

S2 E3: Canoe Coaching

Ricky Snodgrass 0:00

Hello, and welcome to this episode of the coaching podcast from British canoeing.

Pete Catterall 0:08

So welcome to the coaching podcast. My name is Pete Catterall, I'm the talent coach development developer for British Canoeing. And today to start the new series of coaching conversations, I'm pleased to introduce Ken Hughes, who is one of the leading canoe coaches in the country and has been for many years. So I won't say too much about Ken, I'll let Ken introduce himself. So Ken, can you give us a bit of a bit of background on you a bit about you, your paddling, your coaching? Just Yeah, a bit of an intro to yourself, please.

Ken Hughes 0:45

Years and years ago, I worked in a in an outdoor centre, that, that used kayaks and we'd paddle those kayaks on rivers without really knowing what we were doing. You don't know what you don't know, I suppose. And then they brought a fleet of canoes and employed coach to, give us an idea. Talk to us a little bit more than I did kayaking, and I bought myself a canoe and was doing all right until the lads that were kayaking, were getting better at what they did. And the rivers they will paddle in got a bit steeper and got a bit narrower and my traditional Canoe didn't hack it. So that's why I ended up going in obviously, once I guess and see what but my first love was a traditional canoe. And I very much still enjoy paddling the ocean, anything which involves dealing with a single blade really, is what I love. And I kind of concentrate most of what I do in those crafts, really. I am a MIA, I did some mountaineering and at one time water was for washing your face. And paddling was something I had to do for work. But things turned around and changed. And one of the reasons things didn't turn around and change is because I had a real interested in, in helping people do the job I was doing and I never aspired to paddle off big waterfalls, first descents or anything like that. My vocation is about helping people to better coaches' leaders and to be a little bit safer.

Pete Catterall 2:30

Wow. See, really interested. So it started off in kayak, and then canoe just took hold of you. And if you're keeping up, you're trying to keep up with a bunch of bunch of kayakers in a canoe on the same rivers. This is pretty impressive, really. And I've seen I've certainly seen a lot of you know, C1 paddling and OC1 paddling and it's just so impressive because it is I don't mind admitting it's harder. It is you've definitely you definitely pick the harder, harder option. So do you have any other thoughts on why that might have? Why did you go? Canoe and stick with canoe because easier option arguably could have been arguing kayak them? Because that's what I want to do I want to keep up with a mate? What was it? Was it the challenge of it being hard? Or is it you don't like the other side of your body? Much you want to just use one?

Ken Hughes 3:24

I'm not convinced I am actually physically equal on both sides although I am paddling more on both sides in both moments. And it's been a bit of a challenge. Yeah, once I bought my boat I saw I could put my 16 foot boat in a six foot long. He says the kayak and it just became a little bit of a challenge amongst the people. I paddled with really and then the more you do, the better you get the more you enjoy it. And I think that's the correlation there isn't?

Pete Catterall 3:56

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I can see that. And so and the coaching side of things for you said you talk you do tragedy spec boat and you do C1 as well. So do you see? Do you see those benefit in each other? So how does how does paddle in a closed deck sit? You know, C1, probably a kayak conversion, and help you tread boating? How would you if you're going to encourage people to try both? Why would they want to do both?

Ken Hughes 4:28

I think it encourages a dynamic style. And I think it becomes less about floating the boat and slowing it down and more about driving the boat and looking at generating momentum and transferring that momentum and moving the boat

around with a more positive approach. That's not to say that Sony broke down and taking a more considered approach isn't appropriate. It absolutely is. And that's typical Canoeing, isn't it? The wide variety of what we do and the approaches we take?

Pete Catterall 5:06

Yes, sure. So do you think you sort of hinted at some of the tactics behind it a slightly different and it almost forces you in a slightly different way of using the river and using the boat? And just getting more out of he gets out of each blade as well with that drive you talk about? Is it different tactics? Do you think? Oh, yeah.

Ken Hughes 5:29

Yeah, yeah. So in a big boat, you've got a, you've got a boat that you have to think about, and have a plan. And in a small boat, you've got a boat that isn't inherently fast, certainly an OC1 isn't going to be a fast boat. And any at all, it'll slow down very quickly. And as you say, how you apply the blade and, and how you use that and don't think about what happens in between blade applications. So almost, it's almost a case of coaching the glide phase between the blade applications rather than coaching the application of the blade itself and in terms of this, what I do with this blade now we'll set up what this boat does.

Pete Catterall 6:09

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, Blimey, you just hit on to me that I see a lot in with the slalom coaches I work with when they're talking about canoe and see one that the glide is so different. Yeah, I think that's that really mirrors across to a lot of the work I do with those coaches. That's is certainly different, isn't it? And I think that that understanding what the outcome of each blades going to do and how that's going to affect the next part of the manoeuvre wherever it is slalom wherever it's creaking or whatever, I think is really important. That's interesting. You hit on actually it's nice to see links across all the other work as well which is great. Rather than

Ken Hughes 6:47

At the end of the day their paddlesport craft aren't they.

Pete Catterall 6:50

Yeah, yeah, it's just you know, pulling on paddles and move you can use it more a lot of the time. And do you encourage your student your you know, your clients, your students wherever you call you know you're well known for you running your coaching business so you've got a lot of a whole load of clients do you do encourage them to jump in and out a different types of canoe as well?

Ken Hughes 7:18

Yes, I think everybody who paddles a traditional canoe looks at an OC1. And they'll say to themselves that looks fun. I'd like to have a go with that. I don't I'm not convinced that those are the people who become OC1 paddlers. I think people have chosen a boat and have decided that that's going to be their craft of choice. So yeah, yeah, I think it's important that you paddle a variety of crafts so that you learn what the boat does and if that means getting in the kayak and learning what that holds I mean, I can do that in a sea one as you say it's not a conversion less to one a paddle. It's a bit it is created in the factory, but its kayak isn't as basic.

Pete Catterall 8:07

Yeah, yeah, but with yet slightly different outfit in centre of gravity.

Ken Hughes 8:12

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

Pete Catterall 8:14

Okay, so yeah, interesting. Yeah, getting them to try different boats to enhance the boat they've chosen. I think that's a great kind of just different way of shaping their development and their understanding of how boats move so they can get more out of the boat, they get the that they've chosen as their main boat. That's an interesting concept or something, I don't think.

Ken Hughes 8:43

I went from a 16 foot traditional boat down to small OC1's. And for a while I left the traditional canoe. And when I went back to it, I found out that I had a different approach. And I had some enhanced skills in terms of, of how you drive the boat, move the boat around.

Pete Catterall 9:05

Yeah, and you know, that's when I see your, your social media posts on your on your site. You know, you definitely paddle a traditional canoe in a dynamic way. I don't think I've seen much, many videos of you paddling slowly backwards or anything like that. I've seen lots of really nice kind of dynamic. You know, it's why I wanted to want to talk about your style of paddling, which really resonates with me, the way you see a canoe is in a dynamic way. It's not this you're not floating down a river like I know. Some people view canoeing as a traditional canoeing. It's very, very modern the way you think if that's if that's fair.

Ken Hughes 9:48

I think you're right. And that's the way I prefer to paddle but if you want me to check insert into every ad on a river then I have to do that for you if you want me to. I think that kind of brings us to people's preferences, doesn't it? And how they work. And they come to me for coaching, and they have that philosophy on how they want to paddle, then I can do that for them. And I can make them better at that and make them super, super good at inserting into an ad and slowing down. But then, I guess, as coaches, our job is to open options for people and to encourage them to take a wider approach.

Pete Catterall 10:36

Yeah, you just hit on some notes that's interested there, what their philosophy is on, you know, they might want to, you know, check and set and slow it down. Whereas you're maybe, you know, I don't speak for you, but you're kind of made preferences to drive the boat and be more dynamic. Do you find any sort of clashes there with when people you know, don't want to do it the way you do it? Or you know, that two different styles, but like you say, you're happy to adapt?

But which one? Do you find yourself trying to get them to be more dynamic and focusing them that way? Or do you generally just run with, with the type of paddling they want to do?

Ken Hughes 11:18

And I think it's about what they would like to achieve and what their motivations are, and what their goals are. And if their goals are to put their boats in the six foot long and on grade three, then there are ways of doing that. And so in the boat moving sideways, works equally well to drive in the boat and dynamically turning the boat. I wouldn't want to enforce people to do the stuff that I do. Just because I do it isn't doesn't mean, it's the right way to do it. As coaches what that's not our job.

Pete Catterall 11:50

No, that's, you know, that's another great message that I've had in the last series of podcasts as well that as coaches, we have our bias, but we have to work with, you know, we're working with people, and we have to understand what they want and their motivations and go with that. So yeah, I do see some coaches out there that inflict their way onto people. And I think you're really touching on that there about, that's not what it's about. It's about working with, with the people you've got in front of you, understanding them, and then developing them as partners. And you know, maybe leaving some there, what do we put like, little trails or breadcrumbs for them to follow just to, to entice them into a different way of thinking, and just see where that goes sometimes, but without being without being forceful, I guess?

Ken Hughes 12:39

Yeah, and it works both ways, isn't it? People who, who take a slower approach on a river, for instance, they can be inspired to drive the boat a bit more, and it can go the other way as well. Yeah, so I think you're right, our job is to inspire people, isn't it?

Pete Catterall 12:56

Yeah. Yeah. And, and the other thing about canoe, I'll actually I'll just rewind a little bit, because I don't think we do it enough. You know, I'm the dominant attack coaches, you know, that we don't have we, we don't take people from boat to boat as much. So we might take people in, in a freestyle boat and then into a creek boat, but there's not the dramatic difference that you'd have with a traditional canoe and OC1 and a C1. So much so I do think there's a bit of an advantage to canoe because you've got such a ride, a wide range of craft that you could you can use to help a paddler develop that we haven't quite got the same. In kayak, arguably, we could jump in a sea kayak and a riverboat in a playbook. But the skills aren't dramatically different. Like they would be in a in a sea one or a tread boat in terms of stability in terms of directional stability.

Pete Catterall 13:45

So, yeah, do you think you know, you paddle kayak as well? Do you think that's true? Do you think we could be more exploratory with our kayaking in moving people from different boats?

Ken Hughes 14:03

I think we probably could. There's a, there's a wide variety of different kinds of kayaks out there isn't there at the moment. Maybe there's a bit of a trend for people to have more than one boat at the moment. The advent of slicey backends means that people have often got one of those and they've often got a quick boat as well. Maybe they might have a little boat to kind of do the flippy floppy stuff as well.

Pete Catterall 14:28

Yeah, I think I think we could do a better job of, some of us could do a better job of encouraging people into different boats to take them in a certain direction in their chosen craft flight you're saying and then it's probably worth is talking about the environment as well because you'll obviously you know, if you work in trad, and in in you know, sticks, you do everything from flatwater trad to stick creaking in your in your OC1 and then you're C1, so the environment you work in Canada is a canoe coach. They're pretty dynamic, aren't they? Different and varied.

Ken Hughes 15:03

They are and until you've been a mile offshore in a force five, then then maybe don't really understand how exciting that is. It's not just about the river. It's about. It's about the, the scale and challenge. Piling on open water in the wind as well.

Pete Catterall 15:25

Yeah, yeah, I think I've definitely had with clients. Some of my most what I call it exciting days, on open water, definitely. Because I can genuinely I can bail out, go to the side and stop. Whereas if it gets too excited in the middle, like you say, out of offshore in a big, expansive, open water, you haven't quite got that options. So, so how do you how do you? How do you develop those skills? For dealing with the bigger open water? The bigger open water? How does as a coach, where does that come from? Is that just for?

Ken Hughes 16:06

It's a, it's about empowering people to make changes, isn't it, and to continually achieve so it's, it's a direct parallel to what we do on the river. It's a direct parallel to what we do when we're polling. Relining and tracking and sailing. So paddling in the wind is paddling in a different type of fluid as well as. So but yeah, it's about it's about appropriate progressions and, and empowering people to make those changes. So it isn't any different. Really, it's just a different environment.

Pete Catterall 16:42

Yeah. Yeah. And do you see that? Obviously, can you coach and you'd like to say you've got, you've got sailing, you've got line and you've got Polo, and you've got the white-water you've got? Do you think that attracts a certain type of Coach, you know, what, I know loads of canoe coaches, but I still think you're all different in your own ways. But you seem to like it, is it that variety of environments that draws you to it, you think partly as well, as, you know, the actual fear of around with one blade? Do you think it's the variety of environments that you work in? You know, you can have one boat and go into all those environments with the same boat?

Ken Hughes 17:24

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I think it, I think it keeps you fresh. And each one's a different challenge. And it's interesting, isn't it outward in coaching and leadership with split the environments now. I'm not so sure whether that's going to encourage people to be to be simpler environment orientated. Perhaps it is. That's not a bad thing. But it was encouraging to see people paddling both although they tended to have a preference. But people who people who specialise on the river, perhaps don't understand the complexities of paddling on open water and how you can set your boats to achieve things in the wind. Again, there's definitely there's definitely an expectation that we work with trimming the wind a lot. And we do approach but applications are trained on the river and an in when you pull in and when you line in and track in and sailing is a principle that runs all the way through and trim isn't just for a big boat. It's for little boats as well. We're on a big subject. That's it. That's it. That's a podcast in itself.

Pete Catterall 18:39

True. Yeah. Is a we'll come back to that one another day? Yeah, it was remember and was it? I think it was might be lol. It might have been great. Might be Chris Forest could be in any kitchen or wherever it is it always you know, they go did you find that move difficult? I'm not yet again. What could you have changed? And nearly every time it's because I was coming from a kayaking background. It was always I could I could move something or myself. Which in a kayak generally, there's only a small amount of trim that you can change. Yeah, I like I'm going to I'm going to make a note of a trim chat with Ken, we'll do that that'll be good. That'll be good actually, or video or something that'd be that'd be quite useful.

Ken Hughes 19:19

It certainly comes from it comes from a principle of trying to set the most up to achieve an outcome. And we do that by tactical applications of trim and edge don't we? Yeah. Deciding what we want and what we don't want and how we want the boat how we want the budget guide I suppose.

Pete Catterall 19:41

Yeah. So this seems to be well and I know they're coaching a lot of getting this think about with canoe not that there isn't with kayak or isn't with sea kayaking or anything like that. But there's an enormous amount to think about with the environment, the boat, the shape of the boat, the size of the boat. What you've got in the boat, way ahead whether you're heading upstream downstream across wind up wind down when what would you say to so coach people that are new to coaching and trying to, you know, they decided that canoe is the thing they want to they focus on them that they want to become, you know, they want to be the next king huge. That's what they want. They're like, I want to I want to be king. How do they? How do they develop that? That level of understanding about each craft and how it works? What does that journey look like?

Ken Hughes 20:34

It's a personal skills journey to be in, but isn't it, it's, it's understanding that we, we carry the water with coaching around with if we're disciplined and skilled in our own paddling. And so when I'm working with coaches, and they want to, they want to think about the technicality of the thing, then we look at how they paddle themselves and what they can take from that. And then we sit and we watch others and we learn and challenge what we know, when we observe other people paddling aircraft, and get an awful lot from that. Rather than rather than doing what the person who told the person who told the person in the past is done, we can change the way that we coach, and what we coach, if you're talking about the wall

Pete Catterall 21:21

Of course, yeah. Nice. I like that. Because Yeah, if we, if we just copy what someone else has done, nothing, nothing moves forward, does it nothing, nothing changes. And, you know, I'm what I'm just short of six foot, I don't paddle the same as someone who's five foot four, or there's somebody who's a lot stronger than I am or smaller than I am or whatever we all have to, you know, we all paddle slightly differently. They'll be like, they'll be themes that we want to stick with, you know, does it work? Is it efficient? That kind of stuff? But yeah, you know, just understanding how you paddle yourself. And then that would work whether they call it self-organisation, isn't it where we try, we have a task to

perform, and our body will learn how we need to do it. And it's staying within those, I guess, within those constraints of my own physicality. But so it still works and still looks right. If that's the way of putting it. So assuming digitalization in their styles, isn't it?

Ken Hughes 22:29

Yeah, yeah. People often say to me, what boat should I buy? Because I'm not very, I'm not a very physically large kind of person. And I think it's, I think there are, there are appropriate craft out there and we can adapt the craft for the person. But ultimately, it's about learning how you yourself, paddle a craft and upskilling to battle that craft. You want to paddle a bit kayak, learn how to paddle a kayak and outfit it appropriately.

Pete Catterall 23:04

Yeah, good point. Yeah. And then, so just thinking of them, you know, we've got a few minutes left. So any other thoughts? You've got? You know, where do you sit? Where do you see canoe coaching going into in the future? Do you see many changes come in? Do you see the same people now? Can they can choose a discipline? They could choose to be a canoe paddle travel expedition paler? And do you see any, any direction and things are heading at the moment or the or even direction you'd like to see things going with canoe coaching,

Ken Hughes 23:37

We continue to challenge ourselves in what we know and how we make the boat perform. And I think the best coaches will continue to do that. And so things will change. And things look a lot different to how they did 10 years ago. With big boats, the design of them hasn't radically moved away from how it's been for a long time. And they just tend to be variations on a theme. Venture have pushed back a little bit with the iPhone, that's a move forward for that cut that boat or the designs offer a degree of predictability. So maybe, maybe it's going to be boat design that pushes out a little bit. If people want to do that, and that's happening OC1. Escape and silver birch have done very well with our designs and move those on a skiff we've got a boat called the next site. I won't describe it but people should go and have a look and investigate it. It's quite a radically different design, and certainly silver birches agencies is a step forward as well.

Pete Catterall 24:51

That's really good, isn't it? You know, if you think about kayak design that's moved on loads over the years if you think a canoe like traditional canoes is fit stayed fairly, not completely static as it but with fairly static we know we know what works I guess. I paddled the prototype. And I was like wow, this is this is really different from on white-water that was radically different. But it's interesting that OC1 with a silver birch having paddled a few of their boats as well, it's nice, isn't it? I mean that somebody out there pushing the design of canoe to make that better, more dynamic more accessible, I think yeah, it's exciting times are you involved with any of that?

Ken Hughes 25:45

No not really. It's interesting isn't it to, to perhaps view it in a different light and say, well actually if it isn't broken, why are we going to try and fix it? If people want to take big boats on grade four, which people are doing more and more at the moment, and that, you know, the middle oki for instance, is a canoe trip as well as a kayak trip now. Maybe boats will change as a result of that are not certain but perhaps, perhaps that's where things go.

Pete Catterall 26:20

Wow, its exciting time

Ken Hughes 26:22

Maybe I'll need a boat for the river and a boat for open water. I've resisted that. But perhaps that's going to be the case.

Pete Catterall 26:30

You're just angling at buying another boat!

Ken Hughes 26:36

You can't have enough.

Pete Catterall 26:38

Never, never. I've got a big stack just down here at sea. They're getting a bit dusty at the moment with this lockdown. But there we go. Hey, Ken, it's been really interesting chatting to you. Thanks. Thanks for thanks for your time. And we'll line up another one to talk about maybe narrow the field a little bit and talk maybe about trim or something like that. Or maybe even getting a resource out there in the in the world on looking at trim maybe a video or something like that. We'll get something set up. But thanks so much for your time. It's been really cool to chat here. And we'll speak again soon. Hope you stay safe in lockdown. Yeah, and

Ken Hughes 27:11

You're good to catch up.

Pete 27:13

Cheers.