

## **S2 E18 – Coaching Philosophy with Jenna Saunders**

Ricky Snodgrass 0:00

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

Lee Pooley 0:07

Hi, welcome to the British canoe awarding body coaching podcast. I'm Lee Pooley, Head of coaching for British Canoeing. And as you all might already know, this miniseries is aimed at exploring with highly experienced coaches, their thoughts and approaches to how they decide on what to coach or focus on in a particular coaching intervention. I'm really pleased today to be joined by Jenna, who is a very highly experienced and established coach. And I've had the pleasure of doing several courses with her over the years and working also as a national coach for British Canoeing. So welcome, Jenna. Now, Jenna, before we get stuck into this, getting stuck into this topic, I think it'd be really good if you can just give a bit of a background on yourself a bit background on your coaching background on how you got into coaching and paddle sport.

Jenna Saunders 1:09

Great. Okay, so. So I've been paddling for about 20 odd years now. And I got into paddling at uni just joined the university Canoe Club because it looked like fun and got into white-water kayak and playing Polo really enjoyed Polo particularly did that for quite a while. And as I sort of went through university, I ended up on the committee as president of the club and thought I probably ought to know how to coach. So I turned off to my back in the day BCU level two coach training course. And, and my career kind of went from there. It was at a centre, local to here and the centre manager just said. Give me a job. Yeah, part time freelancing. Yeah, I kind of do actually, I need a bit of extra cash. So I got my qualification and started working, just freelance coaching, and absolutely loved it. And it was a bit of a career changing moment. And then I realized that I really enjoyed that so much more than I enjoyed what I was doing. Probably politically. So when biology degree kind of is, has been ignored ever since. I've been Yeah, paddling for a living, which is pretty cool. Really. It's the best job in the world, I think.

Lee Pooley 2:39

Well, I cannot disagree there at all January's I do think it's one of the best jobs in the world. Coaching other people. And I think I think what would be really good to know is, you know, you, you made reference to obviously go into university, Polo and white-water and decide to do your British in your union level two, and then got into the sort of the freelance market work in working for a centre. So where are you now with your coaching? Because you're not you're not still at that centroid?

Jenna Saunders 3:13

No. So when I sort of fast forward a couple of years ended up managing a different centre, and did that for quite a long time. And in the process, I got my qualifications a bit, and I started running coach education courses. And somewhere along the line came canoeing and suffering. And I also realized that actually coach education and running those courses and coach development is by far, that was mostly the job my job. And I love bringing on a younger staff and helping them with a paddle in and with the coaching. And I really enjoyed the slightly more theoretical side to, to coaching into understanding the background to it. And they've been able to bring that to life a little bit. So I realized, towards the end of 2018, I'd met centre management had run its course I'd done what I could do. And I really wanted to be in a situation where I could run a lot more courses being out there rather than sat behind the desk helping other people to be running courses. So I went on my own, and I left at the end of 2018 had a bit of a break, went to America for a couple of weeks, came back with a with a clear head and started up my business, which is flying Gecko and have been doing that ever since. Which is really cool.

Lee Pooley 4:54

That's brilliant. And yeah, I think will be really useful is as we get into the sort of Jake says, you know, now you've got your own company, you've, you've got your own, probably, you've got your own clientele, what does your clientele typically look like at present?

Jenna Saunders 5:13

So a lot of my work is coach education. So running coach award, particularly call cause and dispense Pacific's in sheltered water and canoe disciplines, and some stand up as well. And there's also a chunk of coaching. And so I'll have people just come usually for very specific reasons, which I think makes me lucky in answering your next question. And, and yeah, and leadership as well. I'm incredibly lucky that at about the same time, as I started my business, British canoeing, we're recruiting for national trainers, and I was really excited to get one of those positions. And I absolutely love helping new providers and current providers in their development as well.

Lee Pooley 6:07

And British canoeing, water and body are keeping you busy, as well as the as the new chair of the of the canoe, technical group. So congratulations on that one. We're probably going to delve back into some of this coach education and leader, leader, leader education leader courses a little bit later. But what I would like to do is sort of, you know, let's, let's, let's talk about your coaching philosophy, where it is now. And whether it's matured and anything significant, anything significant along your way, have you say 20 years? Is anything significant made any particular changes to your philosophy?

Jenna Saunders 6:49

So that's a really good question. My philosophy at the moment is absolutely in flux. And I think always will be. But it's based around the way I want to project myself onto the world, and, and how I want people to see me effectively. So it's about working together with people to find solutions for them, rather than being in charge. It's about working in partnership, with kindness and with positivity, and with a lack of ego, so that people go away from a coaching session, with me feeling that they're also not that I am. And I'm really making sure that I'm a part of a long term development. So I'm, I'm just playing a small part here, and helping them on their way rather than becoming a dependent sort of coaching relationship.

Lee Pooley 7:50

Okay, so that's where you are now. And I think that's really lovely, articulate, and I knew you would be in that particular frame gender of really well articulating

where you are at the moment. And it was quite interesting to use the influx word, but it's about developing solutions together. And, you know, working as a collaborative, has it always been that way.

Jenna Saunders 8:14

And I think that has evolved. And I think that that comes with experience as much as anything, I think it's almost harder to, to feel to work like that, it's a lot easier to turn up and go, I know what I'm doing Listen to me than it is to turn up and go. I don't know what the answer is going to be today. But between us, we'll work it out. And, and so I think it comes with a certain amount of time, and therefore the confidence that comes with that. And so I think certainly when I was first coaching, I was probably instructing, not coaching. And, and yeah, I think you have to evolve, don't you have to take on new information, and you have to change your mind. And you have to have the ability to look back and go actually what I've been doing might not be the best for my students, and what kind of change

Lee Pooley 9:18

And question for you about your coaching philosophy, you know, we completely bought into agenda. But does it conflict any way of delivering British Canadian courses? Because, you know, there is a set syllabus, there is a set program. I should know I helped write them. So how does that fit with your how does that fit with your philosophy?

Jenna Saunders 9:42

There's definitely elements of the coach award that that I deliver with less enthusiasm and other elements, I think. And I try really hard not to let my own biases affect the way People are on my course. But at the same time, I think people that come to courses from me know what about, if that makes sense. And I've chosen my approach. And so yeah, it is, there is definitely conflict there. And there's definitely times when I'll present something. And I'm thinking, well, actually, this isn't what I do, necessarily. This isn't what I necessarily always want to do. But I actually think there's and there's a benefit in that honesty. And I am, I tried to be really honest with the people that are on my courses and say, Well, actually, this, this is current thinking, and current thinking changes, and it has

changed and it will change. And what I'm telling you now might be what is currently out there as best practice, but actually keep questioning, keep researching, keep reading, and keep an open mind to be willing to change your mind. And don't I don't want people to go away thinking that just because I've said something it is the gospel truth. Yes, that's

Lee Pooley 11:08

A lovely way, isn't it? You actually encouraged him to be to be a learner to be an independent learner, and to be reflective, to ask questions to challenge. Just because I'm saying this, I want you to challenge me, I don't want you to just sit there and agree with really, really positive stance, you know, and actually, it probably creates you to work harder, doesn't it on those calls?

Jenna Saunders 11:33

Yeah, very much so. And the more the more I run, the more confident I am with the syllabus and with the content. And the more I'm able to be a bit creative and to move ideas around and to ask the questions as they come up. And to introduce subjects in a slightly more creative way. With a bit of luck.

Lee Pooley 11:57

You always go with a bit of luck, because actually, it's not always a given, is it that it's going to work? And sometimes it doesn't, and you have to do something different. Yeah, well, that's a's a really nice segue into the next question I've got for you is because you know, you are, you know, you are a very highly regarded, experienced coach with a huge amount of background. And, you know, for me is really to dig into so how on earth, you know, the complexities of coaching, and the complexities that you've just outlined in your coaching philosophy? How do you decide what to coach? How do you decided once a case, what your approach is? What considerations? Do you have processes?

Jenna Saunders 12:47

So it's a great question. And, and it's one that, you know, when you mentioned it a couple of weeks ago, I've been thinking a lot about it, obviously. And I think the very simplest answer to it is, I don't know, it depends. It depends so much on

who's in front of me, and what it is they want, and why they've come to me in the first place. But I guess it's a process that starts with who's in front of me, so why, why are they here? What do they want? And what do they want from their paddling? In terms of long term development, as well as what do they want out of this session today now? And where are they at? What do they feel is need working on? And, and what do they actually want out of their paddle career? Is it you know, are they competitive and they recreation? Or do they want to be paddling at the top end of white-water canoeing the boundaries of what can they will do? Or are they really happy going out on long expeditions on sort of grade two and just want to be really confident paddling, loaded boat, for example. So it's about finding out where they're going, and then how this episode fits into that long term.

Lee Pooley 14:16

Okay, so a huge amount of information gathering initially about their requirements, let's say, you know, what their requirements or the needs are? And then, you know, what do you do then? Because if that's their needs, you need to understand the demands of the of the discipline or the demands of the requirements. So how does that how does that work now?

Jenna Saunders 14:39

So I guess from there, it's a case of having a look and just getting them getting them in a boat or been abroad and having a paddle and, and see whether that seeing if what I'm seeing matches up to what they've said and trying to work out. What is the one on the one overarching big thing that's going to make a difference? So looking at the whole paddle, or is it? Is it something technical? Or actually more likely? Is it something about the understanding of the environment? Or is it something about the psychology that's going on? Or is there an air physiology issue? So with open canoes? I do I teach a fair amount of women and open canoes, and obviously, a relatively small and light woman in a 16 foot boat, you know, there is physiological things that can be done and things that potentially can't, and it's a case of working solutions out that are going to work for that person. And we use would you say, there's such things as a silver bullet, it would be great if there wasn't that.

Lee Pooley 15:49

You allude to you know, you're trying to find out probably the most, you know, the thing that will make the biggest difference,

Jenna Saunders 15:56

A good day, you find it and it just all falls into place. And sometimes it doesn't, you know, that that's life, isn't it? And you've got two fingers in finance, what's the next big thing? Or what did it that I missed?

Lee Pooley 16:10

And I think that's really nice to hear that sort of you're very humble in, in what you're saying there is, you know, actually, this is a relationship. And some of the things sometimes are going to work really well. And other times, they're going to fall flat on their face, but that's okay. Because if you've managed a relationship, well, then could you've always managed that expectation I'm here.

Jenna Saunders 16:33

Yeah. And I definitely have conversations that go along the lines of bear with me a minute, I'm just going to try something. And this really might not work. But if it does, it might just be the thing. And yeah, and it's nice when it does work.

Lee Pooley 16:48

Yeah, so it's lovely. Yeah. And so, listen, listeners might be sat there going, Okay, yeah, with the driving along in the car, listen to this on that on the radio or sat at home. What advice can you give to other coaches, maybe less experienced coaches? Because you know, that's it. That's, that's a huge amount of experience, you've got the you draw on. So can we can we put it into probably more palatable, bite sized chunks that maybe some, what should they concentrate on? As they're coming through their coaching career?

Jenna Saunders 17:27

I think the biggest bit of advice I could give is give yourself time to think. And I think that's something that we all struggle with, because there's almost

inevitably a time constraint on what we're doing. And I'm sitting there being quiet, you feel like you're not doing your job. But actually sitting there and being quiet. And watching and listening, is the most important thing that you can do. Because you won't, you won't work out what's actually going on until you actually give yourself time to do so.

Lee Pooley 18:00

And you'll probably jump into early with actually, with probably not the right amount of information jumping into early and doing all those microcode corrections that

Jenna Saunders 18:10

they're tweaking the technical bits is really, you can you can quite often within five minutes, see 1020 technical bits and bobs that you could tweak. But actually, you can be fiddling around the edges and never actually come down to the crux of, of what's going on.

Lee Pooley 18:30

So I'm going to, I'm going to push you a little bit this on, gentlemen, so give us some practical tips of actually enabling you to get time to think what would you do on the water, if you go crumbs, I need time to think and maybe you've done you've got a lot experience gives a few practical elements that you could throw us

Jenna Saunders 18:50

So setting, setting a warm up task or challenge. And it takes time. So something that is not a really simple just go and do that. But go and experiment with go and explore what's going on with it know your edge as you cross that flow, and go and explore what the water does to you. Go and tell me what you know, what's the tightest angle or the most open angle you can get away with and still cross the flow. So that they've actually got to think they've got to play they've got to try things. And that gives you time not only time to think but time to watch time to respond to see how they respond to what the water is doing. See how they respond to what the boats doing. And see how they react when it doesn't



go how they expected it to. And, and you've got loads and loads of information there. And

Lee Pooley 19:51

Yeah, that's some really great practical sort of top tips examples that you just gave there. Jenna? So the crunch question for to me, then is all sounds really good. But you've got you know, it sounds great when you've got one person, isn't it? Your invitation is very easy when you've got one person. But you come from a freelance, freelance world that you're working for centres. And very rarely would centres do a one to one provision. So can you can you still do that? Can you still be, can you still come across that way with 4, 5, 6 people in your group,

Jenna Saunders 20:33

The more there are, the harder it gets? Definitely. And yes, to an extent, and I think, then it comes down to time, if you've got six people on one hour, then your chances of really genuinely being able to differentiate pretty small, I think. But if you've got six people in a day, or two days, then you've got far more time to be able to do that. And to get to know everybody and to, to get to understand what's going on. And so the way I'll tend to work bigger groups is theme it. But then within that theme, everybody might be working on something slightly different. So it might be well, we're going to, we're going to look at crossing the flow. But actually, some people might be doing it forward, some people might be doing it backwards, some people might be messing about with what a trim does, some people might be messing about with edge, and it just depends on what it is that they need, in that in that scenario. So I might set a fairly open big task. And then as I spot something, and as I start to understand what's going on, I might bring somebody in and change the task for them. And give them something different to play with.

Lee Pooley 21:46

There's loads of complexities isn't there, there's lots of stuff going on. And it would almost be easy, and it'd be easier just to do a standard session would. And what I mean by that is going, I'm just going to do X, Y, and Zed, and everyone's going to do exactly the same thing. But that would go completely

against your coaching philosophy, wouldn't it? You know, and, you know, for me is, you know, when you talk about, you know, the way that you deliver that actually you really come alive. And I'd imagine not delivering to your coaching philosophy, you become quite despondent in what you do.

Jenna Saunders 22:23

Yeah, yeah, definitely. And I think one of the things I love about the way things have gone more recently with British canoeing is that there is real scope for that there's, there's a real acceptance that actually, if we're going to coach Well, we've got to be individualized, what we're doing and not one, the session that I ran last week, and the same as the one the week before. And that's really the job of it. I mean, I've, and I've really fallen back in love with coaching over the last few years. Because of that, I think

Lee Pooley 23:05

That's lovely to hear. And, yeah, it's just, it's just nice that just to see your listeners can't see your face. And we're doing it, we're doing a call on a conference, but actually your face lights up when you talk about your enjoyment of coaching, and it comes across really, really powerful. And I'm interested whether we can delve into a little bit on you talked something that you talked a little bit about the technical models, you know, you sort of talked about, you know, this is what they want, and then I'm seeing whether that's actually happening on the water. Do you have technical models? Or do you do? Do you have some biases with where you go? Well, for paddling has to look like this? Or how do you approach your observation? And how do you match whether it's effective or efficient for that person?

Jenna Saunders 23:53

Yes, that's a really good question. And I think it's really easy to fall into that bias of it. It's good if it looks like me, or if it's good if it looks like x person who's excellent at this. And I think I try really hard not to do that. And I definitely have to try not to that makes sense. You know, there are definitely times when I'm kind of it's easy to say well, x isn't quite working and so it's probably why because it usually is but I think given enough time and I guess the experience as much as anything you can go past that and you can start to work out well

actually what's the person in front of me need rather than can I make this person look like me? It's can I make this person can I help them to be as good as they want to be? And in the best way that for them rather than in a in a try to copy a technical template or whatever you want to call it?

Lee Pooley 24:58

Yeah, so you So it sounds like you're, you're almost you're moving away from those instructional books or those that you see if you get online to say, this is how it should look, you're, you're moving away from those and actually going, what is it they want to be able to do? And how do I work with that person to be as efficient and as effective as possible to what they need to do? Rather than the comparison exercise. So that's, that's really, really nice to hear. So, you, you talked about a little bit about bias. Let's, let's get hold of that a little bit more than So, you know, what would you say is your, you know, what is your conscious bias, you know, when you're coaching is a setting where you just need to be aware of that you don't pounce on parents on the on the paddler occasion, and give them this awesome new bit of stuff that you're, you're totally biased towards?

Jenna Saunders 26:00

Yeah, definitely. And I think there's, we all fall into patterns. And it's very easy to do so. And I think almost the more experience you get, the easier it is to fall into those patterns, because sometimes they work. And sometimes they might work for lots of people. So, so for me, a classic one is supper, you know, I can almost always beg it to be really easy to say to almost everybody, you probably need a shorter stroke. But is it that? Or is it actually something else that's going on that's causing a stroke that might be longer than is efficient? So yeah, it's about coming back and trying to get away from doing that. And I'm not saying that I, I don't sometimes fall into doing that and fall into this. I know this works. I'm going to do it, because it worked last week and week before. But it, but I do try really hard to pull myself away from that.

Lee Pooley 27:07

Yeah, yeah. So always avoiding the go to the go to sort of approach to solving saying, isn't it? Yeah, this this solves this. This is this solves it for everyone. Yeah,

it's just being aware of that. And that's just really, you know, I really appreciate your openness and honesty to that question, Jenna, because, you know, it's something that seems quite liberating when you actually connect, you know, amplify your, what your coaching biases is, and it's not, it's not a negative, it's just being aware of them, isn't it? So, what is it? What, you know, knowing you is I do, Jenna, what are you? What are you focused on at the moment what you research in what you play in about with in terms of your coach coaching at the moment. So,

Jenna Saunders 27:58

I guess for me in a particularly since lockdown happened a year ago, and I've put a lot of time and thought into how trying to understand ecological dynamics better, and to try and to live that. And it's a bit a bit of a light bulb for me. And I think a lot of people in the community of coaching around ecological dynamics have said that, and, and it's almost as if there was something not quite right, that you didn't understand. And then suddenly somebody explains it, and you go, oh, wow, now I get it. Somebody else thinks like this. And, and so having that to frame my thinking, is making a massive difference. And I'm certainly nowhere near an expert in any way, shape, or form. I there are days when I feel like, yeah, I've kind of got this and there are days when I feel like I just I really don't got this. So it's, but it's fascinating. And again, it's given me a new lease of life. And, and it's explained a lot of, of what I always kind of knew tacitly but couldn't, couldn't explain.

Lee Pooley 29:14

It's something that we started to explore together, isn't it on the performance coach last year, and for listeners that might not know. And it doesn't mean not, not textbook not? We're not interested in textbook on these on these podcasts. Jenna is what your what's your what's your explanation of ecological, ecological dynamics? What is your explanation of it?

Jenna Saunders 29:39

So for me, the practical explanation implication of it is about understanding the person in the context of what's going on around them. So rather than trying to develop a skill is a finite thing or technique. It's about how they respond to their

environment. How they understand their environment, how they pick up the observational cues about what's going on, how they feel what's going on with the water underneath the boat during the paddle. And really getting them to physically understand what's going on, rather than technically, or intellectually understand what was going on. So I think we can get really caught up in paddle waggling, and angles and, and all this jazz. But actually, when you're out there in the middle of a rapid or in the CEO, or somewhere exciting, you've, you've got to be able to just do something, you don't have time to work it out and think about it, you just do something and you feel it and you get on with it. And that's what I'm trying to build. That's really interesting. And I'm sure that lots of people, you know, would well, canoeists and you're born you just you are, you cover a whole breadth of paddlesport. But actually, as a canoeist, you actually you're not saying about polo waggling, there's, there's more to it than that, which is, which is lovely to hear. And so really is the outcome, what is the outcome of coaching in that particular way.

So, you get people who are fluid. So rather than, than almost a robotic attempt to do what should be done, when it should be done, it's about somebody who just goes with the flow understands, but can't explain necessarily, so the body just knows what to do. And, and it just happens, and there's a joy in that movement. Rather than a right, I'm going to hit this eddy line x degrees with X amount of power on that side of my boat. And it's much more just knowing Jeff going forward.

Lee Pooley 31:50

Great, great explanation there. And I'm sure a lot of people would listening would go, great. I now understand the basis of ecological dynamics. So thanks very much, Jenna. Jenna, I really do appreciate your time. And I'm sure the listeners have really enjoyed it as much as I have this podcast about, you know, exploring with you your coaching philosophy, how you coach, and what really sort of motivates you at the moment. So, Jenna, thanks very much, much appreciated. Thank you so much. Hopefully, we can do we can do another one maybe on ecological dynamics. So thanks, everyone, for listening. Please keep an eye out for other British schooner watering Bali podcasts and speak to you soon. Take care. Thanks very much.