

British Canoeing Awarding Body Coaching Podcast

Your Skills and Development with Ken Hughes

Transcript

Georgina Maxwell: 0:12

Hello and welcome to this episode of the coaching podcast. My name's Georgina Maxwell and today we have Ken Hughes joining us.

Ken is one of Europe's top canoeists, a Paddle UK national trainer, mountain climbing instructor, technical adviser, and aquif ambassador. This is his second Paddle UK podcast, having previously discussed coaching canoeing with Pete Catterall. Ken runs a wide variety of Paddle UK courses. but significantly is wider known for his skills, and his development programs. Now, I'm definitely part of that development program.

So I first met Ken at the age of 16 when I was at college. So it's how old are Just keep lovely to have you on board here this morning. So do you want to say a little bit about yourself?

Ken Hughes: 1:05

Thanks George I've been coaching canoeing now for around about 30 years. so I started really really young and it's been an interesting journey. I've gone from running old ancient BCU courses to taking a more performance-orientated approach to what I do. So now what I do is I try to make paddlers particularly canoists because that's what I specialize in better at what they want to do.

So I make better leaders, better coaches. I make people more skillful and I run courses to make them safer.

Georgina Maxwell: 1:46

You have a huge history in the outdoors and like I say when I was young cutting into the outdoors for me you definitely made a difference to my whole life in terms of my career where I've come and where I am now. I remember the first time I ever sat in a canoe with you. I can't remember where that lock was or lake was near Katrick. And we sat on this lake and I got home that night and I said to my mom, I know what I want to do and it wants to be water sports. It's going to be canoeing or kayaking. My mom drove me to Carlile Canoes, got me a canoe and yeah, I won't tell the rest of the story, but yeah, it's definitely made a huge difference to me and I'm sure you've made a huge difference to loads of people out there. I think most people I've chat, I've met Ken. Yeah.

So, you've lifetime achievement so far, although you still got many years left in you. So, you've said a little bit for about your background there, but there's a spectrum of canoeing, isn't there? I look at who's doing canoeing all the time, and I might see somebody with a tilly hat and a Kelly kettle. I might see somebody dropping off waterfalls in Norway in an OC1. So, I mean, that's my interpretation of the spectrum, but what's the spectrum there? And where are you mainly on that?

Ken Hughes: 3:02

Yeah. Yeah. We have a very very diverse sport, don't we? and I admire the people who will go and join water systems up in Scotland by carrying their boat over a hill. the people who spend hours and hours organizing journeys and epics. so you only have to look up that trip that Ollie Sanderman did recently in Scotland to appreciate that. and maybe Dave and Matt who seem to carry and pull their boats more often than they were paddling them, but big admiration for that. and that's at one end of that spectrum And then I guess putting your boat in an 8 foot long Eddie on grade three plus is at the other end of the spectrum. And and although I can build people's skills to do the expeditioning stuff and have done and will do again I be long at the 8 foot long Eddie eddy on grade three end of that spectrum. That's what I do in my own personal battling anyway.

Georgina Maxwell: 4:06

Yeah. And it's enjoyable just being in the river environment to me it's just so special. So I guess the next yes.

Ken Hughes: 4:15 It is, but don't underestimate how exciting it is to be a mile from shore in a 47 wind as well. Yeah. Yeah.

Georgina Maxwell: 4:26 Pretty exciting. what do you think makes a good canoeist? That's the next question I've got for you. So, if we can delve into that a little bit, elaborate as much as you like. What makes a good canoeist?

Ken Hughes: 4:39 I think somebody who understands and appreciates the importance of foundation skills to begin with. I get people who come on courses to become better grade three paddlers and indeed at the end of the course they will be. but they get quite surprised when I use bits of flat water as and I think an appreciation for how important it is just to be able to make the boat go forwards. and to be able to generate momentum in a decent way so you can then redirect and move that momentum around. and people I guess need to appreciate that 90% of what we do in a paddle sport craft, but particularly a canoe, is moving the boat around a power stroke. and it's the boat that moves, isn't it? Not the blade. So to appreciate that the water is a solid object on which we concentrate the effort to quote the old UKCC level one. very much so I coach people to create momentum to redirect momentum and appreciate that it all works around a power stroke.

Georgina Maxwell: 5:56 Are you talking flat water at the moment? because we had a little conversation before this call about once we're on to the moving water, how does that change with the power of the moving water? So, yeah, if we can sort of delve into that conversation because it was quite a good conversation we just had.

Ken Hughes: 06:15 Yeah. Yeah. You could just in terms of harnessing the power of the river if we're on the river. just the ability to kind of put the blade in let it pause for a moment. and then I guess to accelerate the boat or lock and load and pull the trigger if you're a kayaker, I guess.

Georgina Maxwell:6:39 Yeah. Yeah.

Georgina Maxwell: We hear a lot of buzzwords, don't when we're out and a lot of coaches may use different terminologies for these things, which I guess kind of might cause a bit of confusion when Yeah, but this coach said this and this one said that. so, how about we spend a little bit of time just, maybe having a little chat about things like phase or... momentum or glide phase or, all of these terms that you might hear floating about. what do they mean to you?

Ken Hughes: 07:12 Interesting I've got some colleagues...

who very much believe in the principle of having an active blade on a river. but maybe philosophically we can coach canoeing in a slightly different way and think about how when we apply the blade, what it does is set the boat up to achieve an outcome. So that puts the emphasis on the glide phase. What happens between blade applications and what you want the boat to do. So, how can I set the boat up to achieve an outcome? What can I do? I can trim it. edge I can accelerate it. I can combine all those things together, which starts to make very simple principles become quite complicated tactically. so I can do all of that to set the boat up to do what I want it to do in the glide phase. And if you think about how you paddle in that context, then almost instantly you start to become more efficient with what you do with the blade and more conservative with how you use it. So for instance, if you're coaching somebody to cross the flow, call it feragliding if you want. crossing the flow is probably a better term.

you want them to reduce the number of strokes that they're doing. So that's classically what a coach will do, isn't it? Now do that again and reduce the number of strokes you're going to do. If you ask them to increase the length of the glide phase, that constraint makes the paddling much more efficient and...to think about how they set the boat up between those blade applications.

Georgina Maxwell: 09:05 you just clarify the glide phase. Is that when you have the blade out of the water and the boat's at full momentum and it's on its way or is it the glide phase you're extending? What is the glide phase? So can it still be in the water?

Ken Hughes: 09:25 Yeah, I would define it as when the blade is not active. Yeah. Yeah, it could be so long as it's having a neutral effect.

Georgina Maxwell: 09:28 Yeah. Okay. So, lots of canoe twiddly things...where you're slicing I'm not canoeist when you're slicing blade back up in some strokes or... whether it's got to the back of the boat and it's just kind of hanging out there and it's not really having an effect on the boat. is that maybe what you mean?

Ken Hughes: 09:46 when the blade's not having any effect on the boat at all. So, when I'm twiddling as you that's a term I use as well. so I guess when you're thinking about having the blade in the water, you can activate it and it will have an effect on it. so if I'm slicing from the back to the front, then I can put feather or pitch on the blade and it will either draw the bow to the blade or it'll push it away from the blade. if that's not happening and the blade's having a neutral effect and the boat's gliding, it's doing what you've asked it to do with the last blade application.

Georgina Maxwell: 10:26 Great. Thank you. That clarifies that Some of the things that you said, you're talking about acceleration. coming from where I am in kayaking, I know that I'm not always going the same speed when I'm heading down stream and then aiming for where I'm going. I'm accelerating at times or I'm coming off the gas or there's a lot of gear changes that can happen. So, is that the same in canoeing? Are you maybe having to put a bit of a sprint in at times and... then having to come off stuff or it always looks quite slowed as a canoe sometimes and maybe just one or two really powerful strokes and then maybe watching a good canoeist that is. What would you say about the acceleration? Are you varying that a lot,

Ken Hughes: 11:26 Yeah, I suppose that ultimately the full answer to that is you're creating relative speed. And that relative speed is reacting to the environment in front of you. So for instance, if you want to create momentum for stability in relation to a feature on the river, you'll perhaps accelerate the boat through that feature. And that relative momentum by moving yourself faster than the flow will create stability. but in canoes we slow them down as well. So if my boat is moving slower than the flow, I've got relative speed because I've got water running underneath the boat. So I've got

momentum. So if I'm going through a big wave train and I want some stability and I want to stay dry as well, that's a secondary factor there. Then I'll slow the boat down and paddle backwards. ...

Georgina Maxwell: 12:27 say that was a primary factor staying dry.

Ken Hughes: 12:32 it is and we do try to paddle dry lines in canoes because water will affect what they do. but you paddle on the high water in a kayak as well, don't you?

Georgina Maxwell:12:42 Absolutely. And that is a skill in itself,...

Ken Hughes:12:43 So, that's a similar thing. So,

Georgina Maxwell: 12:48 isn't it? being able to actually read that high water and a lot of my clients particularly have never maybe had any input in on that and I can show them a high bit of water and it just completely keeps them high and dry as they go through a rapid and they're like what never seen that before. So yeah, that should be something that maybe we need to feed in early on, isn't it?

Georgina Maxwell: on white water.

Ken Hughes: 13:11 Yeah, it is. But it's moving people through in the environment incrementally. It's getting them to do that on easy grade two so that they can then move on to harder grade two and onto brackets three and so on and so forth. And I think if we empower people to make those incremental steps through the environments then we make progress possible without creating anxiety.

Georgina Maxwell: 13: 44 Great. Yeah. Yeah. Because of the whole empowerment of individuals, I think it's a key part of people being able to be a bit more autonomous. feel a bit more confident in their own decisions and their own ability. and I guess they will then go away and feel more confident in being a bit more exploratory in how they approach things. So if we can come away from the tell people what to do and get them to think a bit more and give them options a bit more, I think it can only really be a positive thing, can it not? What do you think?

Ken Hughes: 14:24 and when people come on a course to be coached they need to understand that they are part of that process. It's not all a tell tell thing. It's about them having responsibility for their development as well. and in many ways making their own decisions, going through that reflective practice cycle of thinking about what they're going to do, doing it, reviewing it, but making conclusions as to what they're going to change. So we're trying to encourage learner decision- making is what I'm saying. and allowing them to within a framework make decisions as to... how they're going to change things, how they're going to reorganize things in their head and for us to guide them through that process. Yeah.

Georgina Maxwell: 15:14 I couldn't agree more. the reflective tool which again as a 16-year-old on this college course at Darlington Technology when you were my lecturer we had a unit on there which was the reflective practitioner and it's fed through my whole career from every aspect of what I do in the outdoors whether it's in my own time or whether it's guiding people or coaching people in the mountains on the rivers And you get back and sometimes you might think there's nothing really to reflect on that day, but it's really important to reflect on all the good stuff from that day because that's then starts to embed all the good stuff that you're doing and right back to the planning phase of that day right the way through to I made a decision here that if I had gone that way or I had gone that way or if I'd given that person more autonomy there or less autonomy there and how does that give me the outcome of the day that I've had. But also, I feel it's really important to have a network that you can come and...

talk to other people about the day you've had. And whether that's real technical, how come I'm not getting that 8 foot Eddie on a grade three plus, how am I not getting that or what am I doing with the position on my boat that's not quite working or whether it's filming yourself and, getting your own feedback that way. I think it's just really important to not just walk away from a day and lose all that learning. Yeah, absolutely.

Ken Hughes: 16:46 Yeah. Yeah. autonomy. Yeah. the ability of the learner to become independent of the coacher. so if we coach in such a way that and build it up incrementally that the paddler understands... how things work and can break it down themselves and use those kind of self check models then they do become independent of us. And people ask me how they can become a better coach. Paddle UK have got it right, haven't they? All British Canoe Awarding Body because the awards are all based around putting the learner at centre of the process. but we are following that reflective practice cycle ourselves all the time. We do it every time a learner goes away to practice. We do it halfway through the session. We look at what coaching behaviors we've used in that session and how the learners have reacted to those coaching behaviors and what effect those had on the learning and people who are aspirant coaches quite often ask me ... how they can become better coaches and one of those ways is for them to be able to think about the behaviors they've used what effect those behaviors had on the learning and I'm thinking about that all the time. The people in front of me. Yeah. Yeah.

Georgina Maxwell: 18:10 Amazing. It's a fascinating topic and I hope we are in an era where people are quite reflective with that and I think putting the learner at the center of everything really feeds into that nicely. I mean this all does come under the topic of what makes a good canoeist. We can isolate all the technical skills that are involved in there, but that reflective practice and that reflective and forward planning of the environment we're about to go into with our craft. And then if we're going down the coaching line as well and there's many boxes that I'm drawing here with these topics in them and then it's being able to sort of segment key parts of them days that are going to help you improve. So, the next question I actually had was, "How do we continue to improve?" And this is the discussion that we're actually having. Yeah. So let's just jump back once more to anything else with the technical aspects of canoeing that you think makes a good canoeist or have you finished on that one. Yeah.

Ken Hughes: 19:11 no, I guess my obvious answer to all of this really would go and get some coaching. because maybe what you've been told in the past hasn't been the most ideal. When people come to me for coaching, it's a brave thing. because they're kind of saying, "I'm not good enough and I want to be better." and yeah, that's difficult. but it's also recognising maybe that you can expand your repertoire of options. So come on a course and I will respect what you've already done so far. In an

Ken Hughes: 24:31 OC1 it will react like a kayak. I mean it's the same kind of hull, isn't it? but fundamentally what a slow boat an OC1 is.

Georgina Maxwell: 24:38 Is that a good thing?

Ken Hughes: 24:40 It's just so you accelerate and It's not like particularly some of these new modern boats will carry their momentum, won't they? But an OC1 just stalls. So it's a very physical thing to do. Very physical. it's...

Georgina Maxwell: 24:57 Is that...what you like about it?

Ken Hughes: 25:08 what I had to develop about it I suppose. became quite fit. but then when you look at it in the other direction and you transfer some of that OC1 stuff to a traditional canoe then it broadens your range of options. It's not just about slowing the boat down, moving it to the side, and allowing it to run at the same speed as a river. It's about moving, accelerating it, and being proactive

with it. And I guess that's why some of us are paddling grade four now in a traditional canoe because we've moved into those kind of realms of performance.

Georgina Maxwell: 25:41 H interesting. So, with the whole trim side of things, in a big open boat, you just shift you can move yourself, whereas in an OC1, are you actually trimming as much or I know the term micro trim? but let's have a quick delve into sort of trim in an OC1 as opposed to a big boat. and you choose the same environment, choose the grade three plus environment. What's the big difference there?

Ken Hughes: 26:14 So yes fundamentally in a traditional canoe you have the freedom to move and moving your knees around that area between the yolk and the kneeling port is fundamental to performance canoeing. If you don't move your knees, you can't move your paddler's box. You can't move your shoulders and your frame to create your power strokes most efficiently and also to kind of protect your shoulders and prevent injury. So, moving your knees around a big traditional canoe is fundamentally important. But you're either locked or strapped into an OC1, so you don't do that. But you're not locked in so much that you can't rotate your hips. so hip rotation allows the upper body and the whole body to move. but think about an OC1, it's a smaller craft. So, what you talked about in terms of micro trim, but just leaning forward and back, then that'll have quite a fundamental effect. But if I want to carry momentum and I want to create a wide arc and I don't want the edge to bite too much, then I'll trim back. And that's the same in both craft. But people don't necessarily appreciate the fact that a traditional canoe the hull will carve, particularly if you set it up to do that. If I want to scrub momentum and I want to stall a boat but create a tighter turn,... then I'll trim forwards. so in very very simple terms because it's a big subject area. you paddle both boats in a very similar way.

Georgina Maxwell: 28:05 This might be a ridiculous question,...but thinking about boat design and thinking about, the design of the Aftershock was a very flat hul and very obvious edges on it. And then I see some of the one maybe you're in a squiff. It's quite rounded. There's no real edges to it. So I mean we can chat about how that's developed over time, the sort of design of an OC1 and what's current, but my silly question is why would we not put edges onto a big open boat?

Ken Hughes: 28:36 Good question. yeah.

Georgina Maxwell: 28:41 If you're saying it can carve and it can Yeah.

Ken Hughes: Yeah. Maybe,...

Georgina Maxwell: Why would we not explore that?

Ken Hughes: Maybe. No,...

Georgina Maxwell: Is it just because canoists are really traditional?

Ken Hughes: 28:48 no, no. ...

Georgina Maxwell: Don't like change.

Ken Hughes: 28:50 yeah. Yes, you've asked me a question that I haven't considered in great depth but what I would say about appreciating why a boat will carve and all the science behind the aeroplane wing effect and the rest of it, which we haven't got time for. But we can make boats carve, they just won't carve as much if the design is different. So, my Escapef Prospector Sport will carve, but it won't carve as much as my Pocket Canyon, which has a slightly different shaped hole. the bottom of it is slightly flatter and a little bit more of an edge. But if I think about the three factors that make a boat

carve, it's all about hull speed, trim, and edge, and how we balance those three factors and how we set that boat up. and if how much we appreciate the potential of our boat to carve, then we can work with it. But let's not expect it. Let's not expect a 16 ft traditional canoe to carve like an OC1 cuz it won't.

Georgina Maxwell: 30:01 Just a question. Yeah. So, I guess with all of this, what is the future of the sort of UK canoe scene? I'm seeing OC1 is really sort of taking off with certain individuals. They're really paving the way in terms of taking it onto the steeper terrain. Seeing a lot of that. I'm also seeing a lot more of these bigger crossings happening in Scotland up here. people offering them as guided trips and, big big sort of, real trips that are on people's bucket lists, which I think is great. But other than that, I can't really see I can't see where it's going, but I'm not that tuned into the canoeing world, I guess, quite so much. Where do you think the future of the UK canoeing scene is and where it's headed?

Ken Hughes: 31:03 I think it will continue to tick along very similar to... what it is at the moment. If you think about that broad spectrum that we talked about earlier of the use of a canoe, then I would hope that more people will facilitate opportunities for expeditions. I'm certainly seeing people being very creative with what they're doing. I'd like to see people put videos up of their adventures. but I also think that the basic fundamental ability to paddle a boat is getting better and better and that I hope will push people in the direction of finding their own limits and those limits might be just going out for a day in 47 and being able to enjoy the wind and work with the People see the wind as a threat in a canoe, but actually actually with a bit of good coaching and knowing how the boat works, it's a joy. yeah, it is. but I also hope people start to push their limits a little bit. I hope to see people paddling canoes down stretches of water like the middle or perhaps in Scotland a little bit more and... not necessarily to walk around both grade fives because which I can't pronounce. I apologise. The second one goes in a canoe. Yeah, I've in a 16 foot boat.

Georgina Maxwell: Yeah. Yeah.

Ken Hughes: You just have to now there wasn't too much.

Georgina Maxwell: 32:51 Not get a bit of water intake there.

Ken Hughes:31:53 I mean it think about how you applied the blade on a lip of a drop in a kayak. What you're doing is you're lifting the boat. You're creating forward momentum and you're stopping that bow diving. And we do the same in a canoe.

Georgina Maxwell: 33:07 Okay. Yeah.

Ken Hughes: 33:08 You won't see me flying off a 20 foot waterfall. with that flat boat. but if you go onto my Facebook page and look at some of my reels, you'll see the application of that key blaze.

Georgina Maxwell: 33:22 And does the weight of the canoe have an impact on that?

Georgina Maxwell: So the heavier the canoe, the harder it is to stay in flight. And the longer the canoe,...

Ken Hughes: 33:33 Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah.

Georgina Maxwell: the harder it is to stay in flight or not.

Ken Hughes:33:38 And then you have to make sure that maybe you create a little bit of momentum as you approach the lip and then the keyblade on the lip will direct and lift that bow. and it's possible

but interestingly,...

Georgina Maxwell: 33:54 and the position you're sat in the boat, could you be too far forward or too far back? How does that or you just neutral when you're trying to get a boof like that?

Ken Hughes: 34:07 by default, because we don't tend to paddle a traditional canoe from the middle of the boat, we're behind the yolk on a kneeling throat or a seat. so we are by default sternheavy in our trim. so I guess it's going to make it a little bit easier to lift that bell. but you might have a heavy bag in the front, but it's interesting this conversation if we come almost back to the start about the importance of a power stroke and about how if I learn to paddle forwards on a pond, I can make myself better ultimately on grade four.

Georgina Maxwell: 34:47 Massively important, isn't And quite often it's hard to persuade people about that a little bit, isn't it? Let's go back to the flat water. But all the slalom paddlers, They know that training on the flat water is going to make you better on the moving stuff. So, yeah.

Ken Hughes:35:03 Yeah. And...if you want to know about trim, just watch a good sling voter.

Georgina Maxwell:35:09 Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. So, I've got one more question for you, Ken, and then we're going to close it off. And I didn't prepare you for this one. But I guess, thinking a little bit about our own personal performance and what we do, I know for sure that I'm always kind of picking a little theme each year before I get back because I do a lot in the mountain in the winter. When I get back in my boat, I'm always thinking about what am I going to work on for the year. And it's still fairly new year time, isn't it? it be April by the time this is coming out. But thinking a little bit about what are you working on, Yeah. What are you working on this year? Have you got anything to think about that's a concept or a new idea that you want to, thread through your year.

Ken Hughes: 35:53I have some new and interesting courses coming up which are not quite we haven't crossed the tees and do the eyes yet but certainly they'll appear and people will see those and I'm really very very open to people coming to me and saying actually we'd like to do this Ken can you create a course around that want that we've got and I can do that and I can do that all the time. Interestingly in terms of personal performance,... I've got this kind of ongoing project in my own paddling and that's to become much better when I'm paddling on my right hand side.

Georgina Maxwell: do you do a blade swap? Do you like jess fox?

Ken Hughes: 36:42 So Tom Sibbald for years and years has been telling me that I should change sides more often. and he is particularly in a traditional canoe there are times when being on your onsite changing sides is more effective. So my project is to make my right hand side good enough to do the same thing when I'm paddling on hard white water. because on open water you have to change sides. So, I am paddling on my right hand side in a performance context on open water in strong winds. so I would like to be able to do that on the river. and I'm all right I'm getting much better. But it's being able to apply the blade on the cross deck side when you're paddling on your right that I'm working on this year.

Georgina Maxwell: 37:35 Great. ...thank you very much, You've been a pleasure to have on this podcast and...

Georgina Maxwell: hopefully the listeners will benefit from all of that. So, thank you very much. It's been great having you.

Ken Hughes: 37:48 Thank you very much for the opportunity.

Great to chat to you, George, and keep up the good work with these podcasts because they're very good.

Georgina Maxwell: 37:50 Thank you.

End.