

Coaching Podcast - S7 Ep6 Kayak Progression, Waterfall Techniques and Creek Boating with Alex Littlechild – Transcript

Georgina Maxwell:

Hello and welcome to this episode of the coaching podcast. My name's Georgina Maxwell and today I'm shared by Alex Littlechild to discuss all things down river freestyle drops waterfalls you name it that we're going to discuss that today. So hi Alex, how are you?

Alex Littlechild: 0.29

I'm good. Thanks, Georgina. Thanks for having me on.

Georgina Maxwell: 0.32

Hey, thanks for coming along. That's really cool to have you here. thank you for giving up your time. Do you want to introduce yourself?

Alex Littlechild: 0.38

Yeah, of course. I'm Alex and I love going kayaking. I have a passion for white water, especially steep environments.

And I love helping others to develop their relationship with the river. I grew up in London on the Temmes. and since I've been paddling all over the world, and have coached, all over the place in the UK and It's my full-time job to be kayaking and to be coaching. and I'm particularly a waterfall and down river freestyle enthusiast.

Georgina Maxwell: 1.09

Amazing. That's Ah This is going to be great.

So, you've talked a little bit about your journey there. So, what inspired you to go kayaking? What was it? can you pinpoint a moment where you thought, "Yes, that's what I want to do.

Alex Littlechild: 1.23

Yeah, for me that there was actually a very specific moment.

I was on a family holiday in the Yorkshire Dales and I was walking along the River Swale. And at the time I had done little bits of kayaking, but by no means I was committed particularly interested in kayaking. And I watched Sam Ellis who is a sort of local hero in the UK and I saw him doing laps of a a 20 foot waterfall on the swale. And I remember seeing that and thinking, "Wow, I never knew kayaks could do that." that's something that I want to do. And I just remember that that was definitely the moment for me. And since that point, I've kind of been incredibly invested in it, locked in as it were.

Georgina Maxwell: 2.10

I grew up on the banks of the swale, so I know it very well. And it's a very powerful beast,...

Isn't it, in terms of influence, because it certainly influenced me. Do you remember your first drop?

Alex Littlechild: 2.23

So after that that time on the swale, I joined a local club in London and got into kayaking and I spent a lot of time on the tempames doing seal launching off of small locks and little ledges and things. And I remember I went to university in Cumbria. and I lived in Ambleside, the sort of part of the Lake District. And local to us, we had a small waterfall called And Skeleith is a pretty small 10-ft waterfall. which at the time seemed like the biggest drop in the world. and it was my goal throughout university that I wanted to go and kayak this waterfall.

And so yeah, there was one day where me and a group of friends went to go and run it and that was a very very important moment for me and for my progression.

Georgina Maxwell:3.11

Good. So fast forward to now and you're kayaking some pretty big stuff, aren't you? So, what's the highest thing you've kayaked right now?

Alex Littlechild: 3.22

The highest thing I've kayaked. The sort of the biggest waterfall I think I've paddled is about 50 foot. Pretty big.

Georgina Maxwell: 3.30

I don't know. Is that a thing when you're at that standard of paddling? Is everyone like, " I've done one that's 56 foot.

Alex Littlechild: 3.37

Of that. There's a lot of people as well who are very good at putting an extra 10 foot on whatever they've paddled.

There's a story of Dane Jackson last year going around Chile with a measuring tape and proving to people that actually all of these drops weren't actually 70 foot, they were about 60 foot. And ...

Georgina Maxwell: 3.55

Yeah. I was wondering how you measure them. I thought maybe you just drop a throw line down or something and...

Alex Littlechild: 4.00

That's what I normally do, and I think that's where the estimation seems to go wrong. But, the one I always like to hear is people saying, " yeah, it's about the same size as right angle or it's about two right angles." And then someone goes, how tall is right angle?" And there'll always be someone who says, "It's 10 meters tall." And someone who says, "It's three meters tall. What are you talking about?" And nobody knows. It's still a mystery.

Georgina Maxwell:4.23

Yeah. Yeah. So what is the difference between a drop and a waterfall?

Alex Littlechild: 4.30

I guess the difference really is about free fall.

I'd say with a drop there often isn't enough time really to think sort of technically about how much you're going to have to do in the air. Often you pull usually a boost stroke and then you'll be landing and skipping out of a drop. Whereas a waterfall, you're probably going to have to think more about the direction that your boat's going to be hitting the water in.

Whether you're going to be stomping it, keeping at a sort of 45 degree angle, or whether you might even be plugging the waterfall if it's at a certain height,...

Georgina Maxwell: 5.02

It's the technical differences that determine whether it's a drop or a waterfall, you think? Okay, cool.

Alex Littlechild: 5.09

I'd say.

Georgina Maxwell: 5.12

So if we're thinking about practicing this sort of thing. Where's good in the UK to do this?

Alex Littlechild: 5.20

I think it's a surprisingly accessible skill to learn.

It's one of those things where people often think about waterfalls and they think I have to go to a waterfall to learn how to waterfall but I'd for me I mentioned earlier I learned to stomp my kayak in a little playboat and I learned that at Sheperton on the temps and there's a maybe no more than 2 meter ledge that I used to go and I did laps of that seal launch and I'd just push myself off the seal launch and I'd have a go at putting my weight forward and trying to kick my feet down and stomp the kayak.

And I'd say even that is a really really good way to start getting an idea of air awareness on waterfalls. And there's lots of places around the UK you can do that. You can use jetties on lakes or locks on rivers and canals. but if you are going to step up and start running waterfalls, there are some really really good spots for it. the one I think of is a low force on the Tee's. That's an absolute classic. It's a small

waterfall that's easily relatively safe. and it's really easy to get an idea of how your boat's going to move in the air...

Because it has a little bit of a kicker in low water, which means it's going to naturally lift your bow, and it allows you to play around with your weight in the air.

Georgina Maxwell: 6.38

Amazing. So, that sounds like really good stuff and venues all over the place there. So, that's handy. when you get to the sort of far out edges of where you're pushing this sport, who's teaching who this sort of stuff, where are you getting your information from when you're going right to the or is it all quite,... You're gradually building towards these bigger drops, but who's teaching each other?

Alex Littlechild: 7.05

Yeah, you definitely do have to gradually build towards it.

There is the one sort of funny thing about big waterfall running is that there's only so much you can prepare before you have to just run one to find out. that you can get to a certain point, but the only way you're going to know how you can perform in on a say 40-footer is by running a 40-footer. And often the sort of important thing that goes behind that is that the certainty and precision that you develop over time, it comes from a lot of practice and consistency on smaller drops. So if you can practice the skills that are necessary for big drops on something that's smaller and less consequential, then you're going to start getting better at it. for me at least, it definitely comes initially from YouTube from a lot of videos.

I like to watch people and then taking those videos and then videoing myself and comparing my technique to those that I've seen on the internet. And what I found is that a lot of other people who are at a similar level to me do the same. And when we go to waterfalls, we don't just get on and run the waterfall. We like to get out and we'll do laps and we'll compare the videos of us to each other and we look at what we're doing in the air and how we can improve that. and it's one of the things that I love about waterfall kayaking, especially lapable waterfalls, is that the learning process is really steep,...

But it's really exciting because there's so many little nuances in waterfall kayaking and air control that I don't think you can get in many other aspects of the Cool.

Georgina Maxwell: 8.36

That's amazing. Good stuff. So, if we're going to think about bringing it down to the sort of average creek boater or pool drop boater or somebody who's aspiring I know that from our previous conversations here you've been working on a concept and the concept is as I understand now you correct me it's for progression self check and it sort of highlights weaknesses within your own stuff. So would you like to share that with us?

Alex Littlechild: 9.06

Yeah, absolutely. So, it's sort of a trifecta of characteristics that make up what the ideal creek boater is likely and this is my personal experience and something that I've been thinking up over a fairly long time. and it's something so these three characteristics you're not necessarily one or the other. you're likely to be a part of the sort of vin diagram of these three things. So the first is the whitewater mathematician. And the mathematician is someone who can make calculations and they can stand and scout a rapid and they can pull off their equation, their maths with a lot of consistency and precision.

They're often someone who looks powerful and confident in their boat. and they seem to have certainty in their paddling. the second is And the reactionist is someone who is more likely to be capable of dropping into the unknown and working it out on the fly. So rather than spending more time scouting, they're better at taking lots of information and bringing it down to a concise A or B decision, which means that they are awesome in stuff like big volume or this sort of fight club style of creaking. so anything continuous, if you're good at that, you're likely to be within that sort of reactionist area. and the third is the expressionist.

And the expressionist is someone who not only can deliver the lines, but the thing that they're looking for when they're scouting or on their way down the river is the way to show their emotion to really develop their style. they're the ones doing kick flips and doing little tail whips and moving around. often, if they get to a drop, they're more likely to be really stomping aggressively and flying away from stuff with a lot of

style. And so the idea is that with each of these three is that we can all be within one of them in places. for me I feel like I am part of each of these. but my weakest point is definitely reactionist and I want to try and train that.

I want to find a way that I can develop my reactions in white water and...

Feel more comfortable just dropping into stuff and figuring it out on the fly. And I think that's really important.

Georgina Maxwell: 11.23

Yeah, that's a really interesting one, the reactionist. Because for me, I feel like when we end up being a reactionary paddler, it might be that our plan has gone wrong or we're falling back into our foundation skills to get us through something or to survive something. So, it's interesting you've painted that a bit more in a positive light than what I would usually sit with that. But do you agree with that? sometimes, being you end up being reactionary if you're not quite precise.

Alex Littlechild: 11.55

I think the key here is the difference between sort of river running and creaking. there are definitely occasions in creaking where you don't have the choice to be a mathematician.

Sometimes there's a mustrun or there's something where you've got to drop in and you do have to figure it out. And it's those moments where the reactionist is going to be able to step up and really perform at their best. but there is definitely an aspect of if your mathematics goes wrong You might become a reactionist. so I think there is definitely a little bit of that to it.

Georgina Maxwell: 12.28

Which one of those three do you think is the hardest one to develop?

Alex Littlechild:12.36

I think in the UK I think reactionist is the hardest. I think we're very used a style of river that allows us to slow ourselves down to stop. I can't think of many mustrun

rapids in the UK and I can't think of there's not too much sort of big water which I think lends itself to that reactionist style.

So the I'd say reactionist is probably the most difficult thing to train.

Georgina Maxwell: 13.02

Yeah, thinking a little bit about sort of penny drop moments within your paddling, that create the paddler you are today, do you think any of them sort of moments that have happened early on have created where you sit on on that spectrum?

Alex Littlechild: 13.20

Absolutely. Yeah, I think it all comes from your sort of influence. I recall a very very specific moment where I was starting to understand how the hull of my boat interacts with boils specifically on drops. and this idea of trying to match your hull to the shape of the boil so that you can maximize the amount of skip that you can get out of features using the rocker of your boat.

And I remember discovering that on YouTube watching a Swiss guy called Sven Lambler and seeing the way that he can paddle down. He's a reactionist I would say, but he can see these boils and he can make micro adjustments in the air to change the angle of his boat so that he can land and skip away off of boils and maintain his speed and power as he's kayaking. And I think that it was a really really key moment for me because not only did I suddenly think, this is a really good piece of information, but suddenly it opened my eyes a little bit to the amount of small changes, little technical pieces that you can pick up from other people kayaking.

Georgina Maxwell: 14.29

So, if you think about people maybe early in their kayaking,...A boil is something that's going to make them feel very unstable and probably not very happy or a confidence inspiring. So yeah, what advice would you be to somebody say on a really boily river to start to actually begin to really enjoy those boils and have the moments that you're having. What advice would you give?

Alex Littlechild: 14.52

Those boils, they can be nasty. I've had had some swims in my early stages of kayaking because of boils and I think it comes down to your tension in the boat and trying to keep pressure on your foot plate and bringing your knees into your chest and not allowing the water to push you around too much. I often see with intermediate and beginner paddlers the things that go wrong in boils is that they're a little bit floppy as they're approaching them.

And whilst they might be powering with their arms, they're not necessarily locked into the boat. And as a result, they get pushed around. and that being pushed around then makes them unstable and it usually pushes them into a worse position. So being locked in really really engaging that core and trying to look up ahead at the direction you want to go, which usually is across the boil. it's a perpendicular or...

Sort of 45 degree angle to the direction of push that boil's coming from.

Georgina Maxwell: 15.49

Great, so back to your theory again with let's focus on the expressionist. Yeah. Let's think about all of these exciting new moves that we don't know even exist out there at the moment. things are developing all the time, aren't they? you think of some moves that you think that that just never used to be a thing. so with the expressionist, how would you encourage somebody early on to sort of really I don't know, just enjoy being that part of a paddler without being I guess segregated from the group because of their enthusiasm.

Alex Littlechild: 16.23

Yeah, it's funny. kayaking is ever changing and especially down river play. all the time we're seeing new moves or moves that we've had for ages starting to be applied on bigger and bigger stuff or in places that you wouldn't expect. and I definitely remember being an intermediate kayaker and seeing all of these cool people on the internet doing all this stuff and thinking, "Wow, I want to be able to do that. I want to be able to try these moves. And the thing for me is that it's a bit of a mindset change. I think you've got to look at the river a little bit more like a skate park than a river. You've got to Look for the air that you could get off of waves and stuff and look at what you've got with you and how you can use that to make yourself laugh and to make other people laugh.

I always encourage paddle spins. in most situations, a paddle spin is only going to be a positive thing. as long as you're not whacking yourself in fa in your face with it, then it's a cool thing to do. And it's something that starts to develop that sort of playful attitude. And if you're comfortable somewhere, starting to do a little paddle spin it around your neck, spin it around your arm, you're starting to loosen yourself up and feel a bit more free on the river. And I think that's where it started for me, doing things even like doing a deck grab or go at pulling your deck and trying to paddle a feature without getting any water in your boat. Little things like that. I think that's expression as well. it's just sort of different stages of it.

Georgina Maxwell: 17.55

And I guess if you get the right tribe out on the river with you, it can be quite a fun thing, can't it? Rerunning drops and trying new what if we try this one, will this work? Yeah, quite a good thing to do. Okay. Okay.

Alex Littlechild: 18.09

Yeah, I think the fun of that as well is that often it doesn't work.

Often even, you're with your tribe of people and chances are someone will go, we should try this." and it won't work and everyone will keep trying it for a few laps and it still doesn't work and everyone eventually admits defeat but you've had a lot of fun trying to find out whether it will work and the learning to fail I think is really important there as well and that's something that Dan River play teaches really nicely. Okay. Absolutely.

Georgina Maxwell: 18.38

Yeah. and I don't know you that well, but I know I guess well enough to recognize that within you that you don't mind how it looks if it's not going but you're trying and you're wanting to improve yourself and you're wanting to try different things and see if it works. so on that what are you currently trying to do something new maybe something that you haven't quite mastered yet and what process are you going through to learn that and how can our listeners think about that as relative to what they're learning. Do you see what I'm asking?

Alex Littlechild: 19.19

Yeah, absolutely. I think that the example for me recently has I've been learning to cobra flip which is where you're trying to get your boat to do essentially a roll in the air, a barrel roll as you're coming off of a waterfall. and I think this is a lovely crossover between your expressionist and your reactionist because what you're trying to do is express yourself. And what you often have to have to do as a result of it failing is you have to become a reactionist. and so for me, what I've been doing is setting myself up to try off of waterfalls. I first learned to do it on flat water in a half slice. So I've been learning equivalent moves.

So something like the screw-up is a really good prerequisite even the move such like a space Godzilla is actually quite similar to that as well. it's a very similar body movement. and once I'd figured out how to do it on flat water, I then moved it to a wave. and so I found a really good wave actually in Shure in Norway this summer that I was trying it on. and I was able to paddle back up the eddi and go again and it was a really good experience trying to learn how to do it. And eventually I started to get it pretty consistently. And so then when I came back to the UK in the autumn, I then had a go at trying it off of a drop on the swale was one of the places that I tried it. and I failed and I kept failing and I landed on my head a couple of times.

And when I was in Chile last week, I picked it up again and had another go. And I was able to watch the videos back of myself. I had a GoPro on my head so I could look at the POV. And I was going again again And eventually I clicked it and found out how to do it and found those little niches. And I think with that the sort of overall learning point from my process there was as much as you can try and do something it is useless unless you've got a way of checking yourself. If you've got a way of looking back and seeing what you need to change then it is going to be hard to progress. So even having a GoPro on your head having a way of filming yourself so you can go back and Review that footage is really important. So yeah, that was definitely definitely a learning process for me and a really fun one.

Georgina Maxwell: 21.33

And are you using your friends around you for that feedback as well?

Alex Littlechild: 21.38

all the time. And the benefit of the situation that I was in Chile is that I was with some people who could cobra, which was really useful. So I was there with some people who knew what they were doing. And so when I was looking back at the footage, I was able to say, "I think I need to do this." and they were able to say, I don't think it's that. I think you need to say wind up more. I think you need to be quicker with that rolling movement in the air." so that was really cool as well.

Georgina Maxwell: 22.06

Amazing. Let's just have a little delve into mindset here. it obviously takes a certain mindset for I guess a lengthy process like that to master a move probably in one venue as well.

You then got to transfer that move into a different venue and learn that, the venue all over again to do it. what sort of mindset would you say you have and what aspects of the mindset do you think is really important for people to have if they want to progress more with their kayaking?

Alex Littlechild: 22.42

I think having drive and having motivation is really important with this stuff. if you have a goal in mind, being able to really strive for it, knowing that you're going to fail on the way is really important. And I think for me, the way that I can build a positive mindset when it comes to trying these tricks is having that consistency in my practice and trying to build it up slowly. in the actual mindset front, I have a little term in the idea of grace under pressure.

Ttrying to set yourself up for success by sitting in the eddi before you run something and being able to relax and visualize the move and then try and perform it with grace or finding that sort of precision in the chaos of white water. and for me, the way I do that is I either actually listen to music or I sing a song in my head that helps me to relax and to stay calm or if I need to hype myself up and to get ready to kayak off something difficult.

Georgina Maxwell: 23.47

So, do you have any elements of being a perfectionist within your paddling? And have you ever seen or is it within you it have a negative impact if you don't you get to

the bottom of a drop and everyone thinks you've styled it and you looked cool but you're very disappointed in what you've done. do you have any of that? I mean I've certainly coached people who have had elements of that and I'm wondering whether it's a good or a bad thing to have that perfectionism. What do you think?

Alex Littlechild: 24,21

Yeah, I definitely fall into that trap. I think often I would call myself a perfectionist. and I think the thing that people do misunderstand about it is that people think that when I land a drop and everyone thinks I've styled it and I go, "I wish I did this better." That's not a failure to me. In my head, when I do that, the fact that I still have something to work on, is quite exciting.

And it's very rare for me to have run something and get to the bottom and go, "Yeah, I absolutely nailed that." most of the time I get to the bottom. And even though I have had a really clean line or I've done something really well, there's always something where I go, "I wish I could have done that." And for me, that's one of the things I love about kayaking. I love this sort of open roof, neverending levels of success that you can find. and that the thirst for progression I think is what drives me. so yeah, I like to go to right angle and I'll do 10 laps of right angle and usually it usually starts really well. My first lap will be really good and I'll think, "yeah, I'm going to do that consistently and I go back up again and I do something different and I go, "I didn't do that the same as the first time. I'm going to go again."

And so I go back around, I do it again, and it And it will progressively get worse. And each time I think, "I wish I could do it like the first time." And usually it sort of snowballs itself until eventually you do get frustrated. And I think that's the unhealthy side of it is that frustration that comes out. but you just have to take a step back and think, "Actually, you know what? I've done 10 laps of this now. it's probably time I call it a day." it can be dangerous as well. I do it on there's a rapid called Yordel Fossen in Voss in Norway and it's quite a big waterfall. it's about 11 mters 35 but tall and yeah I do the first p usually really good, Third lap I get excited and pull too hard and then I try and fix it and it just gets worse and worse.

But I always come away from that thinking, yeah, that was fun." Regardless of the outcome,...

Georgina Maxwell: 26.32

Great. So you obviously have a specific motivations when you go aking. things that really excite you and tick you. do you ever feel like your motivations are completely different to the rest of the group? for example, it could be people are just wanting to get down a waterfall safely and you're doing 10 laps. How does that work?

Alex Littlechild: 27.00

Yeah, that can be difficult. I think that's where it's important to recognize that it's a team sport and you've got to be able to be there and to look after everyone and make sure they're happy to look after you as well.

Those 10 laps I did on Yord Del Fossen for instance going there there was me and another person who was also very motivated to go and have progression and to keep doing laps but the rest of the group really weren't that keen and so we did have to check in with them and go is everyone okay hanging out here and doing some media and being here and usually people are like yeah yeah that's absolutely fine but it's important not to get too stoked and to make people annoyed that you're spending so much time at waterfalls or at specific moves. So, yeah, it's definitely a little bit of a delicate line. You still have to make sure that you're moving with the intentions of the rest of the group and not just yourself.

Georgina Maxwell: 27.55

Yeah. when I ask that question, I think in the back of my head I can visualize some youth maybe and maybe not youth, but somebody within a club setting or a group setting which they're just dying to progress and they haven't got the arena to do So, what advice would we give them? how can they go and really really go and go and grab it, but they haven't got the access to do ...the pals or the people to go out with or the people with the same motivations anything like that. what advice

Alex Littlechild: 28.32

Yeah, for me that definitely rings true. I remember being in the club back at home and feeling really inspired by the things that I was seeing on YouTube and on Vimeo at the time and thinking, I want to be doing that. I don't want to be here in this pool session. I was trying my hardest to visualize the stuff that I was doing, but it is

difficult. especially when you're young and motivated and you can't understand why you can't go and kayak off a waterfall right now. but I think the key of it is not don't lose that stoke. Keep watching those YouTube videos and it will happen. You just got to wait your turn and, use those times on flat water wisely.

If you've got access to be trying stuff while other people are doing their own thing if you're the only one who's motivated, you can use the time that you've got on the river wisely and you can still make the most of your time.

Georgina Maxwell: 29.30

I guess maybe changing craft becoming I don't know get more sicy boat on them sessions which you can't access other stuff. Yeah, that sort of thing.

Alex Littlechild: 29.42

Yeah. getting into playboats, having a go at paddle spins, hand paddling stuff with no deck, anything that can get that little bit of excitement going I think is really the hand paddling thing is really good fun. That's definitely something that I would encourage people to try.

I spent quite a lot of time trying to do hand paddle ferry gliding and stuff. And I think I have that to thank for my boat control these days is from spending a lot of time trying to do cartwheels with my hands and understanding how the boat and my body move together without my blade.

Georgina Maxwell: 30.18

Great. So, what's next for you, Alex? when you start think back to when you were young enthusiastic and watching Sam Ellis go off the waterfalls and things there and now looking at the stuff you're running. One, did you ever think that was going to be happening? and two, where can it go next? surely there's a cap on this.

Alex Littlechild:

Yeah,...

Georgina Maxwell:

What's next for you?

Alex Littlechild: 30.42

I definitely wanted to think that this was going to happen when I watched Sam Ellis doing that that day, but I never really thought that it would.

So I'm really grateful for the people that have helped me out and also glad that I've had the motivation to keep going with it. And yeah, I guess yeah, there's got to be a top out somewhere, but I'm not there yet. there's still more that I want to do. I've done a little bit of traveling, but I'd love to go to some more places. Mexico and Iceland are pretty high on my list. That's a big waterfall destination, so yeah, would love to go there. and just spending more time on White Water. Like I say, I love consistency and progression. So

Even going back to the same places and doing things again and again is really fulfilling for me. but yeah, more freestyle, more freewheels, more tomahawks, more Cobras. That's in my plan.

Georgina Maxwell: 31.33

Amazing. Alex, you've been a brilliant guest. It's been great to have you on board here. Is there anything else coming into your mind that you want to chat about or you feeling quite content?

Alex Littlechild:31.47

I'm feeling very content. Thank you for having me, George. Bye.

Georgina Maxwell:

Ah thanks, Alex. Okay, goodbye.

END.