

S2 E15 – Coaching Philosophy (George Fell) - Miniseries

Ricky Snodgrass 0:00

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

Lee Pooley 0:08

Welcome, everyone to the British Canoeing Awarding Body coaching podcast. My name is Lee Pooley. I'm the head of coaching at British Canoeing. And as you may have known already that we are running a miniseries aimed at exploring with experienced and highly regarded coaches, their thoughts and approaches on how they decide on what to coach or focus on during a coaching intervention. Today, I'm delighted to be welcoming George Fell, from north of the border in, I'm not going to say sunny Scotland, but I know they've certainly got snow at the moment up there. So welcome, George.

George Fell 0:51

Hey, brilliantly, thank you very much for having me. It's a privilege.

Lee Pooley 0:56

No, no, it's great that you can give up your time for it to have this chat. And just before we sort of delve into the subject of coaching, and all that, all those particular areas, I'm wondering if you can give the listeners a bit of a background about you, yourself, your paddling background, and probably what would be useful is where you are now in terms of your coaching. So when you refer to it later on, they understand what you were you are at the moment.

George Fell 1:30

Ah brilliant, Okay, thanks. So, oh, long story. So I started off in paddling, trying to make the long pointy boats go fast. And discovered that I wasn't particularly strong at that. And I'd say in fact, pretty much I discovered, discovered beer, girls and whitewater paddling and pretty much pretty much all at the same time. And I guess that was probably about the next 15 years. So nowadays, and as Lee said, I live and work up in Scotland kind of both for myself and for Glenmore

Lodge, although as you can tell from my broad scotch accent³, I was actually dragged up in Yorkshire. I enjoy bobbing around in all sorts of different types of recreational crafts. So I guess whitewater is where I came from, but I probably spend more time in sea kayaks. Now. I love canoes and the flexibility stops, I'm still trying to work out how to use SUP on anything but the simplest environments, and I tend to alternate between bobbing around on them and bobbing around next to them. And I kind of just love having adventures out on the water. And that's Yeah, that's what I love doing, I guess, outside paddling, because I suppose that background does affect what I bring to paddling. My background was physics, and then meteorology, and then working as a weather forecaster. So I think that means I definitely came at paddling at first, with a sort of scientific, break it down. Try and understand it, there must be some rules hiding behind all this complexity. And I suppose one of the big things over the last few years has been taking part in the British Canoeing paddlesport diploma, which I guess has been a, Yeah, a big part of that as me being sitting down and giving myself a good conversation good telling off a lot of the time and a conversation between this, oh, this is just yeah, we should break it down and measure stuff and really find out how it works. And another bit of me going but actually, it's really complicated and you can't break it down and everything connects to everything else. And maybe all these coaching theories, which I've been maybe a bit dismissive of, they are the best you can do. Yeah, so it was a bit ramble. But I think that's a brief summary of me and where I'm coming from Lee.

Lee Pooley 3:57

No, no, it's great. And it's, it's great that you refer to the coaching diploma on many occasions, joys and do not take this the wrong way. I really enjoyed, you know, the conversations we've had, but also, just to see you actually wrestling with it. So you know, go in now that surely there is a process, they're saying that the way that we can break it down, and eventually come around and go. I'm trying to make you I'm trying to simplify a complex thing that's happening, and sometimes it's just you Yeah, I've really, really enjoyed our time, George, and I'm really pleased that you referred to that. One thing, it's probably good to just sort of make sure that we get within the early types in terms of the conversation. You mentioned that you know, you work for Glenmore lodge, etc. If you go into is there any sort of particular participants that you're involved with now you know, as adults, teenagers, really understand where you come from when you answer some questions.

George Fell 5:01

Absolutely. So I guess, I mean, the last year in a bit, as we'll all appreciate it been a bit odd. But back in in normality, if I can remember that far back, then my workup, Glenmore Lodge is overwhelmingly with adults. And it's a mixture of skills based courses, where folks are coming along and want a mixture of a good time in Scotland to see some to see some new environments, and maybe to get a bit better and be happy in their paddling, then national governing body awards, where hopefully all those things still things still apply. But we've also got a syllabus to try and cover in my working as myself. Who do I work for anyone who pays me but again, predominantly, that that that's again that that's adults usually?

Lee Pooley 6:02

Okay, well, that's really useful, because I'm sure we'll all we'll return to that about, you know, those particular areas as we as we move through. So this video, I'm going to really enjoy delving into this, this next question, and I should brace myself appropriately. It's all based around your coaching philosophy, because, you know, you already alluded to maybe some of the struggles that you come from because of the background, and the historical backgrounds you've got. And very useful working in the outdoors having a weather background, but in terms of your coaching philosophy, in terms of your coaching philosophy, rather than just describing it from a piece of paper. Could you describe what your coaching philosophy looks like on the ground?

George Fell 6:57

Oh, well, that's a good question. I could, as with any real life question, the first two words have to be it depends. So the minute you try and write down rules that are black and white, they never survive contact with real life. So I guess these are maybe coaching aspirations rather than a rigidly defined coaching philosophy. So what does it look like? It looks like I meet some people. And if I know them, then I've already got some information, if I don't know them, then I guess I'm, I'm frantically trying to try and find out where they're coming from, and make friends and gather some information about them. So trying desperately quickly to find out where they want, what they want. And there's that whole conversation about wants and needs. And that whole conversation,

to me working in recreation almost feels a little bit dishonest some time, I think I've come around to the idea that I actually work in a service industry. And that my job is probably to find out what people want their picture of where they want to go, and properly to do whatever I can to assist them to work towards where they want to go rather than particularly forced them into my picture of what I think they should look like. But still going to be rambley and philosophical, hasn't they'd rather than rather than practical. So what Next, I guess at some point, we get out in the water. And at that point, I get to see if the picture that I've interpreted from their words, matches the picture that my eyes see when food get out on the water. I guess at that point, we started to try and make a plan. In terms of the philosophical things, I guess one thing that's really important to me, and this is still carrying over from science days, is testing. So I guess I believe really strongly that I don't know best. I just have some ideas and sort of opinions. But actually, the way we turn opinion into something useful is to get out and test it. And I guess that means a lot of my technical beliefs about coaching have gone from a good one should look like this, too. If you do so. So let's take a really simple example which hopefully translates into any craft. So if I take some variation on the theme of thumb stroke, you could have a belief that says my blade should be vertical or at 45 degrees or whatever. And that's fine, but actually that doesn't work for everyone in every boat. If you have a bit of sort of relative belief that says, What if I bring it closer in the boat goes more forwards. If I bring it further out of the boat spins around more, I think that probably does work for everyone, every boat. So maybe we have, what am I trying to say? And we all have the same physics, but we all have different biomechanics, maybe is the way of way of saying that.

Lee Pooley 10:20

That No, that's, that's, that's great. And I think what we'll do is a little bit later on, probably might delve into this testing bit a little bit in a bit more detail. But you refer to George, you refer to a service industry. I want to sort of, you know, sort of pick that a little bit. Is that because your client, your clients, the participants are paying?

George Fell 10:44

No, no. So I guess, I guess that was maybe a little bit flippant, but, but you'll get used to that, but no, so I guess I, I struggle with this picture of the I struggle with

gurus. I struggle with a picture of a coach who knows everything, and a paddler who in whatever setting who comes along to them for answers. And it's all about, and it's easy to dismiss that viewpoint to make it sound silly when you're not there. And you're using lots of words to describe it. But I think that genuinely is how a lot of people picture coaching, you know, where, where the idea of a coaching session is that essentially stuff transfers from my mind to their mind or to their notebook. And I really don't think a coach can give people a for most things. I think a coach can't give people answers. I think a coach will give people questions. A coach can help people find their answers can help them investigate stuff. I mean, having said that, if I've got someone who turns up and holds a paddle in their teeth, you know, I can probably go you might work. It might work a wee bit better if you held it in your hands. But like, yeah, I guess it goes back to that that absolute versus relative thing again,

Lee Pooley 12:14

Are you would you I mean, this is just a couple of words that sprung to mind when I was listening to you. Georgie, are you saying that actually, you are part of their journey, and you're exploring together?

George Fell 12:25

Oh, sometimes, I think, again, I think I think every generic statement you make, you can always come up with situations where so I guess more is what I'm saying. I would prefer to be on the same step over step below rather than step above. I don't know if that says things about me, or if he says things about coaching. Yeah. But certainly that's where I feel happier.

Lee Pooley 12:53

That's, that's, that's, that's great. And I always knew that it wouldn't be as straightforward with you George. That's why I've asked you to come on of the podcast, which is actually fantastic. And I hope it's getting listeners thinking as well as it is, is me which is which is great. So main subject area for today, George. No. All right. You are Yeah, and you know, you've just said about being on being on the step below, or on the same step. But the reality is, you're a highly respected and experienced coach. And, you know, whether you whether you want to admit that or not I going to say highly respected and experienced coach,

with great diverse backgrounds, unable to put on a lot of experiences. So how do you decide what to code you have approaches, what considerations to take? Do you have processes?

George Fell 13:57

So I think processes is an interesting word. I think I can retrospectively tell myself stories to justify why I did what I just did. But I don't actually believe those stories represent what happens inside my brain or anyone's brain. So I'll tell you some stories. But we have to accept they are stories. So yeah, I suppose. Started off we only kind of briefly mentioned that idea of, of needs or wants. So I guess I guess trying as much as possible to have a picture of where people want to be. And the trouble is, that picture often comes to me via the medium of words and words are actually terrible mediums for communicating pictures. So yeah, that those there's a bit of a bit of chat. There has to be but there's also a bit of watching folks on the water in the environment and just seeing what makes them smile, I think recreation is a so recreation. It will be easy to say my job is to make people better at paddling. But actually recreation, I think often my job is to make people happy with that paddling. And almost this is a generalization. But if I was honestly trying to make most of the people I work with better at paddling. If I could change two things, I'd make them fitter. And I make them deal with failure better. Because actually, and actually, I actually apply that to myself as well, though that definitely applies as much to me as it does to anyone, anyone I coach, and actually folks do those two things, then then probably they get better really quickly. Anyway. So yeah, so process. That's right. So let's embed some process. So yeah, I guess I guess my first the classic sort of scientific, get my scientific scalpel out and start slicing things up and break all that complex into manageable, manageable chunks. So yeah, my first cut, I'll separate once and needs to put another way, in my opinion of what's the right thing to do with their opinion, what's the right thing to do? I like to say I'll try and value their opinion. Great, then what then? Well, I guess I'll try and watch him. And then I guess the sort of classic thing here would be to talk about that sort of systematically inductive, holistic ways of watching people. So that systematic thing being where I essentially have a shopping list of what I'm expecting to see some kind of template and I can just checked my list again, seeing what I do, whether what I see matches what I'm expecting to see. And I guess if I see five things, then the next problem is to work out which most to work on first. And then the next thing is to work out, how am I going to actually coach those things? Even when I'm go either consciously trying to work systematically? Not sure not convinced? I think

probably when I do, I don't actually have a shopping list of good things, I suspect to have a shopping list of common mistakes. So I think really, if I'm watching someone, let's say I'm watching, trying to keep it generic, so it works, but I think I can't do here anymore. Let's say I'm watching a paddler, a whitewater kayaker, who's about to fall off a drop. And then it's like what are the things I'm expecting them to get wrong, I'm expecting to get the wrong line in. Or they might get the wrong line in which the consequence of that is helpful. They'll have the wrong angle and speed when they get to the drop. I'm expecting them to not have the right edge. I'm expecting them to be too early or too late. With a paddle stroke, the paddle stroke, my probably won't be vertical enough. Oh, then when they fly off, expect if it's their first 20 goes absolutely guaranteed the body shape will absolutely go to bits. And if they get all those things, right, the next thing they'll get wrong is that they won't have a landing stroke. So there's Yeah, I think probably what I'm yeah, honestly, systematically, I think I probably have my list of List of errors, common errors, rather than my list of common correct things, do you you're looking at your you're old enough, you'll remember when I was when I was growing up before computer games, were a big thing you used to get choose your adventure books. So you'd be like, if you do this, turn to page five, if you do, and it feels like that, that systematic approaches is maybe the sort of Choose Your Own Adventure book approach to coaching. And I suspect there's a fair bit of truth in that. A Tom, Tom, a canoe coach and friend and yeah, and coaching genius. He, he's he has a great line, which I would absolutely agree with, which is I've only got about six sessions that I run. And I hope you're not interviewing Tom later on. Because if so I'll just load him out of the water. But he's got a brilliant line. And I think I think he's probably right, but actually what probably what most of us have our I don't know, 6-10? Who knows, but a few a few common things we're good at fixing. And those are probably the things that constitute what 70%, 80% of what we do. And they'll come out different every time because we're a different environment with a different person. So it's not like I actually have succession plans that I stick to. But actually, in terms of themes, we've probably only got a few themes. And almost that's probably okay, maybe what makes different coaches different is what their preferred themes are. So yeah, I reckon that probably represents the majority of my coaching. And I suppose then the other classic thing we talked about would be that deducted thing. So that thing where it doesn't quite fit into any of our boxes, but we see something's not quite right. And then we try to work out why so one example of that, so if you don't like water, so we've got, we've got a sea kayaker. And they're in waves, and they're just looking kind of wobbly in the boat, they just do that the face doesn't look happy, but grip on the puddles a bit tight. And you can see

them and just Yeah, like classic would be going down when with the wave's kind of coming, coming from maybe 45 degrees off the stern. And they just yeah, it just catches them unawares. And they keep doing these little, little Jolts and wiggles and, you know, and it's like, okay, we're going to see what the problem is, we can see what the symptoms are, but we can't see what the problem is. So is the problem. The outfitting is the problem that they're in a new boat is a problem that physically they don't have the core stability or flexibility to deal with it. Is it? Is it an understanding problem that they haven't spent time in this environment, and they're just not used to not being able to see the waves? So that that going from here is a symptom to try and work drill down. Here's a cause. And I guess that's probably another big water for paddling. So for my coaching decision making, so if I haven't got a ready answer, maybe that's my next place to go. But both of those.

Lee Pooley 21:15

Just too sort of ask on that one, and do you? Do you still think you know, because you said about, you know, six sessions weren't mentioned lately, but we do six sessions. And do you do you think then even in adaptive approach that you're seeing this, this outcome? What could it be that almost like a decision tree? Would that be a script that you would have parked away somewhere?

George Fell 21:45

Oh, that is a good question. It probably has scripted elements. But no, I think if it's fully scripted, I probably don't have to go through that logical reasoning. And I'm probably straighten. It's a line drawing exercise, isn't it? So essentially, the question I suppose is, where do we draw the line between systematic and deductive and I guess for me, it becomes disruptive when it's not an instantaneous jump A to A to B, it's that there has to be a little bit of processing in the middle there. And, yeah, so I guess I'm at some point, going back to principles, and at some point I'm having to go, there are multiple potential causes for this problem. I'm not sure which one to choose yet. So I may be having to invent. Yeah, perhaps I'm having. Yeah. So yeah, no, thank you. That's it. That's a really perceptive question. Thank you. So I think I think I may I think maybe there's no difference in our beliefs. I think maybe us just drawing the line between systematic and deductive in a slightly different place.

Lee Pooley 22:50

Okay. And then this deductive element a bit like Sherlock Holmes, you, you, uh, you then go in, it could be five things? And then do you just go well, one at a time, I'm going to address it. And if it doesn't solve it, I go to the next one. I go to the next one.

George Fell 23:20

I don't think I've ever been as logical as that. So So. I mean, it depends what the thing is, doesn't it? I mean, asking them would be a good start. Or even maybe going here's a fit. Yeah, here's the thing I see. Can you tell me more about it? Because it because it may be that they tell me Oh, yeah. And it's, it's my mates boat. And it's just like, Oh, well, I've just there wasn't a point of me wasting my time. Invent? Invest? Yeah. Trying to discover the ever for. Yeah. Investigating ever for possibilities. So chat to folks see where they're coming from? And then yeah, so maybe it could be just try things. It could be trying to do some experiments. So it could be okay. So we're feeling a little bit wobbly when the waves are coming from somewhere in western quarter. Let's point into them and see if that makes a difference. Okay, so it's fine when you're pointing into them. So when you went? Okay, let's go across them. Okay, so now you can see him coming. But what are the boats hitting them in the kind of wiggly direction run the stable direction? Okay, you've got it. So you look stable there. So in that case, we can cross off it's not we haven't have the core stability to deal with it. So yeah, I think yeah, I think we do experiments. I think we probably do a bit science at that stage.

Lee Pooley 24:34

Okay. Which, which is quite nice for you, isn't it?

George Fell 24:37

Yeah, yeah. Is it okay, if I just finish off?

Lee Pooley 24:41

Yeah, please do.

George Fell 24:42

Yeah. Cool. So the holistic thing is the one that I'm really interested in, which I guess will bring us on to cognitive biases and all that kind of shenanigans. So I think over is nice logical, pretty things that look that look good in flow diagrams, I think probably don't represent most of what I do. So I reckon most of what happens, happens and not particularly a reasoning, thinking verbalize above level, it's just like, the thing to do next is the thing that pops into my head. And there's some really interesting research about that. So the, there was a guy called schooler in in the 90s, who was looking at what they call, what do they call them? The kind of problems where you don't think your way to a solution, you're just, you're just the solution pops into your head, insight problems. That's right. So things like some cryptic crossword clues. So we have problems where you don't reason yourself to an answer, you just rock backwards and forwards through a bit. And then then suddenly, you see it an example. So take 10 coins and make a pyramid. So like 4-3-2-1 Pyramid. And then I hope I do hope someone's going to listen to this podcast is actually do this because it's a great one. So you can turn that pyramid upside down, just by moving three coins. And he did ask him to do the experiments about these kinds of problems. And he found that if you get people to try and think systematically about those problems, or even worse, to try and verbalize them, they get worse. So not only does consciously thinking about it, not help, it actually makes things worse. And if you tell them that it's the kind of problem way where you don't need to think about it, that also makes it worse, which is brilliant. So it's like the bit of brain that's involved in solving these really complicated problems, these multifaceted problems, where the answer just pops into your head, not only can you not switch it on consciously, but actually it's inhibited by trying to consciously find a solution. And so yeah, I kind of feel that that probably a lot of coaching problems are insight problems. They're multifaceted, complex problems, not sequential, easily broken up problems. And I'm sure we've all I've definitely had it and have it loads on sessions where you get that sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach where it's just like, I, I know, this is about to go wrong. And I don't have a solution to this next bit. And I can see you as a problem. And I can maybe even put the problem into words, but I can he fix it. And yeah, I wonder if our non-thinking brains are actually better at dealing with those than our thinking brains.

Lee Pooley 25:30

It could well be could well be George and I think what's really, really great is that that yeah, that honestly that you have a choice about going? Yeah, we've all been in that place. And I'm sure we'll be in that place many types of going. I don't know where I'm going with this.

George Fell 28:05

Well, I went to the last do a webinar. I haven't been in that place for at least 36 hours. So yeah.

Lee Pooley 28:15

I think I think what's really interesting is I think, you know, we just go back into, you know, where you talked about systematic productive, and this holistic approach and really good. Do hope people do the coin bit. I will when I when I get off this podcast, I'll have a go at this. Yeah, it's all of them. All of them have absolutely a potential of, of being dominated by your own bias. Yep. So are you know, for listeners, what is your conscious bias? So what do you know is your conscious bias? And do you have any, any way of managing that?

George Fell 29:03

Okay, so, okay, great. So I guess, in terms of, yeah, okay, so, so big picture biases, I would argue 15 years ago, I would always jump to the technical. And then I think I may have gone like pendulum swinging, I may have gone too far the other way. And I think I spend a lot more time trying to gently, gently nudge people in that direction of trying to be happy with their paddling and to see as something to motivate you not something to run away from, with varying levels of success. So yeah, yeah, I guess I spend a lot more time doing touchy feely things and I do hard tech things. And I think that is Sometimes a weakness, I think, certainly, I'm doing within which I believe is helping people most. But actually, I also need to do the things that they believe the most. And I guess that goes back to that wants versus needs conversation that I've just argued against myself. Then within technical, I guess, as I say, but my background originally was trying to make long pointy boats go fast. And so I, yeah, I see, I see power transfer. I guarantee if I watch someone paddling, I'll see things about Oh, you could use your body more efficiently to really drive that boat forwards? And I guess certainly for no, across over this crossover disciplines are involved in actually, if

you can, if you can make the boat go forwards in the right place in the environment, then probably I think that's 90% of the technical and tactical job done. So I'm aware of those biases? Do all I do stuff to consciously avoid them? No, I think if it's working me, I sort of embraced them a little bit, because I think they're part of who we are. And I don't think we can escape our biases. And to an extent, they're why people come to us. So there are different coaches, and almost coaches, I know really well, I could imagine a performer and I could predict the different things that we would all see in that performer. And as long as it's a community, and as long as you're not the exclusive coach, the only coach that person ever sees that maybe that thing is as much a strength as a weakness.

Lee Pooley 31:57

That's that, you know, that's a really nice way of putting it actually, you know, I hadn't, I hadn't thought of it in that, in that clarity to be quiet honest George. Well, actually, why probably certain paddlers or individuals will go to that particular person because of the bias that they hold. And there's nothing wrong with biases. Within reason. Yeah. So yeah, that's, that's really good. Because I was actually thinking, you know, have you and this is just a thought, did you actually go because you said 15 years ago, you're quite heavily technical. And now you just want to make it make them happy with their paddling, you know, completely different ends of the continuum. And I was thinking, wondering whether once you started understanding your bias that he actually made you move to more of an end of the continuum. Just a thought.

George Fell 32:55

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I think Yeah, I think so. And I think that's going to be a continuous process. So I think there'll be, at some point in the next few months, year, there'll be another thing where I look back into there and go, Oh, I really missed. I really missed that. And actually, if I'd have gone off in this direction, and then that would be my thing for a little while. And that that journey, I'll never stop. I hope, you know, your time I'm coaching when then hopefully. Yeah, it would be really dull. If, if I was a finished product that would be terrible. You know, so, so, so yeah, I think I think that, that, that that journey, yeah, journey has to continue. Yeah,

Lee Pooley 33:33

I don't think anyone can accuse you ever being dull George. And, you know, this has been absolutely fantastic. And what I would hope is, you know, later on in the year, maybe we could catch up again and, and delve into particular subjects in in an in a bit more depth. But I think, you know, for me, it's been it's been really, really great. And thanks very much for being really open and honest about you as a coach, and what I'm, before we sort of wrap it up, and what you what you focused on at the moment in terms of your coaching because there's always something for you with you Georgie you're always looking to investigate investigating something and trying stuff out what you what you pay particular attention to.

George Fell 34:19

So right now, reality has forced me into trying to learn about how to make learning happen online. And I'm definitely very much have a crash and burn stage of that. And it feels like it's something where it is possible to do it really well. And there are a ton of advantages to it. But I don't feel like any of us are doing it really well or really capturing those advantages yet. So I guess, yeah, a lot of thought and effort is going into that at the moment.

Lee Pooley 34:58

All right. Brilliant. Well George, many thanks again. Really appreciate your time and I'm sure our listeners as much as I have enjoyed listening to you and your thoughts around coaching. So as you as you as you know we are going to continue this miniseries and hopefully you will all be engaged with British Canoeing awarding body coaching podcast and engage with the rest of the miniseries. So thanks very much and take care.