

S2 E20 – Coaching Philosophy with Darren Sherwood

Ricky Snodgrass 0:00

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

Lee Pooley 0:07

Hi, my name is Lee Pooley, Head of coaching at British canoeing and welcome to the British Canoeing awarding body coaching podcast, as a lot of you may already know that at the moment, what we're doing is working on a miniseries aimed to explore with highly experienced coaches their thoughts and approaches to how they decide what to coach or focus on during a coaching intervention. I'm really pleased to be joined by Darren, Darren Sherwood on the call today, and I've known Darren for a very long time now, spend a lot of time out on the sea paddling together procrastinating around coaching and also working on several projects at the same time. So welcome, Darren.

Darren Sherwood 0:53

Great. Yeah, thanks. Thanks very much for having me. Lee. It's great.

Lee Pooley 0:56

No worries, well, well, as you know, our conversations are always you know, around coaching and developing as well as you know, a lot around paddling. So this is going to be no different today down and this is about exploring, exploring coaching, but very much from a personal view of, of you as a coach, how you've developed and really about how you go about your coaching practice on the on the water. So I think what might be really useful is if you could introduce yourself a bit of background to your, your paddling career to date, and probably around the sort of clientele you're working with predominantly at the moment, because that'll help people be able to link into what you're saying later on.

Darren Sherwood 1:48

Yeah, okay, great. Well, I guess I've been paddling for quite a long time now. I sort of dipped in and out of it, in the scouts, and, and at school. And then in my

sort of teenage years, I got heavily into athletics, and then that was kind of preceded by strength sports, and I kind of left the outdoors for a little bit and spent a lot of time lifting very heavy weights for quite a while. And, and then when I went to university as a to do my teaching degree, I ended up getting back into the outdoors as that was part of the sort of PE degree. And I was like, this is fantastic. You know, I'm, I'm out I remember the outdoors now it was, it was great. And, and part of that was paddling. So I got into canoeing by virtue of the fact when I was when I was powerlifting, my, my thighs were 31 inches in circumference, which is a fairly decent waist size. So I didn't physically fit in, in any kayaks. So I sort of started an open boat by virtue of the fact that I could actually get in one. And then from there, I got into sea paddling, and stand up paddleboarding. And I have quite an I don't know if obsessive nature is the right word, but when I get into something, I really get into it and, and the sort of the strength training drops off. And, and I went sort of full, full steam into, into the outdoors. And yeah, through sort of my PE teaching and outdoor Ed at various schools, I sort of developed that, that kind of work to my coaching predominantly was with children at school. And then since setting up channel training, I do a lot of work now with apprentices. So getting into the outdoors, and now sort of a lot of a lot of coaching with sort of private individuals and clubs and things like that, that are looking for that kind of personal or performance development type coaching. So it tends to be smaller, smaller groups of people in in sort of quite exciting, same places, I still get to do some introductory sessions, which I do genuinely view as a real privilege to be able to sort of help or be part of someone's first experience of being in a canoe or on a sub or on a set on top kayak. You know, that is a real, a real privilege. And unfortunately, I still get to do that through sort of work every now and every now and then I'd like to do more of it. But yeah, it's great. So that's kind of where I am a bit of a potted history there where I am today.

Lee Pooley 4:45

Well, probably we'll probably Delve back into some of those areas that have obviously, you know, over thought may have may have shaped some of your some of your thoughts and approaches that you that you that we might see on the wall. Have we come along and observed you? But would you say that you're predominantly seeing and stand up paddleboard at the moment or the entertainers you're coaching or would you? Okay, so yeah, yeah, professionally. Yeah. So listen as long as you know, so listeners can go actually, yeah. So your base around those particular areas, although coaching is quite broad spectrum

in the types of environment and craft you're in it is usually seen in stand up paddleboard?

Darren Sherwood 5:28

Exactly, yeah. And that, again, the stand-up paddleboarding, again is very multidisciplinary, predominantly ocean. So surf downwind Open Ocean and coastal exploration kind of stuff when we're when we're talking about stand up paddleboarding. I do a little bit of white-water sup, but not professionally, just for creative way to help myself.

Lee Pooley 5:49

Yeah. And you know, based in a great place within the UK on the north coast that you've got, you've got you've got swell for your surf and you've got some fantastic places to see kayak with including Lundy and the North Devon coastline.

Darren Sherwood 6:07

Absolutely yeah, the Exmoor coast and now up north Devon coast is a bit of an undiscovered gem. Yeah, huge title races huge title range sorry, on the Bristol Channel there which creates some great races and as you say lots of swell dynamic environment. Yes, a sea kayaking paradise and stand up paddleboard paradise really.

Lee Pooley 6:30

Cool. All right. Well, thanks for setting the setting the setting the sort of scene and if we can go into what your present coaching philosophy is. So at present, what your coaching philosophy is, and maybe give us some indication how that might have shaped over the years because you know, you've already you've already spoken about your, your weightlifting career, you're, you know, very, very clearly identified physical education and fitness. And then way, you know, what you're doing now, you know, there might be some significant things that might have shaped your philosophy going on. So has your philosophy changed? Where is it at the moment and anything significant that maybe, you know, cause you to change?

Darren Sherwood 7:22

Yeah, well, that is a question, isn't it? I guess, I guess if I, obviously, I've had a philosophy probably before I was aware of it. And I guess in the sort of the early, the early part of my coaching career, if you like, I guess I struggled with when I couldn't quite understand why people weren't quite as into paddle sport as I was, you know, if you, if you want to be good, at canoeing, or whatever it is we're doing today, then you've got to put the time in, and you've got to put the effort in. And it's not always pleasant. And because I'd come from that trading background of if you want something that you put the work in, and that's it, and if you're not going to put the work in then you don't really want it. So what are we doing here, which, which works for some people, but you can imagine for other people that that didn't work at all. So over I don't know if his age or whatever is mellowed me but I've sort of come to the conclusion that for some people that just not as into it as I am or they're not into it in the same way that I am in the we are all that we are all different and a good day on the water is, is a good day on the water for me isn't necessarily the same as a good day on the water for somebody else. So I mean, that sounds like a very simple like, no brainer thing, but it did. I did struggle with that for a little while in the early part of my career as well just sort of do it that you know put the time and put the effort in and it will be okay. Whereas, whereas now my philosophy is very much about that kind of CO creation bit of if this is what you want to get out of this out of your sea kayaking or out of your stand up paddleboarding, then that's fantastic. That is that was great. The fact that you want to dedicate any time at all to this brilliant sport is its great and now I'm here to help in any way that I can. But it is very much your journey and your pathway and I'm here to kind of support and guide give some input again depending on what that what that outcome looks like. And now independence again is a big part of it. I want to try and treat every session as if this is the only session this person will ever have with a coach. And I know that's not I know that's not the case. But I try and work at it from that footing so when I'm not there tomorrow, what have I done today, that is going to kind of future proof their own performance, you know, are they going to be able to go back into those environments? Do they understand why we did what we did today and the way that we did what we did today, so they're able to take ownership of that and move that, that forward. And again, I know it's a little bit trite to say, but that is the rewarding bit of the job, when you see people having their own independent adventures. Or you, you sort of bump into them having not seen them for a few years, and they're out doing these fantastic

trips, or they've gone down the coaching pathway themselves, or, you know, you've played my new part in that in that process. So that that's the's the rewarding bit of the job.

Lee Pooley 10:42

Yeah, I really like the use of the word co creation, I think that's a lovely way of really sort of capturing your coaching philosophy at present, you know, it's about it's about almost a, you know, when we spoke in the past is almost, you know, this is a this is a privilege to be a part of your journey. And if I can assist in any way, then what better way to do it through a through for paddle sport medium. So, yeah, okay, that's lovely in working towards independence. Now, when you talk about working towards independence, so this is the only coaching session or the last coaching session, they go into to maybe to have with yourself, is there anything significant? Is that like, is that working towards independence to become safer on the water? More knowledgeable, more technically sound? What what's your what's your, what's your attitude? Or your approach to that, to that independence?

Darren Sherwood 11:43

When I get a guess it's, you know, that sort of coachy answer anyway, is it depends what they're there for in the first instance. So if they're there for performance development, then it's, it's crucial that they understand they're, or they're able to take ownership for that, that learning and for that, that progression, if they're reliant on me to say, you know, now, at the end of the day, thanks to thanks to my coaching, you're much better than I haven't, you know, that protects my ego and makes my self-esteem feel good. Protects my self-esteem, but it does nothing for that that individual, because it's entirely focused on me. So I try and work really hard on, on them at, you know, what does, what does success look like for them, in terms of based with their outcome, what they want to get out of that session, and it could be that success looks a little bit like failure, that through what we've decided on that, that they're putting themselves in a in a position, or they're putting themselves into an environment where they need to fail a few times, to be able to get some understanding of what is actually going wrong for them. So we can then put that that right, so. So that's, that's great. If that's what it looks like. So success looks like some a bit of healthy failure initially, well, then that's great. And every time we fail, or it doesn't quite

go to plan, well, then that should be seen as a as a positive. And they're able to identify that so in their own learning, if they I did it, whatever our measure is they capsize or swim or something in the surf, then then that all that tells them is they're in the right place, doing the right things to develop their own performance. Rather than, you know, that was something to be avoided. And I worked really hard in my coaching session to avoid putting them into a situation where they might fail, because again, I want them at the end of the day to sound a great coach, again, that does nothing but you know, inflate my ego.

Lee Pooley 13:51

Yeah, no, that's a's a really nice way of actually approaching it, isn't it? So you're, you're almost, you're almost putting in your constraints to actually identify to them that actually, you know, that failure isn't that failure isn't actually a dirty word. Is it? Yeah, this is Yeah. And I think this is, this is where some Coaching has come from in the past, or maybe our own humanistic, humanistic sort of approach to things, isn't it that actually, failure is seen as a, as a as something that's wrong. But actually, you're suggesting that actually failure is a really important phase of the learning?

Darren Sherwood 14:37

Absolutely. And again, I would, I would, I would invite anyone to reflect on any element of their life that has any worth. Whether that's a relationship or a particular skill or a talent or anything that they've got, anything that they hold with any real worth or value is almost certainly built on a foundation of failure. For sure, you know, And so why should paddle sport be any, be any different, you know, if we look at our own personal relationship with friends, you know, we've friends come and go, we've had, you know, good times, or bad times, and all of that kind of stuff. But, you know, the friends that that sort of stick with us are built on getting it wrong a few times. So why should? Why should paddle sport be any different at all to anything else that has any value or, or worth in our life?

Lee Pooley 15:28

So I think what will be interested in what's really interesting about this, and you know, is that we're already starting to probably go into, you know, what your

approaches and considerations are, aren't they for, for your coaching interventions? So how do you? How do you approach the subject of all of that with a with a client or you know, that, you know, we're, you know, I'm going to put you in situations, you know, as times throughout today, you are going to find it difficult, or you are not going to be successful? How do you? How do you bring that into your coaching session?

Darren Sherwood 16:11

Well, I guess it, it starts, it comes back to that co creation, you know, if, if they don't want to be put in those situations, then obviously, I don't know, I might be able to see that, that for that. That performance development that might be the best thing for them for their personal development. That's the worst thing for them. So, again, it's just that open and frank conversation around about, you know, what, what are your motivations here? What, why are you here? Because if you're, if you're really motivated, then, you know, again, we can relate this back to other areas of our life company, if we're really motivated to do something, then we can put up with a bit of discomfort or putting ourselves in those uncomfortable situations or those uncomfortable positions, if it means that much to us. If it doesn't, then, then let's not do it, you know, where there's enough things in the world that to make us miserable, and paddling shouldn't be one of them. So let's, let's not do those bits and pieces. Initially, and again, there's maybe there's a bit of trust or a bit of rapport building to go to so you know, some easy wins To start with, make them feel comfortable. And then just how about we go over here and have a look at some of have a look at some of these things? And see And see what they said, but again, it's trying to, again, I know it's a bit of a cheesy thing to say is that it's not just listening to what they're saying is hearing what the person that you're working with is saying. So it, it really does, it sounds really magnanimous, and all of that kind of stuff. But it really doesn't matter what I think, or what I want to get out of the day is what that person wants to get out of their day. So I might think it'd be great idea to go over into those gullies and, you know, mess around in that white water or do something like that. But, but if I'm leading that session, and if I'm pulling that person into there, where they don't want to go, then that that's potentially a negative learning experience, which will mean they might not come back to me, but might not go paddling again.

Lee Pooley 18:25

Yeah, yes, yeah true.

Darren Sherwood 18:26

That's the ultimate failure.

Lee Pooley 18:29

Yeah. So already we, you know, so. So all I'm getting from this is, it's very much about the individuals, the or the individual individuals that, that that are engaging with yourself. It's understand that and a lot better. And you, you talked about personal development and increase in performance? So would you start to establish that through early conversations, which you would they fall in those particular areas? Or is it is it a combination of both?

Darren Sherwood 19:06

Yeah, it's a bit of both. I mean, I, I typically, you know, I like to speak to people before I, for a coach, and I just asked them a little question for them to or put it in an email from a third person perspective, and say, if you were to see me coaching somebody else, what would you want to see? What would you want to hear? And what would you want to feel if you had that kind of third person? Perspective? You know, it's a bit of a cheery one to answer on the spot, which is why I put it in an email or set it up there. And then I would say, where is that coaching? Session happening? You know, is it is it happening in a tide race? Is it happening in amongst the rocks? Is it happening on a surf beach? Is it happening in a really sheltered harbour? You know, where is that? Where is that happening? And then I like to receive that information back. And that little that little sort of third party third person perspective, they sort of see that that session going on. Tells me an awful lot about that. That person and their goals. Yeah, obviously it's framed in there, in what they want to get out of that that session. But you know, do they? Do they want to see someone having lots of fun and smiling? I'd like to think so. Did they want to hear some questions being asked? Did they someone that likes to? Are they seeing me as the coach doing lots of demonstration? There? Is it is the environment? Are they feeling like they're they've got ownership over that, that session? Could they? Could they go into conditions and out of conditions of their own free will? Or is it committed? Or what? Yeah, all of those kinds of different sort of elements of a session, they're able to kind of put

together that perfect session, then there might have to try and get as close to that as they can. But it's quite an interesting, and I've had I say success, it seems to seem to land quite well with people to be able to sort of think about right, yeah, if I was sat on that beach, what would I see what would I hear that would make me go great, can't wait for my session with Darren tomorrow, or whenever it's happening.

Lee Pooley 21:24

So actually, by doing all that, by doing all that pre work, I'm guessing that you don't have a whole filing system or, or a shelf system that you just pull something off the shelf and go, that will do for today, you're actually designing each time that you go out onto or any occasion dimension, it starts from a new design. So you're not actually just pull in, you know, already established session that you're really confident you can run the stand on your head. This is every session is fresh.

Darren Sherwood 22:03

Yeah, I mean, I would say I do. I do that sometimes. But again, that's, that's the distinction to draw between when am I coaching? When am I doing something else? So I do a bit of volunteering by my local club, if I take six or eight people out in the in the surf, you know, sea kayak surfing or something, well, then I can't individualize that coaching session, I'm going to have to kind of rely a little bit on some heuristics talk a little bit broader about, here are some themes and concepts that we can explore. And I will do my very best to get round and do some individualization with them. But essentially, we're in the serve for two hours. And there's a lot going on. There's the safety element, all of that kind of stuff. Now, I wouldn't say to me, that I would be coaching in that instance, but in answer to your question, if I'm working with someone wants a one or in sort of that one to two, setting, then I don't go I don't have a formulaic kind of approach. In that case, we go here, and where, where do we do this. And that, that took a little while to get comfortable with as well, as someone who comes from a teaching background, where it's all about schemes, or work and lesson plans, and all of that kind of stuff, to, to not be able to go right, nought minutes to five minutes is a warm up, you know, five minutes to 10 minutes is introduced this skill and then that I had again, it felt hard, it felt like I was doing a disservice to the people I was working with, if I wasn't if I wasn't doing that planning, but

for me, now I'm more comfortable with that I'd feel more uncomfortable going in with a structured session plan into that kind of coaching. But I do my preparation, if you like, through reading, you know, reading, I read books and research papers, and I try things out and I do my experiment with different ideas and approaches. And I think about different things. So that that's my preparation for those sessions now. So the time that was spent writing session plans to scheme to work and now spent, you know, reading and speaking to other coaches and broadening my ideas and knowledge and approach to the different situations.

Lee Pooley 24:33

So that's really nice to hear. So you know, you it's not like you've ditched the planning. You're planning just looks different. Rather than establishing, you know, it's those harrowing words that you just say the schemes of work and lesson plan from my days of teaching. You are replaced with really considering what you're hearing and what you are seeing through your interactions with The learner, and then, you know, sourcing, more research, ways of working etc. Yeah.

Darren Sherwood 25:08

I've got to say, you know, for anyone that's maybe new to coaching and listening to this, it goes wrong. Still, you know, it definitely, doesn't it, you know, I'd like to say wouldn't be a catastrophe, but there's certainly things that I, I try to do with my learner's that don't, that don't land in the way that I'd anticipated them to, they would learn or they would have landed. So I still, I still get it wrong, there's definitely there isn't a some kind of magic threshold that you cross, and then you no longer make any mistakes. I could, I could certainly engineer situations where I could take people to certain locations, do certain things with them, because of the location and the environment, everyone's going to have a good time there. But again, I would say that isn't that that coaching bit. And if I'm saying it's okay for my learners to fail, in order to progress, then then it has to be all right for, for me as a coach to fail now, and then in order for me to progress as well. Not always an easy not always something to be, you can feel pretty uncomfortable, particularly as a professional coach, if someone's paying you money to do that. So it's it is definitely a conflict between giving them what they want, and, and all of that kind of kind of stuff, do myself out some work here?

Lee Pooley 26:35

I don't think I say, I don't think so. It's quite interesting, though, isn't it? because traditionally, you don't have to go back to many years, that probably in the public eye, of someone that was going to engage with coaches, were coming to be told what to do by an expert, that is infallible than actually can walk on water? You it's almost. So have you seen Have you seen? Have you seen? Is that? Is that is people, people still coming to you with that thought process? Or do you? Do you see a difference in how people might be now engaging with coaching?

Darren Sherwood 27:24

Good, good question. Again, I think it depends on their prior experience. If people have had that kind of coaching, that that is all about protecting that kind of self-esteem, you have lots of technical information, put the paddle here, put your body here, paddle at this speed, and that speed and all of that kind of stuff and, and had some success, then then all the all they want from me is a is a replication of that, maybe in a different environment or a different part of the contrary to what they did, I find people that that maybe haven't had been exposed to that kind of coaching before are far more engaged in, in the session on a on an individual level. And the language is very different, you know, going back, five, six years ago, like rotation was the big, you'd people would turn up and they'd say, I've, I've had some coaching, yeah, I've got a, I've really got to work on my rotation, you know, and you and you go or what, why? Because it you know, I'm not rotating, and I've got it, I've just got to do more rotating. And that'll be that'll solve all of my problems. And, and they had a really sort of key, the focus of whatever coaching is for has been very, very technical, you know, error correct away. And maybe they haven't been able to reproduce that, whatever that technique, they will be able to do so. So in their mind, they could never going to achieve what they want to achieve because they're the person coaching them was six foot three, and you know, a rugby player and they're five foot nine, five foot one and about a ballet dancer or something. I don't know that. That's not to say we can't do things. But we are products of our experience and our leavers and all of those kinds of things. We're not we aren't all the same. So I think the way that you're certainly coaching is going now, in the last sort of few years, a science to see people come with more individual. I want to develop but it's not it's not suddenly technical. They understand that in order for them to thrive in that environment. They need to develop their understanding around

what's actually happening there, or maybe there is some safety element to, to it, you know, they don't feel safe when they're out, when we're out as a couple or as a group or whatever we, you know, they want to develop that. And then once that safety is in place, then they can develop their, their performance, because they're able to take ownership of that, that journey or whatever.

Lee Pooley 30:24

That's, that's really that, you know, it's Yeah, as always, I really enjoy, you know, talking to you about coaching, and we can go off in lots of different directions. But, you know, sometimes I just got to remember, we there are listeners here, and I'm thinking nice, right? Yeah. So help me to sort of delve into certain subjects and apologies for anyone listening, thinking, he's got his own, you've got his own agenda, I haven't. And so what I'd like to be able to do your turn your, your highly respected. And you know, you are, you are a coach developer, as well, this is not just about coaching, you develop coaches, and you know, you have a lot of people have engaged with you with you and your delivery style, etc. And so before we start bringing this sort of this, this podcast to a close, I'd like you to consider your journey as a coach, and what advice, top tips you would give to coaches that are relatively new, relatively novice come in to coach it? So they wouldn't make the same mistakes as you did? Or should they concentrate on specific areas? So, you know, I know you I know, you knew that this question was not coming up, but I thought I'd spring it on you. Yeah,

Darren Sherwood 31:45

Yeah, thanks Lee. I guess, I guess I would, sort of the only piece of advice I would give to a new coach is, is don't, don't take anything at face value, you know, question it. And, and, and sort of explore it and make it your own with a lot of these things. They are theories. You know, and there's things like, we were talking about earlier, ecological dynamics, and, or sort of more cognitive approach to, like, skill acquisition, but they're both theories, that we can't look inside of someone's brain and go, Ah, that's exactly how this is, this is happening. So I'd say to any new coaches, is try things out and, and come to some understanding of, of your own in terms of what these things are, they are just ideas or theories are whatever you want to, or you want to do so. So make them your own. If they don't work for you, then maybe don't dismiss them straight out of hand, maybe find out a little bit more information until you can

make a really sort of informed decision of like, No, I do subscribe to this, this way of thinking or this, this, this approach. And, and that's, that's okay. I guess the other thing would be embrace the chaos as well, you know, code coaching is, is really hard. Because people are people are complex, you know, again, and like I said earlier, you know, anything that has any value in our life, I don't mean material value, and anything with any real value in our life is, is complex and messy and goes up and goes down. So coaching is, is the same as well, there isn't a formula for coaching, if you think I found the formula for coaching, that it's probably time to go get some CPD or reading different books or, or something like that. So yeah, embrace the chaos, it's going to go, it's going to go wrong sometimes. And that's okay. If it is going wrong, it means you're trying things out. And that's the only way we can progress our sport forward. And the only way we can progress coaching is people trying stuff and getting it wrong a few times before they before they get it right. So yeah, don't embrace the chaos, I guess is what I'm saying with the coaching.

Lee Pooley 34:12

I think the nice thing that comes across really clearly Darren is that actually you're embracing the complexities, you have embraced the complexities of coaching, but by no means are you trying to simplify them, you're accepting the complexities. And you are working with that person to see an appropriate way that's, that's, that's, that's suited to them. So I think that comes across really clearly. But please tell me if I've got that wrong. But yeah, you're almost saying it yet. Coaching is complex is okay, that is complex. And you work with the individual to look for solutions.

Darren Sherwood 34:58

Absolutely. Yeah, and Share the share that share that thought process with the people that you that you're coaching, you know, we're not, we're not these infallible people on a, on a pedestal with all of the answers, you know, I may have, I may have, you know, had some experiences some coaching, but if I'm working with someone for the first time, I have zero experience of working with that person. So I'm kind of starting from, from a kind of a baseline there. Now, you know, through my experience, I might be able to flip a few pages at a time and skim read a few bits and pieces. But essentially, it is a novel situation that I'm in with that person in that that environment every time I canoe clubs are just

the best place to go and to go and sort of cut your teeth for one of a better word. And whether you're fresh into coaching, or whether you're been coaching for years and years and years to go back to your local Canoe Club. And sort of take one or two or three people with no other with no other agenda than just let's let me help you achieve some of your paddling goals or aspirations or something like that is great and you learn loads, absolutely. Loads, you know, you can try all those bits out in a really safe and environment. So yeah.

Lee Pooley 36:25

Cool. Well, Darren, thanks so much again, for you for your time.

Darren Sherwood 36:30

No problem.

Lee Pooley 36:30

So I hope I hope that you know, in in the next couple of months you'll be you'll be keen to do another podcast with me and explore another subject in depth but for sure, thanks very much. And thanks very much for everyone for listening. And for more updates on other coaching podcasts, please visit the British Canoeing awarding body website. Take care.