

S2 E17: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion with Helena Russo

Ricky Snodgrass 0:00

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

Ben Woodruff 0:07

Hello and welcome to the British Canoeing coaching podcast. Now this week we are discussing something slightly different. We have Helena Russo from British canoeing, and we're talking about equality, diversity and inclusion and the considerations around coaching within paddlesports. So Helena herself has a background in sports development. It started with netball, being a women's and girls' network development officer, also as a coach with all sorts of qualifications from netball, badminton, rugby, and is a volunteer. And currently, she is a SUP paddler, but loves lots of sports. So running, climbing lifting, has tried a few sprint triathlons. And then is her role at British Canoeing involving equality, diversity and inclusion. And it's really, really interesting. It's a conversation I'm looking forward to having and I think coaches are going to massively benefit from so Helena. Welcome. Thank you for joining us.

Helena Russo 1:04

Thank you for having me.

Ben Woodruff 1:06

Lovely, thank you very much. So obviously, I've just introduced you, could you just give us a sort of a brief introduction to your experience in equality, diversity and inclusion or EDI, as it's sometimes abbreviated?

Helena Russo 1:20

Yeah. Yeah, of course. So as you sort of mentioned in your introduction, I started out my career with netball, which is a famously women and girls only sport. So I often joke that I sort of started doing EDI, without really know anything about it. And then I just kind of carried on doing it and picked up the baton from wherever I was going next. So when I moved on to other organizations, I've been

involved with things like resource development, you know, involved in surveys, and basically trying to tap into how we can make sports more equal, diverse and inclusive. So yeah, I've been in post here at British canoeing since January. And it's been a real, real ride. So far, really exciting time to be in this kind of sector in this kind of space. And, yeah, just really excited to have lots of conversations, really interesting conversations with lots of different groups, people like I am today. So yeah, that's where I am also fighting for that.

Ben Woodruff 2:12

So yeah, like I said, we're going to have a bit of a conversation around equality, diversity and inclusion today. I will probably abbreviate it for the rest of the podcast. A mouthful, so yeah, around EDI today. So I'm going to, I'm going to kick off and just throw a question out there that I don't think has sort of one definitive answer. And it's what is equality, diversity and inclusion?

Helena Russo 2:38

It is a really, really broad topic. So it encompasses lots and lots of different conversations. But if you were to kind of take the three words individually, and equality is essentially around everybody having an equal opportunity to access opportunities, or activities, experiences, or the sport. And when we look at diversity, it's about seeing a wider range of people that share characteristics or come from different backgrounds, basically, sort of evidence that difference between individuals and between communities. And then inclusion is literally what it says on the tin, it's about, you know, we're making, we're making sure that people are included, and when they're accessing opportunities that, you know, they feel that they belong, and that they can actually, you know, even get there in the first place. So that kind of gives an overview of those three definitions, but it is it is really wide ranging it you know, it covers lots and lots of different facets of a really ongoing conversation.

Ben Woodruff 3:36

Lovely, thank you. And, I mean, I think a lot of coaches will have a rough understanding of the topic. And it's really interesting to hear it in more detail and start that conversation. So obviously, you've coached before; in terms of

your own coaching philosophy and how you've coached before, what does EDI mean to you in that capacity?

Helena Russo 4:00

Yeah, so my primary sport is netball. As I, as I said, it's where I started my career as well. So I do definitely, you know, coach, a lot of women and girls, you know, that's, that's where the focus is. But for me, I think inclusion is all about addressing barriers that exist to different people. It's all about, you know, making sure that people have an opportunity to get into the sport in the first place. I've had amazing experiences through sport, I started as a volunteer coach, I've been, you know, I've gone to competitions, I've, you know, volunteered at university done lots and lots of different things. And I come from a relatively, you know, privileged background. And I think that for me, in my philosophy, it's about you, like I said, taking down those barriers, addressing the reasons why people can't get into the sport or feel that they can't get into the sport. Yeah, and I think, you know, I just want people that I coach to have as many opportunities in the same way that I have. And, yeah, a way of doing that is taking down those barriers and I feel I have a really important role in that as a coach.

Ben Woodruff 4:59

Awesome. Thanks. Thanks for your honesty that so yeah, moving on slightly Why, why? This is something we've talked about a lot on the podcast, it's all well and good, knowing sort of the theory, the explanation and how but the main thing and this is the thing that Lee was always talking about to me is why? So why should coaches consider how inclusive their sessions are?

Helena Russo 5:24

I think one of the most important things is that coaches are often for a lot of people, they're the first people they ever come into contact with, and they're that first point, when they go to a session, or they try something new and activity centre, or, you know, they go down to their local lake or anything like that. And that first experience when that person is like shaking in their boots, thinking, oh, my goodness, what am I doing for the first time ever, you know, that experience is so crucial to help more people get out on the water. And then on top of that,

coaches also stay with people throughout the course of their, you know, career, if you want to call it that, or their experience. So it's not actually just about those first ever contact pieces, it's also about the ongoing journey. And, you know, we're coaches are often look to as people to be trusted, they help them improve out on the water, you know, help them to tackle skills, they can't quite, you know, get their heads around. So, if coaches aren't delivering sessions that sort of make everybody feel included, but also draw people in from the outside and think, Oh, actually, that's somewhere that I could see myself. Or even just inadvertently, excluding groups that you know, without even really knowing about, it can really impact people's long term enjoyment of the sport as well. So there's a there's a lot of that. And I also think, what's possibly even more important when it comes to coaching sport, generally not just paddling. And you know, it does sport does more than just help people be active, it can help people manage their mental health and wellbeing it can help people find a community somewhere that they feel like they actually belong, they're people that are like them, or make them feel that they belong to that community, even if they're not like them. You know, it can help people find their voice, it can be empowering, and they can become leaders. And it's somewhere that people can just be themselves and coaches are really, really key facilitators, all that great, great stuff that goes on in those spaces. And you know, personally, I feel that coaches and I included, you know, we have a duty to make sure sessions and our sport is welcome to everyone in equal measure.

Ben Woodruff 7:22

Yeah, I completely agree. And just sort of picking up on a couple of things you said there. So he said, of coaches and actions being remembered. I mean, I remember my first coach, when I started playing different sports when I was younger. Yeah, when I was 10, when I started taking part in sports, I remember my first coach very well, James Rice was his name. And he had such a big impact on me, because I wasn't the best athlete at all, and actually made me feel really included. Really welcome and ensured that I had a place in every session that was taking parts of the stage, I then got better and actually really enjoyed it because I was a better athlete. But yeah, I mean, 11 years down the line from that first session with him. I probably haven't seen him in six or seven years. But I still remember him this day, and the impact he had. And I think, actually, as a coach, people have coaches deploys employs anyone around paddlesports and variety of sports, have a beautiful responsibility in the fact that they are a massive role model to all participants, and they will be remembered and will

have a massive impact on each and every participants life. So yes, as you said, really important as a coach to make sure that you're inclusive and, and that people are coming and enjoying your sessions.

Helena Russo 8:38

I totally agree. And I have to say actually, it's interesting, because it's so nice to hear that, you know, lots of us have had really positive experience with coaches, when I was a young netball player, you know, sort of early secondary school age, I, you know, had a couple of experience with, with coaches that were really negative. And luckily, I was somebody who was, you know, desperately headstrong and wanted to play and I was, I'd always been active. And luckily, that didn't put me off, you know, I felt much excluded with it, you know, within the sessions, and I felt that I wasn't being selected and those kinds of things. And it did definitely come down to you know, people I'm very, very loud, bubbly person. And that was something that was sometimes criticized within that sport in space. And, you know, luckily, I was somebody that kind of carried on but that sticks with me, that's something I always remember that and I always think to myself, I never ever want to make somebody feel that way. Whether it's by accident, how it would never be on purpose or you would hope it would always be by accident, but you know, those experiences stay with people whether you're 7, 17 or 47 you know, regardless of where you are in your journey in sport, somebody might make you feel tiny and that will be the end of it. Nobody will want to come back you know so yeah, we coaches are just so you're so right they have beautiful responsibilities. A really nice way of putting it is definitely that.

Ben Woodruff 9:59

Yeah, and actually something you alluded to there is, is something that always gets discussed in a coaching context, in without taking into consideration is individualization every individual is different. And we have to make sure that the sessions are inclusive to every single individual. And that that is, be it needs physically, mentally, or in terms of just how they like to be coached. So, obviously, we've looked at the why, which is something very important, and we'll keep that theme going throughout. But how can a coach listening an employer, the employer, paddlesports, instructor listening, ensure that sessions are diverse and inclusive?

Helena Russo 10:39

So I think if you ask any coach, if their session is inclusive, like most of them will say, yeah, of course, you know, anyone can come down, you know, anyone's welcome to come to my sessions, that's fine. But I think we have a responsibility as coaches to really reflect on our sessions, and certainly our sport more generally, to kind of take a look at the participants that come to our session, or the club members we might have, if that's the space that you're in. And, and kind of, you know, we have to ask ourselves those questions. You know, why do we see lower numbers of women participating? Why might we see, you know, lower representation from people from the black communities that exist across Britain and in the UK? And actually, I think a question we should probably be asking ourselves as coaches is something more along the lines of kind of how can I be actively inclusive? So that kind of means, you know, what's that constant? Ongoing process? Yes. Okay. You think that right now your sessions are inclusive, you feel that your practices are inclusive, and that's fantastic. But it's actually about looking at that session in front of you, and then actively always reviewing and asking, how would this look from somebody else's perspective? Actually, what could I do anyway, that would cater for a wider group of people, even if they aren't currently in my sessions? And so yeah, it's an it's a really broad question. And I think you can also take it as probably a good thing or a bad thing, but the list of how can I is a million miles long, that, you know, there are so many different things that you could do, some of them are very specific to groups of people. So you know, like, you've alluded to there, if you're coaching people with disabilities, there will be obviously certain things that need to be in place in order to enable them to access that activity. For others, it might, you know, it's more general, it's about having that general inclusive space. So I think, you know, a lot of a lot of coaches as well, you've already add to that as well, individually. Individualization, excuse me, is a key core skill of any coach, you know, we adapt sessions on the basis of, I don't know, age scale, you know, all of those things. We already we already do that. So actually, the same guiding principles exist with an inclusion. So you know, that there's probably already a step in there. So, yeah, that's a big old list.

Ben Woodruff 12:49

Yeah, yeah, I can imagine it. Again, sort of along that topic. Speaking of big lists, I'm now going to move on to ask sort of what common barriers are that people

face that should be considered, I'm going to emphasize now to the listeners that this is not an exhaustive section, the list is massive. This is just some examples that you may have come across that are prominent within of paddlesports and other sports areas.

Helena Russo 13:16

Absolutely. Yeah. So you're totally right, it's very, very complex. And everybody, even within a particular community, you know, will face different barriers for a multitude of different reasons. And we, you know, we talk a lot about in this space as well around intersectionality, which is a concept, which essentially means that if you have more than one protected characteristic, you essentially have kind of like a compounded factor of barriers. So for example, you might be a woman who exists in a black community, so you may face instances of racism, but you may also, you know, face barriers around sexism, you know, in that space as well. So, there's so much complexity to it. So, but yeah, so, you know, some of the key ones that we might face are, you know, barriers could be physical people could have, you know, you know, physical accessibility requirements, and, you know, whether that's to do with disability or age, and actually, that can then obviously lead into feeling that they won't be able to, or they're not comfortable getting into a craft, if they don't feel that there are, you know, accessible options available to them. They can be related to attitudes, not just if the person accessing the small ball. So, people already in the sport, whether that's coaches, you know, or whether it's club members or other members in that, in that session space, if people around you have very kind of exclusive attitudes that can create kind of a hostile environment that people might not want to return to or feel that they're going to be judged or, or excluded without, you know, before they've even got there. And then they can also really be related to a perceived skill or danger, especially with us being a water sport. You know, if we don't see ourselves represented in spaces where we don't feel confident, we don't I think there's a natural assumption actually, we might not belong or we can't do it. And so yeah, that they may feel that they're not going to be able to paddle successfully or that you know, any kind of, you know, special when you look at some of the things along slalom and white-water actually I think Oh, goodness, no, that's far too dangerous for me. So I think there's also a danger of kind of perceived barriers as well. And along that line as well.

Ben Woodruff 15:18

So that that, again, leads me quite nicely. It's my next question. And obviously, perceived barriers can come from both participants, coaches, carers anyone. And it's something that, like you say, is often something that can be overcome, it's just perceived as potentially too much effort to work around, and bits and pieces like that. But what, if anything, do you think stops coaches from tackling inclusion topics? Now, this could be anything from a physical disability, it could be mental impairment, it could be part of a community that is discriminated against. So like you say, the BAME communities or various religions, anything like that, what do you think stops coaches from tackling inclusion topics? If anything?

Helena Russo 16:08

Yeah, so it's a great question. I think the number one for me is fear. I think the fear of getting it wrong, the fear of trying and being branded as discriminatory, because it's not quite right. Fear of saying the wrong thing, fear of not knowing. And I think, you know, given the topics that were brought up in, you know, during the protests in the summer of last year, I think we found ourselves in a space that was quite fearful, we were being faced with a lot of accusatory questions, and I think that feeds that, you know, that, Oh, no, I don't know what to do, you know, I'm just going to leave it alone. And, you know, like I said earlier, I think there's so much that you can do, but also, sometimes one of the best things you can do is just to admit that you don't have the answers yet, you'd like to know you want to do better, and you're, you're actively trying to work in that space. And I think often fear can stop coaches, you know, myself included, you know, earlier times of my career, as a coach, you kind of back away from some of these things, you think, I don't know enough about this, I don't, I don't want to, I don't look at it, I don't want to touch it, you know, it's not for me. So I think, you know, letting the fear overcome you, and just stop you from addressing any of it can do far, far more harm than you trying and getting it wrong a couple of times. I think the second thing is, is kind of closely related it, you know, its part of it, but it's lack of knowledge. And lots of coaches are really new to some of these conversations, whether it is to do with, you know, EDI generally, or whether it's about more specific topics like gender identity, or bias or, you know, some of those more nitty gritty pieces that they feel like, they might need a bit of more, you know, support resources, education around. And the good news is, there's loads out there, you know, free resources that you can access on the internet,

books, podcasts videos, as Netflix documentaries, you know, there is an endless bucket of resources out there for people to tap into, for coaches to really, you know, grow their knowledge and understanding. And I think it's not, it's not just about learning about those, those communities or those groups of people, it's also about learning about what stops them from participating. And if coaches have an opportunity to tap into underrepresented communities, whether it's from them locally, or just people that don't come to their sessions, very often or that, you know, more generally are underrepresented in the wider sport, you know, that that in and of itself is a way for us to start to reconnect with those communities and bring them into the conversation.

Ben Woodruff 18:42

That is really useful now. Again, alluded to in the question, lovely, for me, it makes three questions really, really, really good is sort of looking at how can coaches expand their understanding of EDI. Now, this might not be every coach listening to this. Coaches are a very inclusive bunch in general, because they're normally charged to get everyone involved in their sessions. But it might not be every aspect of EDI they want to look at and might be certain aspects and it might not be for them. It might be for colleagues, peers that they feel that they could do with some support. So how can coaches expand their understanding of EDI, or start a conversation with other coaches surrounding equality, diversity and inclusion?

Helena Russo 19:31

Yeah, of course, like a, like I said, there are so many brilliant resources out there. And that and that, you know, there are whole organizations, in fact, not just resources, whole organizations that exist to tackle the very specific topic of EDI in sport. So, you know, the first one would be asking questions of the people that work for those organizations would probably be a good start, but you know, people are able to access resources from all over so you know, UK coaching or really well known organization that delivers a huge library of resources and courses. And it includes anything from, you know, coaching people with autism to, you know how you can make your coaching sessions more accessible to people with disabilities through to, you know, just over overall all-inclusive inclusion modules, which is that's inclusion far too many times in that sentence. But, you know, a couple of examples would be, you know, mind has a physical

activity and exercise toolkit to support providers and delivers, and you know, just to either deliver more inclusive sessions for people that might have mental health problems, but also for people that are using sport, physical activity and exercise to manage mental health and wellbeing so that's somewhere that you can, you can start with that that conversation. Stonewall have the makes for everybody's game, everyone's game toolkit, which focuses on LGBTQ inclusion, activity Alliance have toolkits about anything from kind of inclusive language to use around people that have disabilities all the way through to inclusive comms. So you know, there's a lot there's lots out there, it's just a case of, like you said, you know, drilling down into which pieces you want to start with, some are more complex than others. But there is absolutely plenty out there. I think something else I would probably mention is that if, and I sort of alluded to it previous is, if you have the opportunity, and you have contact with people that might come from underrepresented communities that we know, sort of, you know, we have certain disparities within the sport currently, either, you know, generally across the sporting sector, or within paddling more specifically, or you have you know, people that have protected characteristics, you might have a trans partner that you're, that comes to your sessions, or you might have a partner with a disability, if they're, they're working with you, if they are willing, and they would like to, you know, support you asking the question of, you know, what's your journey? What's been your journey into paddling? What made it easier? What were the barriers? What do you think we could do to improve, you know, that that taking that is, like, you know, from the horse's mouth, isn't it, it's that, that instant connection with those communities, and they can guide you to understand a little bit more, and spending time to understand their journey could be really insightful for coaches. The only caveat I would give to that is that we should always be careful as coaches, and as anyone who's trying to, you know, get involved in this conversation around inclusion is that we shouldn't rely on whole communities to educate us on certain topics, it should be our responsibility to do the groundwork, it should be our responsibility to, you know, dig into all the terminology and the history and, you know, understand those basics, but actually, when it comes to some of those specifics, you know, what made you What's your journey been? What, what can we do that? What can we learn from you? And you know, that could be that could be really helpful, but like I said, the groundwork the bit that comes first there are there are lots of resources out there that coaches can start to use to really improve their knowledge.

Ben Woodruff 22:57

Yeah, that's really useful. Now. We're going to we're going to sort of come to wrapping this up now because I think it's been really useful to start a conversation with coaches and started reflecting and thinking on their own sort of practice within the EDI realms as such. What I am going to say though, is if any coach wants to reflect on it more or has any questions, please feel free to get in contact with the coaching department or Helena. The contact details are all on the British Canoeing website, under the staff page, and we're more than happy to pick up a conversation and help that reflection process sort of take place. So thank you very much for today. However, I'm looking forward to discussing it more welcome episode. It's been brilliant.