

# Imagination in a Performance Environment

Imogen Collins

British Canoeing England National Talent Squad Coach

In a sport that is based around being in the greatest physical shape to deliver top performance, it's sometimes too easy to lose the focus of **imagination and fun**. How can you really make paddling km after km interesting or pushing yourself to maximal extreme enjoyable? Well you can, and it's incredibly important for coaches to never forget that. Using your imagination, even in an elite environment, not only pushes you into areas you might never have thought to explore before, but it also makes it all the nicer for the athletes.

As an English National Talent Coach, I was concerned how best to balance enjoyment and performance. We get set KPI's and goals, just like the athletes, that need to be achieved. But I also have my own coaching values that I am not willing to step away from. And they revolve around fun, enjoyment, team and care. All of which can be sprinkled into performance if you use a little bit of imagination.

It's important to know what makes your athletes tick. Working with a group of young paddlers aged 14-18, there are all sorts of realms that they enjoy. Some just lap up the monotonous repeated hard work and some need difference and appreciate variation. It's my responsibility as a coach to make sure there I cater for these all, which I love. It's exciting to have challenges and try to find the best way to solve them.

**This leads me to my most recent experiment.** It's the start of January, the athletes are finally getting back on the river after it being almost unpaddleable for 3 weeks. However, anything on the water after 4.30pm becomes incredibly difficult to input any technical advice for the athletes. You are lucky if you can see anything other than their dazzling boat lights. I needed to find a way of continuing the technical progressions we had made on the paddle machines, on the water. **So light bulb moment, or shall I say glowsitck moment.** I decided to go and purchase a load of party glow sticks. Then each athlete chose their own colour and I challenged them to attach them to their bodies on the area that they were technically working on. This was a good challenge for them to make the decision on what they wanted their technical focuses to be when on the water. Luckily, it turns out they have been listening to the coaches and they all picked the exact places we would have advised them to go for.



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Once lit up, I explained this was for them to focus on but also for me as a coach to limit overloading of information. Once out on the water, I was likely to only be able to see the movements and positions of the lit up areas. Therefore, I could only feedback to the athletes on this. The hope was that this would lead to more specific and controlled inputs. I was worried if it was going to work. But with the session they had set, it was not going to impact negatively if it didn't, but could have a very large impact if it was successful.

**And successful it was.** They focused on the target areas. We only provided feedback on the illuminated parts of the body and ultimately, they loved this small and imaginative little alteration to an otherwise boring session. They wanted pictures, videos and asked loads of questions around how we could take it further. **They were excited, I was excited and we all went away happy and motivated for the next session.**

Personally I wouldn't do this for every session in the dark because over time the impact would wear off, but the variation from the normal sessions hopefully gave an impact.

Technically, they now had an image in their head of how the lights will look when they get it right. Video was invaluable in this and interestingly, they wanted it for more than just Instagram. Two of the athletes asked to chat after the session about the lights and what the movements were telling them. **The athletes led feedback was amazing and all motivated by trying something I had never done before.** I really would advice to give it a try. I was also honest at the start that I didn't know how it was going to work. By showing my vulnerability, they were more willing to show theirs and didn't worry as much about looking silly. Practice what you preach and all that jazz.

Once again working with juniors is great. Especially if you are vaguely able to be on their level. At a recent Women's EDP day, I had 3 crew boats out on the water, 2 x K4's and 1 x K2. The focus of the session was to learn about overcoming challenges and bringing a crew together. After a few efforts, when I was comfortable that the athletes were all set up and running their boats, I asked them to come up with a boat anthem that matched the stroke rate they were working on. They had an effort to decide and time after to discuss.





Each boat picked a song they all knew and understood the tempo of. I then challenged them to blindfold one paddler in the boat. Without the slightest negative murmur, a seat 2, seat 3 and in the K2 the front paddler were now one sense down. Now, here is where the anthem came into play. Their challenge was to stay in time through the use of their song. It worked perfectly. They paddled down the effort in perfect timing (albeit slightly less perfect singing of 'We will rock you', 'Shut up and dance with me' and 'French kisses'). The tempo of the song gave the blind paddler the understanding of the stroke tempo and did brilliant job of sticking to this. **When they finished the effort, there were grins all over their face. They were immediately aware that they had succeeded in the challenge.** The use of tempo based paddling is really helpful when trying to bring a crew boat together. It's a non-changeable. The song tempo is consistent and easy to copy. Give it a try the next time you take a crew boat session, although don't forget your ear plugs... they might be needed.

Athletes and coaches always have challenges. When working with high performing athletes you are asking them to do a lot and overcome a huge amount of problems. It's so important for us as coaches to also make sure we are always thriving to do the same. If something isn't working, never fear trying an abstract way to solve it. **Out of the box thinking makes for fun training. Imagination can help create an even harder working environment,** athletes appreciate the time taken by a coach to try and make changes. Showing the vulnerability of trying different things will increase the athlete's willingness to be vulnerable to improve. When you come up with an imaginative approach around a problem, you will also feel a huge amount of pride and an even greater sense of achievement when the athletes are able to take such positive learnings from it. **Never shy away from doing something different and being imaginative. Even in a performance environment, you never know, it might be the one change or challenge that completely alters an individual athletes thinking.**

