Brown 19:51

It'd be a mixture, which isn't a great answer but at the end of the day, it is a physical sport. So, if your physical conditioning is of a poor level, being fitter, being stronger, being more flexible, it would be really useful to help you spend more time in the boat. Trying to challenge both technical and then specific physical challenges within it. So, it depends how and where you are entering the sport. I do think the healthier you are and the more aware you are of how your body moves, you'll find paddling easier, maybe. I wouldn't discount how unstable race crafts are, I guess, throughout the classic work on your core but I think there are so many elements of core stability that you could unpick so pilates, yoga and even some of your basic just trunk work will make a real big difference to how comfortable you are in a boat, which then allows you to open doors of how brave you can be about challenging your movement in the boat.

Chris Brain 20:53

And I think that that, for me, feels really useful because I know for a lot of paddlers, they might be able to get out a few nights a week or at the weekend, but the rest of the time they're thinking about paddling and they really want to paddle, but it's hard to be out there all the time as maybe an athlete would be. So, I think it's great to have something that they can do to keep them focused and helping them move forward with their paddling that they can do outside of that 'on the water' session.

Hannah Brown 21:21

Yeah, and we put a lot of forces and repetitive movements through joints that maybe are not used to it. Not many people rotate a lot around your trunk, but also your

shoulders, your elbows. So, there's a lot of nice low level robustness work, which is the stuff you do and you won't think will have an impact. But it will really reduce the time that is impacted later on down the line. And I think in this everyday world, when people sit over desks and have poor posture, that's never going to feed to a nice movement plan when you're trying to sit in a boat and rotate and lock the blade and create shapes and frames that are strong. So yeah, from fitness and strength but also just postural core stabilising, it will really aid. And don't forget you can do ergos.

Chris Brain 22:10

Are you a firm believer that people can be paddling and competing for life? You've obviously got a huge amount of experience as an athlete, as well as a coach alike, what kind of duration in the sport could somebody have if they stay in good condition?

Hannah Brown 22:27

Well, we've got Masters racing categories that go well into your retirement years from my understanding. I'm a big believer and hopefully an advocate that you can reach top level or as high as an individual can. I think not everyone is going to win the Olympics or make the Olympics, but someone can push themselves to the utmost level they physically could. But also then come back and find a space within competitive boating that you can enjoy. We have realms of divisions and many racings on offer from marathon to sprinting, to wild water racing and even ocean racing, which gives you a whole other breadth of experience on different waters that I think you don't have to be going for the British team or winning international medals to still enjoy racing. It is quite often the case, unfortunately, you see people push themselves to achieve, but then leave the sport and I think it's a huge loss both of literal bums on seats from a racing participation number but also just experience and knowledge within the sport. And I think you can probably reflect back on your time at the club of slightly older paddlers that gave you little nuggets of information that really propelled or fed your development and actually, if you have been at that level, you don't owe the sport that. But it's a really nice avenue to give back to the sport because, quite often, coaching seems onerous and time consuming, hard to fit in with everyday life, but actually taking that slight step back. Still enjoying the fact you

can stay fit within the sport and discipline you choose, but you can give back to so many without realising if you're on the water next to them.

Chris Brain 24:13

Do you think that your experience as an athlete has a big impact on what you coach?

Hannah Brown 24:20

Yeah, definitely, I think you can never underestimate the level of respect that having experienced it, tried to chase dreams but I also think as an athlete you go about your career trying to turn over every stone possible. You're incredibly obsessed by getting faster or getting fitter or getting better. And most athletes that go through that point in their career will have come across multiple coaches, multiple experts within different fields. You would have tried different training philosophies, training plans, sessions that I think your breadth of experience is much greater than you sometimes realise in the moment. I think it really fuels my own library of resources or tools. And I think if I just competed in one discipline and just competed to one level, I would have less to offer. And, like I said at the beginning, racing is a complicated, challenging area of canoeing. So, to have just done one piece and come into a coaching world believing that was all there was is naive and probably a pitfall and, as a coach, you realise there's many more levels of information, knowledge that you just had no idea or understanding of when you're an athlete because you see such a small snapshot but, it's a cool space to reflect on. What did you experience? And what was useful? What was also poor? And how would you like to shape that for other people moving forwards?

Chris Brain 26:05

And, do you think that former paddlers and competitors make the best coaches or is there an avenue there that somebody could come into just the coaching and just be really great at that?

Hannah Brown 26:17

It's like a million-dollar question. I think, being a successful paddler isn't a guarantee of being a great coach. I definitely think being a good coach is highly linked to your

personality traits or your demeanour. I think it isn't easy and quite a few people would look upon a coaching career or pathway as you just go and coach but it is fundamentally tricky to unpick a problem and to work with humans. So, I think there are characteristics that a really good coach could come into it. I think it is tricky in paddlesport to have not had any experience of it and then come in and coach, but that's my opinion. But, much like I talked about previously, there are many facets of many paddlers, many experienced individuals in this world that you could draw upon and I think, like I said, you don't have to be the best paddler in the world to be the best coach. I think you don't have to be the most knowledgeable paddler to be the worst coach either. I think there is a nice in-between. If you are curious with the community and utilise the community, you could learn so much. And also, coaching isn't just you, I think there's a body of people that you can draw upon and actually it's not coaching coaches but coach to coach conversation is some of the most people-rewarding you can have.

Chris Brain 27:48

If there was a coach listening in who maybe came from a more recreational background, maybe they're interested in canoeing or kayaking, whatever it might be, but they've never experienced the racing disciplines, how would they get into that either as a paddler or maybe as a coach if that was something they're interested in, coaching and helping out a local club as well?

Hannah Brown 28:13

Yeah, it's a huge world as well because obviously the recreational body is moving quickly. Participation numbers are forever increasing there and I think it's an opportunity for new, incoming paddlers, but also for coaches to broaden the potential opportunity to offer. How would they get about it is a really good question though. I guess, I'd hope every racing canoe club would have their doors open to any keen coach to learn. I think there are avenues of shadowing; I know in river racing we run several winter camps where we are crying out for additional coaching help, but the same point offering a fantastic opportunity for people to be immersed in that bubble to learn from. I know we're having a couple of flatwater coaches coming in this winter just to experience it, offer their services from their expertise, but also step into a world of the unknown to learn and see how they could pull out elements from that. I

think within the high-performance setup, there has always been the option for people to come in and shadow. I know it sometimes seems like it's a closed community, but there is nothing stopping anyone going directly to coaches or directly to the program to come and facilitate or organise shadowing opportunities. I know every coach on the ground would be absolutely buzzing to be able to share and educate so there's that, but I would say don't be afraid to go and ask the local racing club. What are you guys doing? How does it work? What could I maybe get involved with or not? And also understand or experience what is a race boat about. I think they are similar kayak canoe as a recreational side but they have different challenges and actually just having a go will be a really insightful experience.

Chris Brain 30:08

And I think that's so important, being curious. Being interested, going, seeing what it looks like. But I also think on the flip side of that, I think there's a lot of recreational canoe and kayak clubs that would really benefit from having somebody like yourself come into the club and teach and coach during a club night and share a bit of your experience. So, rather than go to the racing club, the racing coaches could come to the canoe club and say this is something that we might do and here's what we might focus on. Is that a helpful avenue as well?

Hannah Brown 30:41

It probably is and everyone would expect it to come to them but it's vice versa for sure. And, going down the coaching pathway route, there is a racing discipline specific module which there aren't that many being run, but I think due to the desire or need at times and so actually if there was potentially more cross learning that could happen at educational events, I think that'd be massive, but no, I think there shouldn't be anything stopping a race coach coming in. I think it's quite easy to get siloed of different disciplines and especially in club environments. You do what you do. Why would you want to change? And, actually, it's the most simplistic answer that's probably the best one there.

Chris Brain 31:26

Hannah, it's been fantastic chatting to you today. I've learnt loads and I'm now really interested to go and see a bit of race coaching myself actually, so thank you very

much for sharing your knowledge, sharing your wisdom, really great to have you on the podcast.

Hannah Brown 31:40

Thank you for having me.

Chris Brain 31:43

Thank you.

End.