

S2 E5 - WCP Coach Interview (Nathalie Siegrist) – Miniseries

Ricky Snodgrass 0:00

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

Sid Sinfield 0:08

Welcome to the British canoeing coaching podcast. My name is Sid Sinfield, I'm the performance coach developer within the British Canoeing world class program. The World Class program is focused on the Olympic and Paralympic disciplines of slalom sprint and para canoe racing. In this series of podcasts, I'll be in conversation with various coaches from the British Canoeing world class program. I'll be looking to get behind the titles to find out about their individual pathways into their current role. How did they start in paddlesport? What was their journey to be a coach on the world class program? So I hope you enjoy this series. Right then so welcome to this edition of the coaching podcast. And today I'm joined by Nathalie Siegrist. So if we could start Nathalie with a little bit about who you are, what you do?

Natalie Siegrist 0:49

Well, I'm Natalie Siegrist. I come from Switzerland. I've just moved to the UK to take on the role of lead academy coach at Lee Valley.

Sid Sinfield 1:01

That's within the Slalom program.

Natalie Siegrist 1:03

Yeah, indeed. Yes. Yes.

Sid Sinfield 1:04

Okay. So you've literally been in the role. Two months? Is that nearly two months?

Natalie Siegrist 1:11

Yeah. Not quite. But yes.

Sid Sinfield 1:15

So getting to know Lee Valley and London?

Natalie Siegrist 1:18

Yeah. Yeah. It's been an eventful move with COVID and Brexit and, and, but I'm all settled now and loving it.

Sid Sinfield 1:31

So just for the people who aren't as familiar as we are with a world class program, what's, what's the role of the academy program? Where does that fit in? In the, in the grand scheme of things for slalom?

Natalie Siegrist 1:43

Well, it is within the world class program. But it's like the step just before the podium group. So we're preparing the athletes for the senior team, basically. So a lot, most of the athletes in the academy are under 23s or even younger sometimes, yes.

Sid Sinfield 2:07

Okay. So the transitioning between talent and podium. Okay, so, so in this kind of series, we're hoping to explore how you ended up where you are. So it's a little bit, a little bit of a personal journey, and then a coaching journey as well. So, were you're paddling at the beginning, is that how you started? How did you start? What? Why? Yeah, where did it all start?

Natalie Siegrist 2:32

Oh, it started very early, my parents started paddling as my mom was pregnant with me. So my first river run was in my mom's belly. And then I spent and they loved it, they loved paddling down rivers and, and building boats back then it was, you know, different story, of course. And so I spent my childhood basically sitting on the riverbank, playing with rocks and watching my parents paddle. And they did try and buy me a boat when I was, I think seven. And I just didn't like it at all. I hated it. So they gave up they said, well, you can do any sport you really like, it's not up to us to choose for you. So I chose skiing. So I was a skier for a few years. But yeah, at some point, I think I was still interested in trying canoeing. So when I was 10 I think I asked to try again. And there was a group in our club of other kids my age so that was a lot easier than and I started loving the feeling the gliding on the water and being outside. So yeah, so I started paddling properly then.

Sid Sinfield 4:01

Was it kayaks and canoes or just kayaks? What sort of?

Natalie Siegrist 4:04

Well, I started right away with a slalom boat. I think I was allowed to use my mom's slalom boat, I think. And then and then we did a lot of river runs as well. So we had those plastic boats, but back then I mean, gosh, the shapes of those that were long and yeah, so yeah. So basically, my father was the coach in our club so it was very easy for me to just join every river run every training session, so I had to do a lot of paddling.

Sid Sinfield 4:44

Despite rejecting it early you then found the love for it, what was it, the thing that really attracted you to paddling what is it that you like about it?

Natalie Siegrist 4:53

I think I liked being outside and back then because of all the river brands, I think nature was a big part of it. And then the other thing is being in a group like

you're still, it's an individual sport so you can do your moves, but you're still in a group. I liked that combination. I think the kind of social part. Yeah, I'm a single child. So for me it was like having brothers and sisters or friends to do something with but you can still drive your own your own, you know, so that I lay out.

Sid Sinfield 5:31

Did you and where did the slalom go did the slalom is that somewhere that you went to compete? And you know, where did that take you?

Natalie Siegrist 5:41

Yeah, yeah. Well, I think I started right in my first season of paddling. We already did pedal one or two flat water slaloms for kiddies, and also a bit of downriver. We did both back then it was okay to do both slalom and most races were a combination of races so downriver on the Saturday, slalom in the Sunday. And that went on, I think, all the way until under 16. I think I still raced down river as well. Okay, it's slalom, a big, big thing in Switzerland.

Sid Sinfield 6:16

I mean, in terms of you know, you're talking about it was with the same sort of people you're against most of the time, you know, most of the people in the slalom.

Natalie Siegrist 6:25

Yeah, it was really small canoeing is very small and slalom, tiny. So it's who the same people at the races was always. We knew everyone and it was good. It was like, having a bigger family.

Sid Sinfield 6:43

Was there any standout memories for you as a paddler? You know, any, any key trips that you look back on and say that was really good, or that was that had a big impact on me?

Natalie Siegrist 6:54

Well, in terms of racing, I think I really liked racing in Lipno. That's in the Czech Republic. That's a natural course. And it's quite impressive. And I raced there in 1995. And I think that's, that was one of my, my nicest memories of a race. It was really nice to race in a place like that. Big rocks, quite big water. Yeah, I think I liked it. And I was quite proud to be to be able to paddle that course. Because I'm a very frightened to paddler, I'm afraid of wind stoppers. So I was quite proud to have done that one, I think. And in terms of river runs, I paddled the Verdon, which is one of those massive gorgeous in France when I was 16. And I think it was a bad idea for me to do that one. I had a really bad incident. Almost at the end, I swim through is it called a siphon in English? You know that was not nice. I could have it could have ended really badly. But I have to come out the other end. So yeah, but that that has impacted my, my future. Yeah. Because after that, I was already frightened before that. But after that I was really always afraid.

Sid Sinfield 8:19

It is such a beautiful river. I've thought it's a stunning trip is an awesome one with the dam released, it was turned on. And you get to go through that stunning gorge and there's some really nice rapids, there are a few dead ends. I mean, you obviously found one of them.

Natalie Siegrist 8:40

But yeah, it's normally not like that. But there was more water than then what they had planned to release. And so it became a syphon and then yeah, and so everybody had to climb over the rock to go over it. And we were quite a big group and I was the last one being, you know, being a little bit before. And I arrived and there was no room to park there for me and then I got stuck on the rock and sucked under. Oh, yeah, that was not nice. Oh, yeah. So I guess but you know, I guess this incident and my fear of white-water has actually accelerated my change from being a paddler to being a coach. I think I was a decent paddler, but I would never have been a great paddler. And I think I'm a much better coach than I ever would have been an athlete so I'm very happy with where I'm at now.

Sid Sinfield 9:41

Before we go on to coaching, you know, do you still find time to paddle or do you do have other sports?

Natalie Siegrist 9:46

Well, I ski. I still do a lot of skiing. So obviously not here. Well, this winter is not the best one for skiing but yes over Christmas for me Two weeks of skiing. So I did that this year as well. And yeah, that's still big on my list and I do a lot of mountain biking. And I would like to paddle a bit more I still have a boat, you know.

Sid Sinfield 10:14

Okay, I'll try and get you to come out, we'll take your paddling, in some of the friendlier, nicer places. I've got a pretty good knowledge of the paddling in Britain. So how about your coaching journey then? So where did this start? When where do you? Where did you get into coaching? What was the draw to coaching? And how did it start?

Natalie Siegrist 10:34

Well, maybe I have to go one step back, even before I knew I wanted to be a coach, I've, since I can talk, I've always wanted to be a teacher. So I guess that that is part of part of me already. And my dad was a teacher as well. And he would coach in the club, he would coach the Wednesday afternoons because kids are, we've got an afternoon off at school, and he was the only one not working then being a teacher. So he would coach them Wednesday afternoons. And when I was a bit older, I guess 15 or so he would take me with him to help coach the little kiddies. So I started very early. And for me, it was just helping out at first, but I really liked it. And once it was clear that my path was not really going where I wanted to go, as an athlete, I was already coaching on the side. And so for me, it was, it was really clear that I really liked coaching a lot more than I liked being an athlete. So, so the change came quite early. I think at 18. I was already coaching in my club, more than just helping out. And then at 20, I think I completely stopped paddling, and then dedicated all my time to coaching. I was still a student then. So yeah, I'd coach in the evenings. And then I think at 23, or 22. Swiss canoe asked me to, to come and assist for the International

trips. So I became assistant coach at 22. Yeah. Yeah. And then I took over the junior team a couple of years after that, and then did 12 years for the juniors all together. And then another four as a head coach, so senior team, and then another four as under 23 coach, so too much. Yeah, went through all the all the different positions.

Sid Sinfield 13:00

So those transitions seem pretty smooth. With a feel pretty smooth, there is just the obvious next step to take on the juniors to take on the older juniors and then to lead that program.

Natalie Siegrist 13:13

Yeah, on paper, they do look very logical, almost logical. But actually, it was not like that at all. It was a messy business. I actually never wanted to leave the junior team, I really loved my work as a junior coach. And I was a teacher on the side as well. So it can really balance the two, it was hard, but really a very good combination. But I'm afraid to say they twisted my arm into taking the head coach position, which was not a full time position. So and juggling that doing all the World Cups, senior Worlds, senior Europeans, plus teaching on the side to be able to survive, because it's not a full time position. That was really, really hard. I think those four years were the hardest in all my life as a coach.

Sid Sinfield 14:06

It's hard trying to get a life balance. Any balance time to Yeah.

Natalie Siegrist 14:11

Yeah. And so yeah, that was hard. And then yeah, and then I moved onto the under 23s.

Sid Sinfield 14:18

Just before then, is any kind of standout memories from that, you know, any of those early years, any kind of real standouts? Where you think well I remember that or that that.

Natalie Siegrist 14:28

So you know, well you have to imagine I was coach for Swiss Canoe for 21 years. So a lot of memories, over the years. But I think definitely one of the one of the good memories was when I was still coaching the the juniors and I would have a 12 seater van, so I'd go alone with that 12 seater van so 11 athletes and me driving all the way to Brato Slava, so that's about for us a 13 hour drive. So I do that. And then we would be camping there the course so. So I'd have to wake up in the morning, around five, drive to the supermarket, as the athletes were still sleeping in the tent, come back, prepare breakfast, and then coach all day. They would help with the cooking during the day, of course. But then yeah. So organize the food, the shopping. That was massive. And then we somehow we always managed to find a race there. So we'd race on the Sunday. And then after the race, around four o'clock in the afternoon, back in the van, drive through the night, and then Monday morning, make sure all the all the athletes could go to school and me as well. So I'd arrive at school for teaching, not having slept, but having coached and cooked and driven through the night. So yeah, so but if I think about it, it's crazy. I would, I would never do that nowadays. I would really not want to do that. But it was still a very, very good moment in my life. I've really loved those trips. Yeah.

Sid Sinfield 16:19

Cool. So it just is as there's quite a significant amount of coaching in there is any, any kind of key learnings that you've you've picked up over the years from your time? Any kind of what would you say has shaped you as a coach? Any reflections in that area?

Natalie Siegrist 16:40

Yes. Well, I think what has shaped me the most is discovering action types approach. And that's through our coaching education in Switzerland, was led by the founder of this approach. And I got to know him very early on in my career.

So as I started as an assistant coach, I was able to start that coaching education. During about four years, we had a whole bunch of professors and lecturers etc. But he was definitely someone that has played a massive role on, on where, where I was and where I could go as a coach. And this approach I really like because it allows for, it allows room for the uniqueness of an athlete and I like that. I like the idea that everybody's different. And you should adapt to the athlete as that unique person and not just come with a list of this is what I want. And this is how it's done.

Sid Sinfield 17:56

So yeah, this work last time to work this time.

Natalie Siegrist 17:59

Yeah, yeah, exactly. So I think that has shaped my whole my whole journey as a coach. And another thing is because I was a frightened paddler. And I struggled a bit, even though I had the best context possible, with my father bringing me to all the races etc. But because of that, I think it's given me the humility that you need as a coach in order to not think everything is easy, and also that you know, everything. No I don't know, everything.

Sid Sinfield 18:38

So, okay, so just, we're not going to drift into too much into coaching nitty gritty here, I'm just, I just wanted to flag up so that action types is the area that you spoke about there. So if anybody's listening, then they can they can, they can do a bit of a Google search, they won't find a lot but they will find something but maybe there's one we could do in a smaller podcast in the future just to give a bit more outline of what that might be. But they could always a search online and find out about action types. So what happened next and so what how did you end up here? In a world class program, what you sound like you were pretty settled in the in the switch program there been there for 21 years?

Natalie Siegrist 19:26

Yeah, 21 years, but you know, that's, that's the worst that can happen if you too settled. And you're like, I had the feeling that I was cooking the same soup over and over again, just reheating things. You know, we were just doing in the last two years in Switzerland. We were just reshaping rethinking our concept of how to bring more people and like the pathway. And it was my third time around to rethink that. I had done one early on one about in the middle of my career there, and then again, and I thought, I really have the feeling that I'm stuck in something. And I'm hearing the same things again, just other people. Yes, obviously, everyone around me had changed. And, and they were bringing new ideas. But in the end, I had the feeling, I'm stuck. And I, it's not healthy as a coach, if you feel like you're stuck. It's a little bit dangerous, because you're not renewing your way of thinking. And so yeah, I needed to, I needed a new challenge. I thought, if I'm going to, if I'm going to continue, I'm still young. And if I'm going to continue as a coach, I need a new challenge. And I need a new horizon. So, and, and while I was thinking that I saw, I saw the position advertised, and I applied.

Sid Sinfield 21:01

Well, cool. So we're glad to have you. So we're hoping to lots of success with us. So just as a coach myself, and I kind of think that most of my learning has come from making mistakes, and I think, accepting that I'm going to make mistakes and owning that is an inevitable part of growth as a coach, but dare you share some of your mistakes that you've made over the years that they've helped you in your development, you know, any anything, any mistakes that stand out, you think, you know

Natalie Siegrist 21:35

Oh, gosh, this is very long, the list is very long. And I think I make them all the time. But I'm very reactive. So as soon as I noticed that something is going wrong, I will, I will find a new solution. I'm very pragmatic as well. So I don't tend to dwell on those. So I'm try to look forward. So I don't think I have a list of all my mistakes. I know I make them and I know, I navigate and find new solutions all the time.

Sid Sinfield 22:17

I think it's refreshing for some of the junior coaches to hear that, that you know, somebody who's on the world class program, I make mistakes all the time, it's inevitable. It is human beings interacting with a very dynamic environment. So, so I think that's that kind of refreshing bit is that we don't have all the answers, but we have a way to think about we might approach to find those answers, and, and making mistakes, it's kind of inevitable on that.

Natalie Siegrist 22:46

Yeah, and I think the most mistakes that I've made were linked to the way I manage my emotions in moments of pressure. And because I was working in an environment that was really putting a lot of pressure on me having a part time job as a head coach, that's a lot of pressure. So you end up being stuck in situations and not handling them really well. But like I said, I always try and Okay, look back on it, find a solution do better. And I think if you have that, that idea of doing better than next time and finding ways to change your reaction or your behaviour in a certain situation, then you can move forward.

Sid Sinfield 23:32

So what is it about the high performance environment that the competitive environment that attracts you? Because in the UK, we have our biggest group of coaches are not operating in a competitive environment, you know, but what is it that you like? What is it about that? The high performance you know, the looking to be the elite end of the sport? What is it that attracts to you about that?

Natalie Siegrist 23:56

I like the idea that people wants to be the best version of themselves. And it's also what I would like to be for myself and I think high performance sport is really, goes in that direction. People want to, to try and be best possible version of themselves. Now like that, that drive and working with people who driven I think that's the main attraction.

Sid Sinfield 24:27

There's also that you are one of the very rare breeds. There's not many of female coaches in high performance setting. And certainly, there's not many female coaches in high performance. And in the UK, I mean, there's yourself and Christina, other two that we have in the world class program. So where have you found that have you found being a, if that's the same in Switzerland? Have you found being a female coach in that setting?

Natalie Siegrist 24:56

Well, I don't want to lie so hard. Yeah, hard that good, you know, it's it. Like I stand out sometimes. So that's also it can also be an advantage. But no, it's not been easy all the way. And I still struggle for some things. It might sound a bit silly, but pulling gates, it's quite hard. And I don't have as much strength as my female colleagues or I'm a bit shorter or whatever. But I think as soon as I'm really coaching, it doesn't matter. I don't feel like I need to make a point because I'm a woman. I mean, okay, I'm just a coach.

Sid Sinfield 25:47

So the pioneering in nature in terms of being maybe the only woman in the setup is the challenge, but the actual interaction with the athletes? Is it that step non gender specific? You're good coaching you enjoy with people, then then you're more likely to connect and to get some results?

Natalie Siegrist 26:07

Well, I do, I do hope that female athletes and female ex athletes will see that it's possible. So I still hope to inspire a few.

Sid Sinfield 26:25

That was going to be but my question here that was really was if there was somebody contemplating getting into the high performance coaching, or even competitive type of coaches, any advice that you could give them, you know, so those young retiring female athletes that you're thinking about there any words of encouragement that you could give them? To get on that pathway?

Natalie Siegrist 26:48

Yeah, well, it's a fantastic job. It's very varied, it's both outside and inside. And it's, it's challenging, in a way, that it's, it's different every day, there is a routine, but every day, there's a new challenge. So, and I think it's possible no matter what, there are solutions. I was talking about that the gates wise, I've now discussed it with my colleagues, and I'm going to get a little stool or step to be able to reach that. So there are solutions, you just need to, to be open and know yourself and know your strengths, and I might be struggling for the gates, but I've got other strengths. If you play with your strengths, it doesn't matter. You can, you can be as good, as good as anyone else. And I think in here in the UK, it's really feasible as a woman because the context of how the structure works, you can still be a coach and also have a family life. It's realistic. I think it's probably not the case in other Federation's, but I think here the way the job is done, I think it's really possible.

Sid Sinfield 28:20

I that's really refreshing to hear, I really, really want to encourage more female coaches into our programs. And so I just wanted to say back to what I've heard there, in terms of what I've taken on from you, as from the time we've known each other as well, is that your openness to continual learning? Is that is that an important part of being a successful coach? You think, you know that that? I don't know everything? I only know so much. And there's yes. The more there is to know.

Natalie Siegrist 28:52

Yes. Well, I think the day that I'm not learning anymore, I will stop because I'm a very curious person. And I want to learn every day, I want to learn something new. So, so yeah, I think the day that I have the feeling that I'm not like I was telling you about in Switzerland, I was I had that feeling suddenly that I was doing the same things all over again, not seeing any, any new things coming. And I needed a change. It's exactly that I need that. That newness. And yeah.

Sid Sinfield 29:30

So just maybe my last question. And so what's the challenge's coming up. So in terms of your athletes and the season ahead, you know, hoping things go to plan, what's the big what's on the horizon for your you and your athletes in this coming season?

Natalie Siegrist 29:48

Well, I think the first hurdle was getting back into racing. The athletes haven't been racing for a long, long time. So we'll see how that goes. Getting back into the race mode. And so that's probably the first challenge. The second challenge won't be, it will be my first season with them. So I will need to adapt to the situation. Of course, I'm getting to know the athletes as they are in the training environment. That's a very safe, safe place. We'll see how that evolves. In race, environment. And then of course, the main goal for the season. We have the under 23 worlds in Slovenia, and about a month later the under 23 Europeans also in Slovenia. So yeah, those are the two main things on the radar.

Sid Sinfield 30:56

So just for the again, for the people who aren't familiar, because I always forget about but we know this world quite well. But how many athletes do you work with on a regular basis? What is your current trading squad? Who is it the your, you doesn't necessarily name them?

Natalie Siegrist 31:12

So, in the academy, we have 11 athletes at the moment, and three coaches so some coaches have four and I have three athletes to coach. So at the moment, I'm coaching 1k, one men and two ladies who are both doubling c1 and 1k. One. So it's very interesting, very diverse.

Sid Sinfield 31:40

Yeah, sounds like sounds very interesting. Very challenging. And okay, you're pretty busy. Well, thanks very much. I'm sure that the people listening in will be glad to have the insight and hopefully you're tempted some people to think about a career in Coaching Slalom. That'd be a really interesting.

Finished