

S2 E7: Coaching Philosophy with Chris Brain

Ricky Snodgrass 0:00

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

Lee Pooley 0:08

Welcome to the latest edition of the coaching podcast. My name is Lee Pooley. And for people that have been listening, we are running a series, talking to some very highly experienced coaches about their thoughts and approaches of how they decide of what Coach, or to focus on during a coaching intervention. I'm really pleased today to be joined by Chris brain. I've known Chris brain for many years now. And I've had the pleasure of working alongside him on several aspects of activity and course development. So welcome, Chris. I think just for just for the listeners, could you could you possibly give a bit of a background to yourself so Introduce yourself in the background on your, on your paddling, as well as your coaching?

Chris Brain 1:03

Yeah, so I started paddling about well, about 20 years ago, now I got involved with a local Canoe Club that was connected to an activity centre and started paddling with the Canoe Club but also having lessons from the centre as well. So I would go and have sort of formal coaching really early on into my, into my paddling career. And it was a predominantly a white-water based club. So we had a lot of rivers based around the Northwest and we would head up into the Lake District and to North Wales as well. And the club had a real a real emphasis on freestyle or on rodeo as we were called it back then really. And it was really at the at the boom of sharp boats and modern designs and freestyle designs of opening up new tricks and, and all that so my background inadvertently and it became paddling in sort of freestyle and doing a lot of surfing and like trying to do pop outs and all that sort of thing and a lot of the current crop of have at the time modern boats which would have looked at which now really, really quite different from what people are paddling at the moment from they're just carried on doing lots of like white-water, but also starting to dabble quite a bit in canoe and certainly more recently into stand up paddleboarding as well. So most of my background is in white-water kayak and also in freestyle as well but, but I'd like to think of myself as a multi discipline paddler. I'm not really nowadays I'm not

really too worried about witchcraft I pad or just that it's the right one for the right environment and that I really enjoy sort of experiencing lots of different environments nowadays, to be honest, as well, which is, which is great. My coaching background with that is, is that I started coaching really early on into my paddling career as well. So as I was I was learning to paddle I was also being encouraged to start on the coaching pathways and doing sort of level ones and level twos as it would have been back then. And I'm really getting involved with that side of things as well. So as I was learning and I was developing I was also actively helping the people that really weren't too far behind me in terms of learning some of the basics and the skills as well. And I've kept that and that's developed into a career coaching and guiding leading pedal squats.

Lee Pooley 3:39

Wow. Lots there, Chris. I'm glad you glad to use the term rodeo it just you know I think sometimes you know, maybe some of the listeners didn't realize it used to be called rodeo or play boating and now it's got a much more trendy a name such as freestyle. But yeah, it's great to just you know, I think it's really important just sort of paint that picture of your progression for very early stages you know why or based within a club hadn't been in their legs to where you are now have familiar listeners will know you as a highly respected and regarded coach within paddlesports I think before we dig any deeper, I'd be really keen to explore with you and almost sort of put yourself put yourself under a bit of a microscope really, what would you regard as the you know, some of your significant influence influences the that have had on you and who you are now as a coach.

Chris Brain 4:46

So the really early coaches that that got me started it definitely had a massive influence on me just in terms of their approach and passion for it and really I think it was very important for them, I seem to be for them to get my fundamentals like really right and to get me sitting up straight in a boat and you know, paddle in, in a straight line. And I know some modern approaches might be slightly different from what we what we did back then. But that that was that was really important to those coaches, and they had a big impact on me, recognizing that some of those fundamentals are really, really important. And as my coaching journey has developed, I've, I've had the pleasure of having lots of interaction with a full range of different coaches, who have all helped infants,

lots of different things, including things that are technical, so understand some of the technical side of things, but also understanding how to apply that into the environment as well. And recognizing when the right things are appropriate for different environments, but also some coaches that have had input in the sort of psychological approach and, and more recently, as well, some of the fitness side of things as well, and actually the physiological side of things, too. Wow.

Lee Pooley 6:08

Okay. So, I mean, we're going to go on to a question in a minute around your coaching philosophy, but it certainly sounds just from talking to you about you, you've had a huge variety and diverse input into shaping your views and perspectives of paddlesport and maybe coaching. So what would be nice to hear is what your coaching philosophy is now? And has it changed over the years?

Chris Brain 6:41

So yes, it has it has changed. And I'd like to think if you ask me this question, again, in the future, that there's been some progression there as well and some development. So right now, I think my philosophy is, is based around sort of three, three key areas. And I could probably word this into a sentence, but I do think it would be based around three key things. And I think it's got to be based my philosophy is about coaching. So is about adventure, personal development, and challenge. And I think what that means for the people that I'm coaching is going to be always a little bit different. So adventure for somebody at a high level could be, you know, a really, a really challenging trip and a remote location where the water is of a high grade, for example, or if it's somebody that I'm coaching, who is really at the early stages, then adventure could just be paddling around a small island and a small and a small lake kind of slightly windy day, it doesn't necessarily have to be there. It's always at the top end of the environmental remits that we might have. So I think I think some element of venture some element of unknown I think, is really important within the coaching that I do, and I think it's always really important to place the people in the real environment, so not to keep it sterile or to hide from the environment. And I think that helps to really bring the adventure out. In terms of personal development, I really like to focus on helping people move from where they were, when they started to, to a new place to somewhere where they feel like they've moved on, and that that might be a really small change in a session. Or it

could be that's a really small change over a number of sessions. But I think having some element of the individual developing is, is really essential in my coaching, and the challenge aspects, I think, again, is really subjective and really relevant to the person but I, I try and avoid coaching sessions where everything is really easy. And every test can be achieved. First time, you know, I think I don't think that's actually that helpful for the people that we're coaching. So I really try and put in some element of challenge, which may, may or may not, they may not be able to do so. So that's, that's where I'm at now, where I've been at previously, I think if you'd asked me this, maybe when I started out, or 10 or 15 years ago, I think my philosophy would have been framed more around technical competence. And that being really, really important. So people skills being perfect and aiming for a perfect replica of any kind of move where its breaking are breaking out and no less room for variation there. I think I think my philosophy would have been would have been framed all around, like being really skilled and about, essentially,

Lee Pooley 9:41

okay, I mean, I've got some I've got some questions that we're going to dig into, because I think, as you've just mentioned it they're near a change in your philosophy. What Why do you think it's changed from a? Because you know, from what from what I know of you, Chris is he is technical. Is still really important. But actually, it may not be the absolute everything that you would have normally coached when you were when you were younger within your coaching career. Why is that changed? Because skills still important. But what, what's made you what's made the transition to move away from that?

Chris Brain 10:20

Yeah, I think you're right I do, I do still place a high value on that technical competence but I don't think it's the only thing that's as important as maybe I used to think it was like the sort of key, the key thing really what I think his changes that I think I've seen, in my coaching, I've seen people who are technically really competent, but still actually can, can find real challenges in the environment, and they can still they can still struggle to, to perform in that environment. Whether that is because of a psychological barrier. It could be maybe a physical barrier in terms of fitness or something that needs to be to be worked on there. But I've just placing less weight on that now than I used to,

because I think I think I've seen patterns more holistically now. And less like that technical is the only focus so. So I try and I try and focus on coaching, a well-rounded paddler rather than somebody who is just really technically able,

Lee Pooley 11:23

Yeah, no, thanks for that clarity. And that probably sort of answers my other question, but I just wanted to sort of just delve into it. You talk about personal development. And I just wanted to just sort of go, what is personal development? And I think you've touched on it there. Yeah, what would you regard? Because you said, as part of your session, you want to see some kind of progression or increase? And can you just give some examples what they might be?

Chris Brain 11:54

Yeah, I think it's great that you've, you've questioned that, because I think that's one of those things that I could probably define in a few different ways. Really, I really, like the idea of students setting goals and setting challenges and, and setting targets so they've got accurate milestones that they could hit. Now, those targets might be something that's happening during the session, like they'd maybe like to be able to paddle down a certain rapid or perform a certain move on the water. And we could have those, those incremental targets and, and that on the session, but it could also be that they've got something long term to work towards. And I think there's, there's so much personal development and in working towards a goal, as much as there is in it actually just reaching it and achieving it. So whether that is somebody wants to paddle the Caledonian canal, you know, the great game way up in Scotland, and that's, that's their long term goal, their long term focus, the actual personal development and the journey that happens to get to there, I think is, is where a lot of the magic happens, you know, how do we, how do we get to a point where actually we can we can achieve that, that goal and achieve that, that long term task?

Lee Pooley 13:09

Okay, that's, that's just really useful. And hopefully, for me, most certainly just, you know, adds to, for me understanding you as a person, but all the hopefully the listeners as well as actually understanding your philosophy and how it's how

it's developed over the over the years. I think what really screams out to me is, you know, huge amounts of, of different people you've worked with, you have different influences in certain in certain areas. And what I'd be keen to do is, my next question, really is about how on earth do you as an experienced coach, decide what to coach? So it's like, you know, sometimes you know, I've been working with I've been working with less experienced coaches and gone and you know, with other experienced coaches, and they always look in or and go, how did they get there as they get to that point of knowing what to coach? So, you know, it's a big area, but could you possibly, you know, give us some kind of insight in how you decide what to coach?

Chris Brain 14:20

I think it's a great question because if you if you ask me at the start of a lot of my coaching sessions, especially if I'm working with somebody really new I might I might struggle to give the answer as to what we're going to what we're going to coach and I think that's because I haven't actually met the person I haven't spoken to and found out what they what they want to do. So when I'm thinking about what to coach, it's got to start with the Paddlers, got start with their motivations. What do they actually want to get out of this out of the coaching session, or maybe what do they want to do long term and that can start to generate at least some ideas of what we might do? Now, it's the challenge is taking that conversation, which might be bank based or via an email and then looking at does that match the picture that we see out on the water? So, in my, in my initial moments on the water, I'm looking to gather as much information and to gather as much evidence for one of a better word about does that, does that match what we talked about? So, so if they say they want to, they want to paddle a certain grade of water? And then we kind of get on the water and sort of think Does, does that actually fit that is what I'm seeing matching what I, what I maybe expect to see or what they told me, I might see. So I spend, I spend a lot of time gathering information. So that could be either myself or the students setting some tasks, show me what they can do. But also, I'd ideally like to see what they what they can do, you know, or just get a hint of something that maybe seems like it's not quite working. And then I do, I'd like to make sure that's robust enough by seeing it work or not quite work a few times. So it's not just it's not just a one off, oh, I really don't like base in my coaching sessions on just a one off moment. I definitely think I've been guilty in the past. Quite historically, I've seen somebody do something in it or try something and not work, and then go right, we're going to base the next the next three hours on

something that I've seen once. Not work, and I don't really think that's reliable evidence to start a coaching session with. So if I'm, if I'm working with somebody for a day, you know, I will usually spend at least the morning just gathering information. And that can still be done in a fun way. You know, it doesn't have to be it's not maybe to clinical, but it might feel like we're going paddling, and we're just trying things out and seeing moves that were consumed moves that don't work. But there's a lot of information gathering to start. Before we then think about well, what are we actually what are we actually going to coach and that that process I realized to be done with the student? I think that's one of the key things that I've changed over the years is that I come back to the student now and I say, what are we going to work on? What do you think we need to we need to approach based upon what we've just been doing for the last few hours. And I will of course have some ideas of things that we might want to work on. But I really try and get the student involved in that now. And I think that really helps for the motivation. And I definitely that was quite different to me saying, here's what we're going to do. And here's is my plan, because I think if I do that, it's just about me, me and my opponent and what I want to do, and it's, it's my it's my rules.

Lee Pooley 17:55

Yeah. So I think I think, you know, for me, and I'm sure listeners would really, really do appreciate your honesty. Chris probably didn't used to look like that. And, you know, certainly it just screams out to me, you know, very person centred, you know, very individualized gathering information. And I think, for me is I want to add, I want to add the complexity to it. So, to me, that sounds all great when you've got one person, or you may have two people, but a lot of people will be listening going my work with a club, and I've got I have six people on the water. Could you give any advice to you know, how would you approach can you approach with your philosophy now? Into a into a six person session say for an example?

Chris Brain 19:02

Yeah, I think that's a really great question. That's something I spend a fair amount of time thinking about, especially when I know I've got we've got a larger group thinking, well, how am I how am I going to do what I say I would usually do with this group. And I do think it's still really possible to have a group working

together or working in the same location. But I would typically try and set up a way of them still having their own individual challenges or, or their own individual coaching. If even if that means that we've got multiple people doing slightly different things. Of course, there needs to be like safety framework set up so that we can all keep our own each other and that I can manage the safety there. But I like to think about what I'm going to do is give always worked with a paddler to have an individual task and then give them some individual feedback or between as we get we work on some individual feedback. Really try and avoid now those moments of, we're all going to do the same thing. And then everybody's going to get the same feedback. Because that will be okay for some people, but there's a lot of people in that group that that feedback won't be applicable for, or they want something that's maybe at a lower level or even at a higher level. So I tried as much as possible to, to set up away on the ward so that people can gain some individual feedback much more easily. And even if even if that's just setting people off at different times, you know, so you maybe have a group of six people, and you could start off working on the same theme, it might be breaking and breaking out, or it might be surfing, but give them a little individual task or get them to generate a little individual task. And then inevitably, quite quickly, they come back individually, and we start that process of being a bit a little bit more individualized. So I try to avoid now saying, everybody's going to do the same thing. Just go don't really think that usually it's so much individualization

Lee Pooley 21:04

That that's really useful. And I like the examples that you've given, like setting people off, you know, one at a time, and getting people to individual work. I think what I'm sort of, you know, I'm still a sort of pursuing this, this group dynamics, you know, of, you know, one to one coaching, you know, it's a lovely space to be in. Do you? Do you think it actually requires more thought and planning? If you, you know, when you're working with, you know, six people than it does one person, or do you think it's very equal time, but you have to be good to understand your, your thoughts?

Chris Brain 21:47

So I do think it, I think it does require a little bit more from the coach. And I think as with any, any skill, it requires practice and reflection, as well. So you need to

you need to reflect on did it work? Did it not work? What went well, what didn't go well. And I think it's that analogy of being able to juggle lots of balls at the same time, because you can quite easily set up a position where you're giving feedback to somebody, but ideally, you're also watching somebody else at the same time. And, and that can be that can be so challenging to do. And one of the things that that I think is beneficial that that approach lends itself to his students taking a bit more of a focus on what is actually what feedback have they got, what are they learning from it, rather than all the feedback just coming directly from the coach in that in that sort of classic, the coach sets the task, the student has a go at doing the task, and the coach gives the feedback. I think, setting people off individually, and then knowing that you are going to have moments where maybe you're not watching completely, or maybe you're not. You're giving feedback, you're working with somebody else. I think setting up in that way, the students are encouraged to think about what happened themselves to, to be encouraged to self-coach a little bit, because they've got to think Well, I'm not going to see Chris now I'm not going to see him every time I come back round on this. So I'm going to go back in again. But what why what will I change? Or what will I adapt? And I think if people are struggling with that, with that approach, sometimes people might be used to getting coached feedback on every single attempt, I try and give them some encouragement to think about, well, if you got to go back in another time without seeing me if you're going to have another go at surfing that way, for example, think about what you might change or what you might do differently so that they're taking a bit more ownership of that. But I do think it requires a little bit more from the coach. Yeah,

Lee Pooley 23:46

Yeah, definitely. And there is a there is a danger isn't there, there is a danger of without, without appropriate planning and thought process, that you can easily just go into a delivery mode of patterns and scripts. So you just have a load of scripts that you GS, GS used without any real insight into the observational feedback that the paddle has given you, isn't it? So I think it's really interesting, isn't it? It's, you know, it's about a clear, a clear plan. It's a thought process and actually engaging the individuals into their own into their own development. And one of the things one of the things that I'm keen to explore with you, key to explore with you, and especially when you're being so open and honest with me, Chris is, you know, are you aware of any biases that you might have that that influence how you are as a coach?

Chris Brain 24:50

Yeah, so it's a it's a great question that I've again, I've thought a little bit about of, you know, what do I think is something that should be on every session Or I should, what's my golden tip that I'm going to tell everybody on every session regardless of whether they need it or not, I suppose. And I do think I've got a bit of a bias towards really valuing skills like surfing and like surfing and a stopper and also things like spinning and control of the boat in that kind of way. And I do think that goes back to my, my roots in freestyle and rodeo possessing I think those skills are really still valuable for the modern white-water boater but, but I've certainly seen do too I think boat design really that, that a lot of the modern river running boats don't necessarily lend themselves to those skills as well. So it'd be possible to, to actually get to quite a high level, but for your surfing and stuff for surfing and spinning skills to be you know, quite a bit of a lower level. So I'm quite conscious that I have a bias towards trying to get people to input those into their coaching that into my coaching repertoire and into their skills. Whether or not they always need them. That's kind of the question, isn't it, that's whether or not they always want it or need it. I'm not sure but that's one of the things I think have a bias towards,

Lee Pooley 26:21

well, it's good to hear, you know, you use the word you're conscious of your bias and I think that's really important is that you know, we do have you know, we do have our sort of, you know, this is the top tip that just sorted out everything this year, or you've learned something new you want to explore with people it can be a bias and I think that conscious bias is really important Chris I really appreciate your time Chris and you know, your openness to be able to just to explore with us together is your approach to coaching your philosophy and how it shaped your time within paddlesport how he shaped the person and the coach you are today. And before we before we sort of close the close this podcast is what is 2021 looking like for you? What have you got coming up and what are you looking forward to?

Chris Brain 27:13

Well, I really hope there's more was a time coming up where I'm where I'm based up in the Northwest. Without sort of leaving my without leaving my area I

struggle to get out and to some of the water that I'd really like to get out on so I'm hoping that with there's more water time coming up. Definitely like to spend more time out on a stand up paddleboard and I really like to get more in my white-water kayak. And I'm one of the things that I love to do more of if I can is to get back in my freestyle boat and to do a bit more of that. Because my work doesn't often take me in that direction. So I'd really like to do to do more of that and just to make sure my skills are really sharp. I'm also really conscious on of my own fitness and, and that's something I've been working on quite a lot in the last 12 months every right to just maintain that and keep that keep that going as well.

Lee Pooley 28:06

Yeah, no. Okay. Chris, before we sort of started recording here, we were talking about running and I was very impressed with you. You've run it every single day now which is which is very impressive and great to see you. Great to see you in good form, in good spirits, Chris, and really appreciate your time today as I said. So for everyone. I hope you all enjoyed that. That podcast we had with Chris brain and keep an eye out for other podcasts over the over the forthcoming year. And thanks very much for listening. Take care.