

Podcast – Lessons from Slalom with Andy Kettlewell - Transcript

Georgina Maxwell: Hi. Yeah. And welcome to this episode of the coaching podcast. Hope you're all and thank you for listening. Today we have Andy Kettlewell with us, also known as Chips to anybody who knows him. and we're going to chat about all things lessons from slalom. So Hi Andy

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Andy Kettlewell:hi ya good morning Georgina

0.36

Georgina Maxwell

Hi ya how we doing

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Andy Kettlewell:very good

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Georgina Maxwell

0:39yeah good, thank you for doing this i am going to get you now to introduce yourself, talk about all of your background so we have a nice big picture to work from and where you have come from in your paddling

0:48

Andy Kettlewell:

It seems like i have been paddling my whole life but i think i have i was fortunate to be introduced to the sport when i was 9 years old from my family friend and since then its slowly taken over my life and now fortunately i can say it is my life im really happy that its my life and i always think back to that first time in a kayak. I really hated it mainly because I fell in and my sister didn't so that instantly meant that she was better than me. We were on a 6 week course and went back once a week for a couple hours on a Wednesday evening at the local canoe club and I think if it was a one week course I would not be kayaking and my life would be very different. But because it was a 6 week course I actually grew to love it and learned the skills over a

longer period of time. I think that's one of the big factors why I carried on because 6 weeks was long enough for me to make a routine that young. Me and my sister carried on paddling, that canoe club in Bedford, yeah they did everything so over a course of a few years i had done every discipline in paddlespot. The canoe club was on a flat water river with a little bit of flow if it rained in the winter that's literally it. So yeah I raced in marathon boats, competed in canoe polo tournaments and even entered a few freestyle competitions. But nothing was really very serious other than we would just go kayaking. There was a good group of people that would always go out every week for a club night then i guess things just evolved from that and we made friends my own age through the canoe club we just kind of yeah did everything together just a good group of 20 or 30 of us so everything just felt like a family from the get go.

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Georgina Maxwell: That sounds so nice and especially at that age as well having something to focus on

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Andy Kettlewell: Yeah it only started once a week for the first couple of years really and then it was my second year i was 11 and got a dry top and started paddling a little bit more through the winter. My parents swill probable correct me - like yeah 4 years in and then i started paddling through the winter in the nighttime and just on the flat water river having a blast but yeah then i guess it developed went to all these different competitions but slalom was probably the one that stuck the most and i am sure it just to be a little core of the races that my parents wanted to go to. We went up to manchester when ive got family up to derby where we have family nearby or where ever they wanted to see their family and friends which i didnt read into it much which was great parents got to see family nearby we would stay at the grandparents and have a really nice time and then yeah it evolved did loads of stuff in wales with the canoe club. It was pretty early on where my parents would ship me off with other members of the canoe club when i was 15 yeah i would go away for the weekend 14/15 just me o my own bag of food and sleeping bag and yeah just go and have great times on the river either at matlock or in wales that's basically where you get that first bit of freedom and that's pretty cool you start making friends outside of your club yeah i made friends i still have today which is really nice

and then I guess I got into slalom. My first race was probably when I was about 11 or 12. But I look at the slalom kids I coached or are around now. And if they don't make it by 15 then they're behind the curve really and I made the prem division when I was 18 and 19 in K1 and C1. And if that happens nowadays generally people would drop out before then. It's like I just kept going and kept going and just enjoyed racing. and started to enjoy training as well. I guess it was when I was 16 that my mom would just drive me to the river. It was about 15 minutes and she'd sit in the car for an hour.

I'd go out on the flat water, put my headphones in, and just do a sprint session or a physical session, put my boat away, jump in the car, mom's read a book for an hour, and then I would be back home for dinner time. and I guess that's when the training started when I was about 16, not at the young age that they start now. and when I moved to Wales for university, Rich Lee straight away came up to me and was like, "I hear you're moving to Wales. It's like, we've got all this going on and that going on. It's like just let me know what you want to be involved in and you're more than welcome on everything." and I guess that was the first point of call where I met Rich Lee, at the time performance manager and I think interim CEO of Canoe Wales.

So it's like yeah and then I guess he became one of my strongest mentors over the years. so yeah I was 20 and then I dropped out of uni just to go kayaking. Just loved it and having the freedom to actually go kayaking. My parents supported me with a car when I was at university and just it really boomed from there. That's when I started making my own friends and... driving myself to the river and being like and that's probably why I never made it through the second year of university cuz we were going kayaking so much. Yeah.

6:39

Georgina Maxwell: Is this on the river at this moment as well or...is this still just in slalom?

6:42

Andy Kettlewell: This is everything. So I would go out all day river paddling. I need to be off by 3:00 so I can get to Cardiff at 4:00 and training starts at 4:30. and it makes like mad. It's like I remember having some tantrums on the way back from the river. It's like where you just drive around. It's too high. It's like I haven't gone kayaking all day. That's like those early days of trying to work out what's going to be running

when stuff doesn't have gauges. and then it's like, I'm late for training. It's like and that's when I realized, I'm enjoying the training as I'm enjoying the white water kayaking. That's kind of where it all blew up. I guess in later years I stopped racing when I was 23 for slalom and then I became full-time white water kayaker. just doing bits and pieces of slalom. and then I started working as a slalom coach from 23 until last year when I was 30. Yeah and It was really good time that just working and going kayaking. yeah,...

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Georgina Maxwell: and fast forward to now. Professional kay white water kayaker sponsored doing some really cool trips abroad.

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Andy Kettlewell: it's a dream lifestyle for sure. You have a lot of sacrifices the whole time. I don't remember a time in my life where I had money. and some people transfix on that. when I finished Sylm again, Richly had been mentoring me and then it's like, "How about coaching this up and coming band of kayakers in Cardiff?" I was like, "Sweet." He's... "Just do a few hours a week. If you end up doing a few more, it's like just log those hours and then go on holiday and go kayaking." It was like he really got me and understood I don't want a tied down job. It's like I want to earn as much money as fast as possible so then I can go on a trip and...

8:42

Georgina Maxwell: Yeah. Yeah.

8:44

Andy Kettlewell: it didn't take long before this group of 13 year olds that I was coaching it's like you're never here. It's like yeah and then they get it. It's like you had an awesome opportunity. but I'd always get their sessions covered. So they were having regular coaching, but I would just be like, "earn the money, go away." And it would go from drooping my bank balance and problem with that. That was the glory days. And they are still the glory days. Nothing's changed.

09:19

Georgina Maxwell: So today we're going to talk about the lessons from your slalom days,... from your competitive days. And it would be nice to see how we can sort of

think about the transition into the white water a bit more. And for the white water paddlers out there, what can we learn to be high performers, to be the best we can be? I do know that not everybody wants to be the best they can be. They might just go out on the river and be there for whatever motivations they want, but there are people out there who just want to keep pushing and get to the top of their game, And traditionally, I guess it's cool, I've done that grade four. What's the next grade four? I'm going to try grade five. What's the next grade five? and ticking off the grades.

whereas, I do know that if we spend more time on the easy water, we'll be better on the hard water. so I guess first we can start with your day-to-day life as a slalom paddler. I know you've mentioned some of that in your introduction there but the discipline the mindset the resilience and the sacrifice which you've t talked about but briefly would you describe then darting from river to river to river to technically or what are you working on daytoday is it and how many days a week were you going on the water is it most

10:45

Andy Kettlewell: I mean,... I look back and there was never a chill day, which is pretty awesome, I think, when you can look back and truly say there was never a chill day. There was always something going on. and I guess it would be depending on whether I was working or whether I was, just off white water kayaking for the day and then coming back for training. So if it was that perfect day we'd have called in sick the day before been like we had a great boss at the white water center at Cardiff when I was doing some work there. did a lot of maintenance work there so it was always fixing rafts and be like it's raining tomorrow boss he got it. He was go on It's like but then we would make up those hours. We'd work till 2:00 in the morning doing maintenance instead.

if it's a winter day, we know how long short the days He would appreciate that and it would be So some days where it was raining, we would go out, for first 8 8:00 a.m., paddle, then drive to Cardiff, which is about an hour from the local rivers.

I would then train in the evening, finish at 8 9:00 p.m., and then some days we'd start work then and catch up on the hours. and work till 2 am because it doesn't matter what time you finish working for fixing rafts. Yeah,...

12:02

Georgina Maxwell: So to me it sounds like at that point you were juggling other maintenance jobs around your schedule,...but how fixed was that training schedule?

12:11

Andy Kettlewell: the training sessions were pretty fixed. on a normal day would be pick up pods like one of my best friends and we'd go to the gym in the morning. So I pick him up at about 6:30. We'd be in the gym 7 till 8. We'd get to the white water center. would work all day and then 4:00 came, quick half hour break for some food and then train in the evening. So the training sessions were probably about 12 to 14 sessions a week when I was really into it and trying to get as much rest in between them. So going to the gym in the morning three or four times a week and then doing stuff in the evening. And that's just how we rolled on a normal day life. We would start the gym,...

12:56

Georgina Maxwell: So that is your whole life at that moment,...isn't it? So what... what sacrifices do you think you did, other than earning money or what

13:07

Andy Kettlewell: Yeah. the boys always used to laugh at me cuz it's only recently that I started drinking pints. I say recently, 24. It's like I'd always just get black current cordial please. It's not just because I was training but also the money factor there's always outgoings for when you're training and racing. trying to keep them as low as possible, but when a cordial used to be 50p in a pub as opposed to £4 for a pint, it's that's not what I valued in my life. So, I'm still hanging out with friends, but I value that £3 pound50 difference. And you do turn down a lot of opportunities. I missed so many trips when I was, competing for slalom because there's a training camp on or, a race on and it's going away in April is just a no-go. I've turned down some amazing trips around the world just to be like, I don't know, I'm training or I'm racing that weekend or no, it's too close to a key race of the season. It's like, but then you make that up. I remember driving back from Grand Tully Slalom back to Cardiff and...fortunately I wasn't driving. I'd lift shared to get there but got back at 2 a.m. and dawn came around and we were on them after by dawn it's like I was back up at 5

and on to the river for 6:30 or whatever It really is for the love of it... but you do turn down a lot of opportunities.

14:40

Georgina Maxwell: And do you have any regrets?

14:42

Andy Kettlewell: No. Yeah.

14:44

Georgina Maxwell: No. I don't really believe in regrets. I think you make your decision in the moment and you got to stick to it. So, I'm going to ask this question and I'm interested in both disciplines of slalom as well as white water and where you are right now in your white water paddling. how do you measure your performance? And if you can answer that for both that would be great.

15:06

Andy Kettlewell: That's a tricky one. you preempted me on this question as well, but still haven't thought of the perfect answer. but for slalom it's, very results driven. And then there's physical testing, so you can see yourself getting stronger in the gym or faster at running. there's benchmark tests that you can easily do, whether it's a 5K or a 1K for the running or whether it's a three rep max or a one rep max in the gym. But generally day, you can see, when you're in the gym and you've got a cycle and you've got that routine, which weights you're putting on the bar. You don't need to be like, let's test this one out. no, that's too heavy. no, that's too light.

you know what you're doing because whether you're taking a log of it on paper or just in your brain, and it's like, " wait a second. a month ago, I was lifting 5 kilos less or 10 kilos less. " this is really working." It's like, and you have to slalom is one of the hardest sports to be like I am now faster because the courses change. There's no training session that I've ever done which is the same as the previous one. So it's like how do you be like last time my PB was 12 seconds on that course. Now it's 11.5. It's so hard to judge like that and make that's my goal. I want to get that course to 10 seconds.

but with racing it's easy because you're measuring yourself against other people or from So the percentage of time you are away from that fastest person changes. It's like last season I was working at 130% of the fastest person. They're obviously also getting faster. Now I'm at 125%. So the gap is shrinking between me and first place. So that's one way of doing it. for slalom as you're working your way up through the divisions, obviously the more points you get in a division correlates to your positioning in the race. So got 700 points. Brilliant. My previous highest points was 500.

It's like but there's loads of other measurable things like how many clean runs you did without touching or missing a gate and did I get two runs as close to each other as possible on time. but I think as I developed slalom I got very much closer to this perfect run. It's like how close is it to my potential? and very much started to base my own performance off what I knew I could do.

So instead of being like I want to beat this person or come first, it's like you make a plan. you do all the training, you do all the prep, it's like but on race day, you make a plan or even in training, make a plan and then this is exactly where I want to be set up and doing all this is like I want to flow. I want it to be the best I can possibly paddle. And when you're watching a video back or you're thinking about, how that run was executed, that's what I'm measuring it off. And it took a while for me to get into that headspace, but that's what evolved for me. Is it close to my plan? And then can I deliver it time and time again.

So if it's in a training session, we used to do five runs of a course, can I get it? there's always variation, but as close to that plan as possible every time. And that's what I was measuring it on. am I faster than this person or that person. Because when your potential becomes I need to deliver my potential and then I will get the results as opposed to I want to beat this time. It's like if I put down a really good run, I'm going to get really close to that time. I was never the best.

I got one podium in Premier in Prem division in my whole career. And that was pretty close to my potential. But if I'd have hit my potential, I'd have been nipping at the bud of first place, which is a cool position to be in. It's like my potential was there. I never hit my potential in that specific two runs that I could have. and...

I guess going from that into the white water,...

that's where I actually found that element of I want to be the best I want this to be the smoothest and took that into my white water rather than I want to end up at the bottom. It was like, what about this move? Can I do that? And it's like then you go and repeat it again. It's like, I nailed it. that's the best I can do or does this work? So it's actually that whole within yourself. Can I do it like that? Can I do that? and then again, we did the same. I remember we've got a local waterfall to us on the methdah which is a double drop. There's so many factors and when I was learning it's like we do laps and laps.

you still do laps and laps and trying to be as consistent or try new tricks off the waterfall. And it's really fun because once you've nailed the trick, it's about nailing the trick again. So, it's that whole slalom, learnings that I've made.

It's like I'm just trying to judge it off what's that trick actually doing? It's like, Can I throw a free wheel again? And is it textbook as close to textbook as I can do? I'm trying to be better that way.

21:04

Georgina Maxwell: Yeah, just aiming for consistency and... and yeah, I mean if we're on sighting new rivers all the time, then maybe it's harder to measure performance other than knowing What would you say?

21:18

Andy Kettlewell: Yeah. that's where I bring in that whole this is how it needs to be. This is the gold standard of this is what I want to do. So, even if I'm scouting the rapid, that's what I want to do. How I measure my success is how close was I to that perfect line. It's like whether I've seen someone do it before or whatn not. But you also have to have, when I'm running the biggest waterfall of, that I've ever done, I was in Chile last year, it's like I was happy to make it from the top to the bottom uninjured. Same with Aldo Foss in Iceland.

It's like worst case scenario, it's like I want to be healthy, at the bottom. Doesn't matter if I come out my kayak, it doesn't look perfect. that's my benchmark of that's as low as I'll accept. As high, it's like I want it to look super ee be in control,...

absolutely awesome. But anywhere between that, I was happy. if you get injured or it doesn't work out, that's part of the game you play. I think with the extreme kayaking, especially big waterfalls, you have to be like just that's what it is. so yeah, it's very much

22:37

Georgina Maxwell: Do you think you have a habit of having I mean it sounds like you're quite healthy with your goal setting...but I do know that some people are always aiming for the top and not always getting it. So, they have their expectations a bit too high. Do you think that could be a thing?

22:53

Andy Kettlewell: Yeah, absolutely. I think you always have to be paddling within your own ability level, which is where the more times you go kayaking, the more you understand your ability, and what you can and can't do. It's like you're well in tune with what you're doing. If you just go kayaking on that grade four rapid and it's like, what's next? and you're always just going for something different. It's really hard for you to actually know what your level of kayaking is, if that makes sense. you don't actually know where you are because you're always doing something different. And that's fine.

We're Yeah, but sometimes you just have to be okay, where are my skills at? And as you said earlier, that's not done on new rivers every day. That's just going and...

23:45

Georgina Maxwell: Absolutely. It's repeating,... isn't it?

And you see the best paddlers out there are rerunning. I was out with a group this week and one of the coaches had finished with his group and he had done four laps of right angle whilst in the process of me, coaching a group down it and it's having that drive to keep going, isn't it? And keep pushing and working on things like you say. So, yeah, I think that's really good that way with that.

Next question. what rituals have you taken away from the slalom to now this professional whitewater kayaker? Is there any rituals you've taken from that whole process as a youth

24:25

Andy Kettlewell: definitely. you do a lot of analyzing, especially the higher up in slalom you get less free time on the water. to practice before your race. So it's a case of analyzing and watching people and then it's like they did this, they did that and that's why they nailed it. no. And you can notice things going wrong in a silent race like three moves before the actual... where it all goes wrong. It's like when you really analyze no that's not going to work. Yeah, it's not worked. It's like, so you get into that and it's like because you're just so tuned in. So I'm always the one behind the camera. It's like, yeah, you could do cool stuff first. So I kind of get around it that way. But it's just my slalom instincts coming out and it's me not wanting to go first because I never go first in slalom or never went first in slalom. I always watched, analyzed.

Can I do this? Yes. Or do I need to do something different to what I've just seen? Get your markers and then go. So, it's pretty much on every big thing I've ran, I've gone get the shots for everyone else for a start, and then you get into your own mindset. It's it's my turn. Yeah, I liked what that person did. And, I like videoing people. It's really cool to share our experiences.

We're really good at that. Share the stoke. But I'll always just flick through the camera and being like, "Yeah, I like that.

Yeah, I need to go there. look at it in real life. there. do this. I can go and do it." so I'm always very much like that. It's like, and I don't want to just get to the bottom of something. I want to do it the best I possibly can.

26:19

Georgina Maxwell: And sitting waiting for your race to start as a slalom paddler and having that prolonged moment before you've got to really press the boost bus button and get going. sitting at the top of the biggest drop you've ever run. what are the similarities in terms of I mean because you look at them two environments they're very different. You've got big scary stuff and you've got gates.

26:51

Andy Kettlewell: Yeah. Yeah.

You got things where if it goes wrong, it really all going to go wrong.

26:53

Georgina Maxwell: So in your head... how are you managing fear and things and do they cross over at all? Yeah.

27:02

Andy Kettlewell: But when you're I think in the moment,... both of those feel like the end of the world if it doesn't go right. One of them might be and one of them is just, I've not done very well at this race. But when you're actually in that moment, it's like the slalom race means everything to you. It's like getting down the bottom of this big rapid or river or waterfall also means everything to you. So yeah, the mindset's very much the same. Whatever you've decided to do in your plan, in your visualization, it's like you want it to happen the best of your ability. So you're actually sat there and... it's like you take some big deep breaths in both situations and okay, the difference is you've got someone being 30 seconds,... five, four, if you miss your start time or you just don't go, then there's no chance of you going in 10 minutes time. So that's the big difference. There's no one being like maybe that's what I need to do when I'm starting to run the big waterfalls and...

28:03

Georgina Maxwell: Get someone to count you in.

28:05

Andy Kettlewell: big rapids. It's like, "Dude, can you just be like five? That'll be really funny." And be like,...

Georgina Maxwell: It would.

Andy Kettlewell: "What is he doing a race down like this waterfall?" But yeah,...

Georgina Maxwell: And then hold up some scores at the bottom. Yeah.

28:19

Andy Kettlewell: so it's big deep breath and as soon as I peel out of that 80 or seal launching, it's like I know your brain just switches. until that split second in both situations. you can back out of it generally unless you're in an expedition I'm not

specifically talking about expeditions here, but that big moment it's like I could just not do this.

28:44

Georgina Maxwell: Yeah. Yeah

28:45.

Andy Kettlewell: It's like every big waterfall I've run, it's not been compulsory. It's like I can just get out of my kayak, walk back to the car,...no one cares. It's all the same for...

Georgina Maxwell: No one cares but yourself though, isn't it? Are you quite Yeah.

Andy Kettlewell: but you want to challenge yourself and it's like yeah I can do this.

Georgina Maxwell: You're quite internally driven.

Andy Kettlewell: This is going to be fun.

Georgina Maxwell: Yeah. Yeah.

Andy Kettlewell: This is going to be wicked and I've trained this hard to do this and if it all goes wrong in the slalen world all your slalen pals your family and... stuff have got your back. It's all right let's go for the next race or reset for the second run. you've got your support crew and it's like if everything goes wrong on the river, it's like you trust your friends with your life and you know that they'll do the best that they can to Yeah, there you go, buddy. We'll sort you out. And yeah,... very much all to do with the team behind you, but it's very similar in both situations.

29:38

Georgina Maxwell: Yeah. ...so I guess you may have answered some of this, but my next question is to can you pin because when even this week I saw somebody else working with another group and one of their group members I was like they're a slalom paddler. So I asked the coach I was like are they as slalom paddler? Yes. you can just instantly tell a slalom paddler in a white water setting. So, can you pinpoint why slalom paddlers make Well, they just look so much different and Can you pinpoint why?

30:16

Andy Kettlewell: it's simple. The more you go kayaking, the better you get. And I know that's not necessarily true. cuz there's plenty of paddlers out there that have been kayaking their whole life and have no style or skill. and that's just life.

30:30

Georgina Maxwell: So you're talking about investment... then investing in input or can you do all this on YouTube? Yeah.

30:36

Andy Kettlewell: That's fine. But I don't think you need to invest in coaching these days. I think it's going to boost you really quickly. But having that mindset of wanting to get better, filming each other, you see the kids doing it all the time now. They phones are waterproof. It's brilliant. and then walking back and doing laps on the same rapid and it's like I want to get that steey line that I've seen off this video or whatever. It's like I've done the same. It's like how do I nail it like that person has nailed it, It's like and you like watching YouTube and it's like watching yours but it's like that whole I want to be the best and that's what the slalom paddler gives you. But I think yeah, it's time on the water. It's, having some really good mentors, whether it's canoe club mentors or program coaches that can steer They can't do the work for you. At the end of the day, you're always doing the hard work, the learning, the, ... learning is hard work at the end of the day, trying to learn new skills, challenge yourself, put yourself out there. but yeah, going kayaking doesn't matter.

doesn't matter what. It doesn't need to be white water. And there's Yeah.

31:49

Georgina Maxwell: And I see the youngsters now and the ones that are running hard white water regularly, and they're not fearful of making errors. obviously if it's going to hurt them, they're going to be fearful of that, but they're ful of not looking tidy every time. They're experimenting. They're playing. they just like it's a vibe. and that vibe, I guess in the early 2000s when I was going out, it was get down it in your S6 and... have a booty at the end. you know that the whole culture to me it seems to have shifted from surviving rapids really trying to have some high performance down stuff. So yeah.

32:28

Andy Kettlewell: And not be afraid to land on your head once or...

Andy Kettlewell: twice. It's generally only water,...

Georgina Maxwell: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Yeah.

Andy Kettlewell: so it doesn't matter. Yeah.

32:34

Georgina Maxwell: So, while we still got you on here, because we are starting to draw to a close, I was going to ask you, if you did have any gym work or simple gym work that you could share with the average sort of paddler that doesn't often get to go out all the time, but they're really keen to improve and maybe they do go to the gym every week, but they can't access their boat every week, and they maybe save up and work and go on their trips every month or whatever it might be, is there any gym work we can do in the gym or at home that can help improve our performance in the kayak?

11:36

Andy Kettlewell: I would say prioritise full body workout over just trying to do upper body likeso much is through the core and the legs, just to get that transfer of feeling into the boat and where we're going obviously having a strong upper body means you can drive the boat where we want to but if we have like a jelly of a core or loose legs in our boat we can't hold onto the thigh grips or if we don't have pressure on the hips you're losing so much potential of where your boat can go so if we prioritise simple all body workouts and lots of core is the simplest answer I think. Nothing specific but don't discount everything we were just saying before the call. If we were doing laps on rapids these white water boats are so heavy the terrain is not just a path up to the top, it takes so much out of you walking up to the top doing another lap. But that's where you make progress. So me being physically fit means you can carry your kayak back to the top and do it again. Because that's where we learn, that's the beauty of it, not just doing new rapid all the time.

34:31 Georgina Maxwell

Yeah yeah perfect so final, question whats next for you, what you up to where you going or what you working on?

34:44

Andy Kettlewell: I am going to work on getting back on the road because I am currently off the road. My van needs a heart transplant. Yeah just work on myself for a little bit work on my skills probably tour the UK for the winter and just keep fit and keep groovy in a boat until, i head away in spring yeah i think ive got a couple of trips to the states planned for next year, again focusing on waterfalls and then at the end of the year focus on some expeditions probably there my two main focuses at the moment.

35:19

Georgina Maxwell : It continues

35:23

Andy Kettlewell: Yeah where's the next place we can bet lost and go and do some cool stuff

35:27

Georgina Maxwell

Well thank you very much for sharing all of that intel and hopefully the listeners will enjoy this episode thanks very much bye.

END.