

S2 E22 – Black History Month with Noah Dembele and Chris Brain

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 this week's edition of the British canoeing awarding body coaching podcast. We've got a really, really good discussion going on today. I'm not going to spoil it too much, but we're going to talk around Black History Month and the topic proud to be as part of our hashtag we paddle together campaign. So I'm really pleased to have with me Helena, Helena Russo, and two special guests. I'll let her introduce.

Helena Russo 0:33

Thanks, Ben. And welcome to the podcast Chris Bryan and Noah Dembele. Chris is a puddle sport coach, who's very experienced lots of time out on the water coaching and instructing. And we've got Noah den Bella with us who is a programme athlete training currently down at home Pierpont in Nottingham. So thank you so much to both of you for joining us today. As Chris said, this month is Black History Month. And we're really delighted to have you here today to talk about your experiences and some of the topics that are important to you. So as Ben introduced the theme this month is proud to be so crystal start with you. What does proud to be mean for you, not just for Black History Month, but for the rest of the year to what are you proud to be?

Chris Brain 1:16

Well, I'm really proud to be a part of a really proud to be a coach and be able to pass on skills and knowledge to, to the people that I'm working with. And also really proud to be able to be involved in something like this as well and to speak as a representative of paddle sports. And to be involved in the in the conversation. So nice. I'm very proud. Thank you.

Helena Russo 1:40

Thanks, Chris. And Noah, what about you what are you proud to be?

Noah Dembele 1:45

I say, well, yeah, I'm really proud to be in the position that I am. Like, obviously, I've worked very hard for it. But yeah, I say I'm one of the I think I'm the only sort of mixed race black person. In I think all of the programmes so yeah, pretty, pretty chuffed stuff. Yeah. Started to make them in, in in the current situation. And, yeah,

Helena Russo 2:24

No, that's fine. Thanks, Noah. And I think we've got two quite different perspectives here because Chris, you're someone who's coached for a long time and no way have you obviously spent a long time being coached. So I'm really looking forward to kind of understanding your experiences from either side of the tape as it were. But Chris, will, we'll start with you again. But for someone who is a coach, and has got a lot of experience in this space, what makes a good coach, in your opinion, as a as a kind of broad overview, what are some of the kind of key attributes that you associate with being a good coach.

Chris Brain 2:55

So I think for me, the really important thing is building the relationship. So the relationship is, I think it's just the foundation, it's the heart of any coaching that you're going to be doing, whether that's a real short term, like a one off kind of coaching session, or if it's a long term thing, just getting to know the people that you're working with, I think is just super, super important. I feel like you can't do any, any good work on or off the water without having some kind of relationship with them. And it doesn't necessarily need to be like a laughing, joking kind of, kind of relationship. It could be, you know, very professional, very formal one. But I think knowing the, knowing the people that you're working with is really, really important. And I think backed up with like experience and knowledge of the sport and what it is you're talking about. A good set of eyes and ears as a coach as well, I think is super important to

Helena Russo 3:49

Amazing. Thanks, Chris. And Noah from, like you said, like I said previously, if someone who's been in a coached environment for a really long time, is that stuff that resonates for you? Are there different elements that make a good coach on your yet?

Noah Dembele 4:00

No, I agree with what Chris has to say. I think it's I think one of the things I appreciate most about good coaches were their ability to understand you. And sort of Yeah, willingness to sort of listen to you know what you've got to say. And yeah, for me, like I do talk a lot of rubbish sometimes and stuff like that, but it's just, it's nice when you know that they don't shut you down. And, you know, yeah, as I said, they're willing to listen. And yeah, so for example, if I ever had a problem and stuff like that, is really, really nice to have a coach that you could, you know, discuss the problems with and from, from that discussion sort of come up with potential solutions to that problem. And I say a key thing for me, sort of within you have been in sort of the elite sort of side of things is having a trust for the coach. So, Justin that, you know, they've got your best intentions in mind and stuff like that. So yeah. Me, coach.

Helena Russo 5:13

Thanks now. And from your perspective, is that something that you've, you know, trust is something that I think a lot of people think builds over time and your experience? Is that does that take time for you? Or is that something that actually you, if you can have that rapport with someone that actually it can come quite naturally and it can come quite quickly? Or do you think it's a time thing and investment thing?

Noah Dembele 5:33

Um, yeah, I guess yes. You definitely have to build up a relationship and stuff like that. Yeah. Yeah, do the rapport build relationship and I think you have to trust and develop from that. Right.

Helena Russo 5:51

And I British canoeing we talk a lot about individualization, especially in coaching and treating the individual as an individual looking at their needs and ambitions within the coaching space and that person centred approach? Is this something that you've either used or experienced yourself? And how does that play out for you in creating a more inclusive coaching environment? So no, start with you? How does that kind of person centred approach impact on you as a as an athlete?

Noah Dembele 6:19

Um, I think I know so yeah. I think, yeah, as an approach, I think that's really, really good one to go by. I think everyone's different. Everyone has different sets of needs or ways in which they want to work. So yeah, like if your coach is able to sort of adapt to who you are as a person, and sort of make the relationships work and stuff like that, I think it really helps to bring the best out of yourself. And also the coach as well. Yeah.

Helena Russo 6:54

Okay, thank you. And Chris is a coach. Does individualization and person centred approaches feature heavily with what you do? I would hope that it would that's a little bit of a setup question. But for you, what are the impacts on either yourself or those that you are coaching or deliver into?

Chris Brain 7:09

Yeah, I'd really like to think that it does, I'm sure if you come in a coaching session with me, I'd feel like it was about what you wanted to do and, and you felt very much like an individual on the on the, the coaching session. What's interesting, I suppose for me is that that's not what I've always done. I think it's what I've done for quite some time now. But I remember back to when I got started. And I think it was still building great relationships with people and still interacting really well. But essentially, my coaching was, was the same regardless of who you were, and what your aspirations were, everybody got the same kind of product, so to speak. And we're talking quite historically. Now that's not that's not a recent thing. But once I realised how important and how beneficial it could be to go with a more individualised approach and to really, to really tailor it to what people want and need. I think you just see, you see so many benefits from

that people really loving what you're doing, wanting to do more of it, once they go out paddling and develop their skills when you're not there as well. And I think you really get that from that individualised approach as opposed to, as I say, when I say historically, I'm talking 20 years ago or so. Just kind of doing the same thing, regardless of who you were.

Helena Russo 8:26

I think we all do that, don't we? When we first start out as coaches, I'm coaching a couple of different sports. And when you first start out is that like nerve racking, like you've got your little play for Coventry? And you just kind of read off of that, and that's you hope for the best after? Yeah.

Chris Brain 8:39

I think in doing that, sure. And, and you know, they'll certainly be times where maybe I'll step back and step briefly for with purpose and for a reason. But the vast majority of what I'm trying to do, I'd say, I'd say virtually all what I do is, is intending to be individualised and person centred, for sure.

Helena Russo 8:58

I think as well, because we're an activity in a sport that, you know, we're not necessarily present in schools, for example, and we might have a lot more adults come to us for their first experience of participating in that example, you do want people to feel like they can come back that that's an experience that's been tailored to where they sit currently within their experience and you without that inclusive, kind of welcoming space and, and that really individually approach, you know, it's obviously only for the best. So that's great to hear from both of you. And the next question is that I've got is around kind of representation across the organisation and across a sport but obviously within a coaching context here and now I'm going to come to you first with this question because I think you're someone who's been very vocal within the organisation around this. And we do get challenged quite a bit on representation, whether it's in the imagery or the footage or within the organisation, for example. So my question is, is the representation of black communities in poplin, something that you feel needs improving? And how would you like to see that done in the coaching, can you Unity or in your case now where the athlete community?

Noah Dembele 10:04

Um, yeah, well, I do think it is something that is quite important. I don't know, it's just, yeah. The whole idea of like role models and stuff like that, if, if you were to see someone, you know, similar, similar background of you, you know, doing something amazing and stuff like that that's maybe going to put an idea and shift and you know, maybe, you know, that could be me as well. So, yeah, I Yeah. Like, I think I'd hope for more representation, just, yeah, just to allow so yeah, people from different backgrounds here to, to see that. Yeah, it's possible.

Helena Russo 10:51

And you talk, you talked a little bit there about role models, is that one of the kind of tools you think is best for improving representation? Because we obviously we, you know, you I would consider you a role model in this space. Is that something that you would like to see more of?

Noah Dembele 11:07

Yeah. 100%? Like, it's quite simple. So when? I say,

Helena Russo 11:15

Is there anything? Is there anything else besides role modelling that you'd like to see? I mean, you're obviously involved with, you know, programmes I call well to, for example, is it more about having conversations and sort of broaching some of those topics as well? Or education? Is there anything else that you'd like to see to help broach that topic?

Noah Dembele 11:32

I need a minute to think about it if that's okay.

Helena Russo 11:34

Okay, well, we'll go to Chris, and we'll come back, no problem. So Chris, again, same kind of question to you is, is representations of black communities in part, then something that you feel needs improving? And if so, you know, how would you like to see this done, you know, kind of through the coaching community?

Chris Brain 11:51

So it's really interesting, actually, and I suppose my, my thoughts on that can sometimes go back and forth a little bit and say, something we really need to, to do something about and then and then other times, I think, but the pattern communities is typically so welcoming and inclusive, I do we need to do something about it. So So I, I sometimes find myself a bit conflicted with whether or not we, we need to make an intentional change in the representation. But I think back to, to when I was getting started in Palawan, and, you know, I was 1516. And, you know, that's, that's a difficult age, I think for a lot of young people. And it's, it's a challenge to know who you are and what you're doing. And at that point, you know, I found I found a site paddling community. And it was just, it was just incredible. It's I, it was just becoming connected to a load of people that all of a sudden, were really important to me, and I really loved being around. But it wasn't a particularly diverse community. But, but that didn't matter. It was just yeah, these are the people I want to hang around. And that was, that was really cool. So at the time, it didn't feel like a big issue. But I remember I used to work at a climbing wall. And they had a stack of magazines and a sit on reception and read the magazines. And I remember getting through these magazines, and I, I pulled this magazine out, and on the front of it was it was a guy called Trevor Messiah, black, I'm a big long dreadlocks hanging down his back, and he's hanging off this wall. And I just looked at it and I thought, I've never seen that before. And that that was just really, really powerful to think, not only had I never seen a black climber on a on a climbing magazine, I just I just never realised that it might have that kind of effect on me. So I thought it was it was a real turning point where I thought I don't I don't necessarily see much that a huge amount of diversity at this is at the time involved in paddle sport. But the question was, like, you know, is that is that important? And then it was only maybe a month ago that, you know, I'm down in Nottingham, and I rock up to the wash. And I see this, this athlete, this person on the water, Noah, I'm just like, I'm just like, who's that guy? Yes. Like this is this is amazing, you know, and I think I think the sort of visual representation of the sport and who's included in it who's involved might be might be changing, you know that and I've got I've got a young niece who's growing up, I'd love to take a paddling and I'd either go for

her to potentially be able to see some role models that may be reflect who, who she would see herself being as an individual. And seeing people like Noah on the water is just is just amazing. So I am a little bit conflicted with the answer, but I think it I think is important for people to see a diverse range of people that may reflect who they feel like they are involved in Paddling.

Helena Russo 14:48

I think you've summarised that so nicely, Chris, I think it's almost that content of, you know, yes, representation is important for some and possibly others. Feel that they are well represented. And that's fine. And I think we just should always be cognizant that there are some groups that maybe are just generally underrepresented. And that's not a bad thing to make sure that they're included involved in that. Because as you said, the impact could be so significant. And so No, we'll come back to you, you know, in terms of diverse representation, and is there anything else that you'd like to see done? Is there a way that we could go about increasing representation and what the impact has been for you?

Noah Dembele 15:28

I would put more of an emphasis on sort of like a welcoming a welcoming environment. So it's like, yeah, I think obviously, having more representation makes people feel potentially feel maybe more comfortable to be involved and stuff like that. But yeah, I think, I think I think I would want to see the purple one, like, I've always found like, I've always been, like, the odd one out, if that makes sense, when it when it comes to, to be in in the sport and stuff like that. And it's made me feel like a little bit awkward at times, and not really quite known how I've been and stuff like that such like, I would like I would want to see maybe, I don't know what it would look like. But yeah, essentially a bit more of a diverse privacy will obviously help with that. But yeah, just I don't know, like, maybe a little bit more done just to make people who may not be stainless, you know, the majority thought or a little bit more welcomed. Bit more part of the community. So then you can kind of just forget about the whole year. Yeah, not being quite, you know, being different and stuff like that. So

Helena Russo 16:57

There's so much it's almost like that, maybe some of that culture, maybe in some of that, that area to kind of, you know, improve on that. So that everyone, including those that come from the back communities are welcome in that space. That's great. Thanks, now.

Ben Woodruff 17:10

Yeah, thank you both you this is really interesting, sort of sat here, listening to you talking about it. And I think one thing, I will emphasise, I can imagine all three of you agrees. It's okay not to have the right answer immediately. It's okay to turn around and say, Actually, I don't know. Let me find out. Let me improve my knowledge and my experience of it, and then I'll come back to you. It's a lot better to say that than try and come up with an answer, especially when we're dealing with trying to create an inclusive setting, because sometimes just giving any answer may exclude people, so you need time to potentially think about it. And there's, there's nothing wrong with that, as a coach to actually turn around and say, I don't know, coaches aren't the font of all knowledge. And actually, sometimes they can say, I don't know, I'll find out and sort of bait based on that, and what we've just been discussing, I'd like sort of both you to give me a little bit of advice you'd give to a coach, to allow them to be more inclusive to have a more inclusive environment. So I'll go to Chris first, obviously, from a coaching perspective, and then I'll come to Noah from an athlete perspective, based on his experiences being coached, what advice creates, would you give a coach to help them be more inclusive and opening and potentially create more role models like Noah moving forward?

Chris Brain 18:33

I think I think the important thing would be to ask them questions to the people that you're coaching to find out what it is that they that they want, find out what it is, it's important to them, maybe what's driving them engaging in in the sport and try and listen to listen to those answers. It could be something really different that maybe you've never even ever done before. It could be that maybe there's some barriers, potentially that that that you've never seen present before, you wouldn't know maybe, you know, there's a there's an issue with something like water confidence or swimming ability or something like that. And so I think just finding out and asking those questions, I think is a really important starting point. And of course, listening to the answers.

Ben Woodruff 19:16

Yeah, and I think that's a really important thing that we've got to remember as coaches is actually you've got to listen to the answers, and sometimes they might be answers you don't like and are uncomfortable conversations to have and, and answers that potentially don't want to hear. But you've still got to take them on board and act upon them. And I think that is the mark of a great coach is the ability to take on much criticisms and adjust to that so Noah, I'll come to you now what advice would you give to a coach to make the environment more inclusive?

Noah Dembele 19:50

Yeah, well, as Chris said, definitely put in an effort to get to know the person the individual and stuff like that. I think that's really key and yeah, getting a yes. Just getting a grasp of who that person is. And then yeah, how far from that point? Yeah, building that relationship? And sort of keeping things positive? Keeping things? Yeah. Going in the right direction?

Ben Woodruff 20:20

Yeah, no, thank you very much. Thank you for that now, it's sort of it's just really interesting. Hearing you to discuss these things, I think it'd be really, really helpful for our coaching workforce to start having more of these conversations with themselves with people around them. And almost reflecting on their practice moving forward.

Helena Russo 20:41

Leading off the back of this question, this is a little bit of a kind of a. Chris, you've obviously described quite positive experiences within your coaching, which is absolutely fantastic. And I think so this might be something that you know, possibly is not with you is not something you've experienced, but I'm going to, I'm going to ask it anyway. So in your experiences, or experiences, maybe of people that you've worked with, or coach, you know, what do you understand that makes accessing paddling more difficult? And are there is there anything that coaches can do to address that, and obviously, with it being black history

month, it'd be nice to understand if there are any examples that you might have heard of that, that might have happened to the black communities or people that you've worked with in that space.

Chris Brain 21:24

So I think like you said, there, my, my experience has been overwhelmingly positive. And I think that's, that's really important to hold that any, any sort of big challenges or issues are usually in the absolute minority, which I think is, is one of the things that I think is really great about patterns that really anybody if they want to can do it. I do think over the years, I've sort of had an experience issues where coaches have had challenges with people, maybe not being able to access the water, or then restricting them accessing the water because, for example, they might be not able to swim. Or there's, there's sometimes issues with things like helmets being mandatory, maybe an Activity Centre. And I know this might sound really, really obvious here, but you know, sometimes people's hair, you know, if it's in, if it's in braids, or, you know, I've got dreadlocks, they're, they're not as big as they used to be there before now, but you know, that sort of thing can be hard to, to get underneath the helmet. And if, and if you say, for example, you know, helmets are mandatory, and then you know, somebody who's just had their head and at the weekend or whatever, can't get it underneath the helmet. Is that is that a reason then that they can't access the water, you know, they can't get out and do the activity and, and I have unfortunately seen that a couple of times. Been a real problem for people getting out in the water and being told that they can't go because helmets are mandatory. And if you can't fit one of our helmets on with your hair, then you can, you can paddle. And as I say that, that is in the absolute minority, but it's just worthwhile. I think coaches and activity centres and providers considering, you know, for example, with helmets is, and is it mandatory? If somebody can't swim? Is there is there a way around that? If, if somebody maybe is wearing a headscarf or a hijab or something like that, is that is that a reason that they can't, they can't take part in in paddle squat. I would have thought that the vast majority of coaches would work around that but unfortunately, are isolated incidents where people say that it will be a problem if you're in the water, wearing a you know, a headscarf or something like that. And, and I'm sure we can typically work around that. But unfortunately, there are some isolated incidents where people make that a real problem.

Helena Russo 23:52

Yeah. And it's that blanket approach, isn't it? Like I say, as coaches we're used to finding solutions to even the most random of problems and hopefully, you know hairstyles being one of those examples that you would look to what to work around and ensure that that's an accessible activity. So yeah, thanks for sharing that. So I'm nowhere in your experience, what have the barriers been for maybe fellow athletes that you're aware of within your communities or paddlers that you've been with a club, for example, in terms of access in Parkland, and is there anything that you feel coaches can do to help combat that?

Noah Dembele 24:27

Okay, well from like a personal perspective, so when I think it was 2017 I was basically say 2016 years after my sort of junior year, so why didn't quite well and middle and stuff like that? However, I was, I was coming I was doing my A Levels and I, oh, yeah, I had to basically stay down in London and sort of Yeah, I was. Yeah, basically the only half So within the area and stuff like that so I had to train by myself and we sort of yeah we got we got like new management in and they made it quite difficult to like what they didn't really want to allow so people to get on the war and do training and go by themselves and so yeah and so what happened there with me was that not only that I was not only was by myself but I'm struggling to get access on the wall to which you just had the knock on effects of yet not really being able to train properly and yeah, say had had a bit of an effects yeah so over the next few years like obviously trying to get myself back into competitive conditions stuff like that so I'd say yeah, trying to reduce the barriers of not being able to paddle basically would be key and yes, just do as much as you can to ensure that yeah, that there is access and that there is support

Helena Russo 26:18

and you mentioned previously as well about how important it is to work very closely with an athlete and understand their needs and possibly also their barriers and some of the problems that they might face in accessing that so that really brings that to life. Thanks Noah. So final question for you both and Chris you starred in our we partner together video and actually know where you were also, you know, in the background that in one of our shots so both our film stars here today, but obviously during National inclusion week we land we launched

our hashtag we partner together initiative. And in recent months, we've been focusing very heavily on our equality, diversity and inclusion work. And I'm just keen to get your kind of overall thoughts on our work in this area good or bad, I'm not precious about a little bit of constructive criticism, but also how you would like to see that impact on the coaching sphere as well. So Chris, if I come to you first

Chris Brain 27:11

Yes, I think whenever you launch anything like this, that there's always potential for criticism. And I think, you know, we've had the conversation before that it's difficult to get it 100% right, because of course, we will have different opinions as well. The thing that I think is really important is that the drive and the passion behind making a change comes from a really, really good place, you know, it's with the intention of making it better and making it more inclusive. So I'm really behind that, you know, when you asked me if I if I'd be involved with it, I suppose I thought a couple of different things where I thought does something need to change and if it does, what am I What am I going to do about it? And I thought yeah, it'd be It'd be great if we if we move forwards I'm not necessarily saying that where we were was really bad, it'd be great if we if we continue to develop so I thought well, what can I do now I'll be involved in and hopefully being a representative on the video so but some of the things that I think are going to be coming out of this is a great I one thing I did myself just recently was the learning the diversity learning which I thought was great and I don't necessarily feel like I'm an expert in this field. I think I've got some knowledge and some experience but the learning was really useful and I'm really pleased that that I did it I just saw I just I've got you know, got half an hour just I'll just see what that's like. And, and it opened my eyes to a few things that I hadn't considered as well. So I I'd encourage people if they if they haven't done it to go through and just have a look even if you feel like you already, you already know quite a bit about this field already. So just starting the conversation I think is really important and or keeping the conversation going if you feel like the conversation has already started for you, I think is essential and the more we can do something different or make sure that what we're doing is right. Is really the way forwards I think brilliant

Helena Russo 29:11

Thanks Chris and a lovely advert for our e di e learning module. Thank you so much that wasn't planned and so no we're to you I know you've been someone who I've spoken with on quite a few occasions on this particular topic and I'm so pleased that we've got someone in the athlete body that's so interested and invested in this area and we are a real asset to our work so for you What's your thoughts been on our progress so far? And what would you like to see moving forward in terms of your athlete or coaching body really?

Noah Dembele 29:40

I just really like how, yeah, since obviously you came to British Columbia, there's just there's been action happening. It's obviously like, for example today, getting us on this podcast and stuff like that and almost Yeah, having these conversations which Yeah, yeah, expand on and hopefully yeah help. Correct yeah help the cause. Yeah, it's to me like I couldn't I couldn't ask for more.

Ben Woodruff 30:14

Yeah, thank you very much for that guys. So if as a coach who wants to learn a little bit more around the subject of equality, diversity and inclusion, as Chris very nicely said that we've got our EDI eLearning module, you can find that on our awarding body website on our digital library. Use that our digital library resources, the Open University to engage, engage yourself, educate yourself, and surround yourself with some new knowledge around the topic. Get out and talk to different coaches and athletes about how we can improve and be more inclusive moving forward. Thank you very much for listening to this week's edition of the British Canoeing Awarding Body podcast.