

## **S2 E24 – Athlete and Coach Burnout with Ben Woodruff**

Ricky Snodgrass 0:00

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

Lee Pooley 0:08

Hi, welcome to the British Canoeing awarding body coaching podcast, my name is Lee Pooley. I am the head of coaching and qualifications that British canoeing. And today, what I want to do is welcome back, Ben. This is a follow up this podcast as a follow up to our initial conversation on coach burnouts where we'll explore further the subject of burnout, but with a specific focus on athlete. So welcome, Ben. Welcome back.

Ben Woodruff 0:34

Thank you very much for having me leanness. It's nice to be doing it in person today, rather than over zoom like it normally is.

Lee Pooley 0:39

Yeah, absolutely. It's a strange thing, setting up all the equipment and sat within our offices during this podcast, as you say, it's been across the, across the internet, and I'm sure anyone that's listening will probably see a difference in quality of sound, because it's obviously the face to face, though and the equipment we're using. And then, you know, just to sort of maybe recap and sort of make people that's listening, aware of the previous, the previous conversations we had is that you've done a particular piece of research, didn't you within your within your, your degree. And if you could just give a bit of a, an overview of what that research was about, because it will feed nicely into the next part of the conversation.

Ben Woodruff 1:25

Yeah, of course. So as part of my dissertation for undergraduate degree, I did some research into coach burnout, and looking at how we can predict coach burnout. So essentially, burnout can be separated into three strands. And it's

worth looking back on the other podcast that we did to learn more about this research and, and the strands of burnout, we talked about that in a little bit more depth there. And also, through that podcast, there's a link to the research into a diagram, I'll try and make sure to include it in the description of this podcast as well. But essentially, burnout in coaches can be traced through three different strands of burnout. And the majority of the time, it's caused by them feeling trapped and stressed and pressured, which makes them feel tired, they then don't perform as well as coaches and potentially neglect some duties that they might have not free meaning to. And it's a really hard place for a coach to be because they feel trapped, they feel that they've got a commitment to their employer deployer their participants, the other coaches they're working with. And it can be quite a horrible situation for that said, Coach. So the research was essentially looking at how we can predict that. And then hopefully, as part of my master's, I'm then going to go on and look at how we can prevent that.

Lee Pooley 2:46

Cool. Thanks. Thanks, Ben. I think it's just useful for a bit of an overview bit as you say, you know, listeners can go back and listen to the other podcasts that we did. Obviously, this is a follow up. So really, today is around focusing around athletes, and focusing on the athletes. And you know, the first thing for me, is, you know, being a very pragmatic person that I am is. So how can how can you know, as a coach, how can we recognize athlete burnout?

Ben Woodruff 3:20

Yeah, I think I think this is very important. And I think it's something the more and more coaches will want to know, the more they hear about it. There was a really, really interesting piece in a national newspaper recently, we've actually called the football player, talking about how he how he wanted to be more educated around mental health and how to recognize it within his participants, because he works with under 16, for England setup. And I think there's a greater want and a need. So it's really important to consider, like you say, how to recognize these things, as well as then how we can go forward to implement steps to allow our athletes to not burn out and ourselves to not burn out. So in terms of recognizing there's a list of things. And I think the thing to consider here massively is that on their own, these things don't close to burnout. They're not signs of burnout, if you're just looking at them as a one off day. So for example,

one of the things on the list is tired and drained. They might be tired and drained one day, but then two days later, they might be fine. Again, that's not a sign of burnout, tired and drained every day of every week, for a month, then we're getting towards that stage of burnout. So feel the examples, like I say is being tired and drained and having no energy at all. And you'll be able to notice that in a participant. They might snap back at you and it might sort of take you back as a coach almost. Have they really just come back at me like that? Did I say something to offend them? No. It might just be that their emotional regulation has gone because they are burnt out. And they don't know. And they can't regulate what they same, there might be a noticeable weight gain or loss. So if people have listened to the first podcast, they'll know that I did experience burnout as a coach. And comical as it seems. Now, I put on to stone in two months. And that's how people recognized that I was struggling with that banner. It's not something I recognized myself. And I think that's the importance of a coach or a significant other, a person that's significant in that person's life, recognizing it, because it then allows them to know actually, you know, I have got something I need to need to sort out a few other ones I'll reel off quickly frequent illness because of the low immunity because of burnout. They might sleep more or less, they might be neglecting their self-care. So scruffy hair, scruffy beards, all of that sort of thing, might feel defeated with a lack of motivation to paddle. They might procrastinate stuff be distance, they might miss training. But as I said, one offs, these aren't signs of burnout, but combining them for a longer period of time continually. We then constitute and burnout.

Lee Pooley 6:05

Okay? I mean, it's really, really interesting when you talk about time, don't you, but also, you know, a combination of those things that you listed as well could also contribute to burnout. So it's not only just over a period of time of one singular area that you've picked out, it could be a multitude of things that you've just talked about, that could create an indicator that the athlete is burning out.

Ben Woodruff 6:31

Yeah, definitely. Definitely. And, and actually, as you've just said, that morphed a lot, it is more than one of these indicators. So again, like weight gain, and loss,

and sleep and drains and lack of motivation, you might look at, actually, no, you're burning out, and we need to now take some steps.

Lee Pooley 6:48

Okay, cool. So I think, you know, recognition is really important. And I'm what I would hope, you know, Ben, when you go on to do further research for your MSC, that hopefully we can invite you back further to be able to one is to promote your research, because, you know, definitely we'd like to promote that research, but also a bit of a follow up and be able to sort of indicate, you know, even further into this particular subject. But as we're probably only scratching the surface, yes. All we can ever do within these podcasts is what could you know, how can how could a coach? Yeah, accountants listening go? Right, fine. I recognize it. How can I mitigate against athletes actually burning out within that coaching environment?

Ben Woodruff 7:31

Yeah, so this is this is really important, I think it's important to also understand that mitigating against it. And trying to prevent it is the best way of always treating burnout. Essentially, when someone burns out, there's not a quick and easy treatment, it will take them years and years and years to ever sort of reach an equilibrium again, because their brain is essentially fried, when they burnt out, their body is fried, it's been absolutely spent out. And essentially needs so long to recover. So the best way of stopping someone burning out is to prevent it in the first place. And, yeah, there are several ways coaches can do this. So first, I think it's really important to know the people you're coaching. And we'll say that in any situation, it's really important to know the individual, what makes them tick, know what they're normally like, know what an off day looks like, know how to push them and get the most out of them. But without pushing them too hard. So for example, make sure the balance of training is fair. So you're not training them too hard, you're giving them time to rest. It's a hard balance to find, because especially if you're working with more elite talent athletes, it will become quite tricky, because you want to push them to get them to the next step. And to be honest, the same is said with any participant within paddling, you want to push them to the next step. But actually, there is a balance and there comes a balance, we've got to say, Okay, no, it's actually more important we rest out, then train again, it's really important to have an open

honest and trusting relationship with them. So that they know they can talk to you about anything. And it's not going to affect your coaching of them, their selection within certain teams, and their selection for certain events. So that that again, is really important to have that open, honest and trusting relationship. I think it's really important to listen to the athlete, but actually listen to them, rather than just nodding, pretending to listen and hoping it'll be fine. Put into action things that you've discussed. So if they're talking about being tired and exhausted all the time, let's put something into action to stop that to help prevent their burnout and enhance their self-discovery. Now, this is quite a cliché when you're working with children and teenagers, young adults, but allow them to discover themselves because it's quite a turbulent time. Transitioning from a child to a teenager to a young adult. And helping them through that by allowing them to discover who they are is really important. It's also important to ensure if you can, that they've got a balanced diet. So for example, if you've noticed that they're potentially not eating very well, so it might be, they're turning up to every session with a Red Bull, and a four pack of Morrison's muffins, that's not the best diet. And actually, it might be time to then have a chat to a parent and make sure that that's contribution because getting the right amount of vitamins. And the balances is also really important. And I think, lastly, and almost the most importantly, is validate any feelings, or things that you are discussing with them. So rather than someone coming and going, Joe, what lay, I feel knackered. I've had two weeks where I felt completely drained. I can't get out of it. Rather than go Ah, yeah, but we're all tired. Don't worry about it, actually. Okay. Completely understand that it's understandable that you're tired. Tell me more. Talk to me about it. Why do you think you're tired? How can we overcome this because you're putting actions in place, you're validating it, you're not dismissing them? Dismissing is then the worst thing you can do because it shuts that open and honest barrier.

Lee Pooley 11:06

I think you know, validation is a really powerful tool, isn't it? And I think that's where, you know, I think, you know, where I see, you know, very privileged to see a lot of coaches in adventure sports coaching, you know, world class program talent program. Is that, yeah, there's some real great validation going on a regular basis. You talk then a lot about what I would class is behaviours and relationships. And, you know, I think, you know, those behaviours and relationships are key to any coach in coaching her and the more you understand each other, the more you'll be able to, you know, identify areas that may be

going slightly adrift. But what I'm keen to do is actually dig into the planning. Yeah, yeah. Because you talked about mitigation, and you talked about behaviours and relationships, but you didn't spend, you know, much time in the in the planning area. And, you know, I know that there will be deployers. Here, you're listening. There'll be head coaches, there'll be coaches that are responsible for, you know, sessions that happen on the water that they will give out certain groups to certain coaches. And, you know, how, what should they consider in terms of considering burnout? And how should they plan the sessions?

Ben Woodruff 12:25

Yeah, again, I think is really important. And actually, the ability to plan can really help. It can help you have things in place. It's not necessarily things that you do every session every week, but actually are in place ready to use, I think is really interesting. As you alluded to, I think everything in coaching is intertwined. As you said, knowing the athlete is really important. But that's not true for burnout. That's for every aspect of coaching. And actually knowing the athlete will then help you with the planning. So, again, be aware of overtraining, make sure that someone's schedule isn't too demanding. As a coach, it's not necessarily planning, but make sure your mood is good, you're approachable. You're not shut down in yourself during that session, if you think you're going to be because you're having a bad day, because every coach has a bad day. And that is completely fine. Just make sure you plan around how you're going to discuss and interact with participants that day. It's also really important to involve paddlers in the decision making, I think it's something that people overlook, but giving a young paddler some ownership over their decision can massively help your relationship with them, their enjoyment of the paddling. And again, you know, mitigate against that burnout, because they don't feel like they just turn it off and do it. They feel like they're involved. They feel like they're a part of the session. It's something for them. Again, leading off from this focus on fun, it's really important to make sure that every session has an element of fun, so that they're going to enjoy what they're doing. Yeah, it's really important for them to keep enjoying their paddling experience. It's also worth and this this is quite an out of the box one, making sure we're actually making sure that suggesting that people try other sports as well, because doing the same sport over and over again for 10 years, can get really tiresome, and I know that contradicts what we say about overtraining, but actually having another sport that they do, just as a way to let off steam can really help in the long run. Here's

one that I think most coaches will have seen and have experienced both negatively and positively. And that's avoid coaching stress from parents. So don't allow co parents even sorry to intervene too much with that child's coaching because parents as we know can be very loving and caring but through this become quite pushy and stressful influences to have on the paddlers around and I've seen that far too many times. Again, messy, can be good. A messy session can be very good, because it's not structured, it's flowing and the person can relax. And again, taking parents out of that situation more can really help because it's not as much stress. You're not as stressed to make the session look really good because the parents rostered they're watching, like I say, sometimes a messy session could be really, really good.

Lee Pooley 15:25

Okay, I mean, it's a really, really great point. So that you bring up, and I think what's really important is that, you know, it isn't a coach's plan is the athletes plan? Yeah, and that's a classic one that, you know, you do hear quite a lot, you know, I've designed this, you know, this is the plan that the athletes going to do, there's got to be complete empowerment and engagement and ownership, that the athlete is the athletes plan, I think it's a good, real good cross train has been around for a long time, isn't it different sports, you can still get huge amounts of benefits across, you know, across disciplines, but it also adds another layer of interest and almost pulls them away. Considering competition structures, you know, too many competitions really close together, can be can be create anxiety, and which can lead to obviously burnout, fatigue, physical and mental. So, all of those things, you know, what, what many people may listeners might be, you know, sort of listening, thinking, you know, that's, that's good periodization that's really thinking about the landscape of what it looks like for a for a period to ensure that actually, it's, it's, it's well thought out. So yeah, some really, really nice stuff there. But I think it's a lot of this is about creating a positive culture isn't in mental wellbeing. Yes. And, you know, yeah. Have you got any top tips or any ideas of how, how a coach at the very early stages, you know, the they may have an athlete transitioning on to their program, they an athlete night, might become to come to a club for the first time is how, how good coaches, how could clubs, how could programs consider ways to develop a positive culture of mental wellbeing.

Ben Woodruff 17:23

So culture, Coach means the brilliant word that is almost a buzzword that gets used, but the culture is really important because it underlies every interaction within that setting. And the large coach, the coach, Coach, to participant, participant, participant, every interaction that happens is based on that culture. And so I think I think you've hit the nail on the head days is about creating that culture of understanding that mental health and mental wellness is something that needs to be considered. So for me, I think one of the best ways of doing it, and this comes from when I was younger, and I was participating, and when I've been coaches, for some unusual and creative sessions, really to mix it up to almost make the paddlers think, actually, yeah, that was good fun tonight, I really enjoyed that, to take them out of their normal paddling experiences, can really just almost shock them back into, oh, yeah, I really liked paddling, if they are drifting towards a state of burnout. And again, it helps with mental wellbeing massively, because it's just a bit of fun, it's allow for their mates. And, you know, those unusual sessions are really, really useful. Again, talking about culture, it's really important to have a culture of fun and jokes, obviously, knowing that the participants can be serious when needed, because there are safety elements to consider in any sport, especially paddle sports. But having that culture of fun and being able to joke with participants and allowing them to joke with each other, because a lot of the time, it might be the only release they get from school, from work, from anything like that. As I mentioned earlier, it's also really important to have an open culture so that you can have people come to you can approach you, you will speak to them. On the same level as yourself, you'll give them respect and validate their feelings and allow participants to be open at all. Make sure your approach born and listen. And again, it's that validation word, don't dismiss anything. If someone really is coming to you with a concern or, or something that they're not quite comfortable with in their life, just you know, help them out. Because at the end of the day, coaches are key figures in a lot of people's lives massively. So remember, when I was younger when I was in various sports, the coaches were key figures of people I looked up to. It could be worth also contemplating wellness sessions, stuff like mindfulness on the water. So while you're out on a paddle, just taking five minutes to almost find some calm water to stop paddling. To have people close their eyes, focus on a point and do some Guided Breathing exercises. Because it almost takes them out of that moment. And they'll enjoy that moment a little bit more, it gives it more of a rich colour in the grand scheme of things. And yeah, it just comes back to the understanding if an athlete is having an off day or another coach is having an off day for participants having an off day, it happens, we all have them. If you're having an off day, it happens. We've all been there, both as participants and

coaches be understand it, and help them through it. So they don't feel pressured, guilty, and that they still get some enjoyment out of it.

Lee Pooley 20:31

Cool. So, Ben, I got one more question for you. It's not on the list. And I always do this when I when I, when I sort of run the podcast is we focus a lot around athlete and participant which I think was the main focus of this. But there is a there is a danger that actually all focuses is upon the athletes. And this might sound negative, but there's no we neglect the coach. And actually, for the athlete to have a as best session as they possibly can, is that we need the coach in in the most optimal place that they can be so five, yeah, five top tips to ensure wellness of a coach

Ben Woodruff 21:23

Or coach at yet, but I couldn't have said it better myself. It's so important that often as a coach, we have so many responsibilities that we neglect our own needs. And forget actually our own needs do that impact the paddler as you've said. So five top tips. Here we go. Number one, before every session, just take them in it could be in the car could be by the water to ground yourself and think, Okay, what are we going to be doing today? What are the positives going to be and then after the session, go through it, pick out positives rather than focus on negatives, pick out the positives, what was good little Timmy really enjoyed that it was Sarah, really, really good on the waters, they really found the rhythm. And look for those positives because it can really help bring that motivation back and take that defeat away. Think as a coach, it's also important, so top tip to not to stop paddling or doing sport yourself, make sure you're still engaging in physical activity and having time for that. When I had my period of burnout as a coach, it's because I was not doing any physical activity anymore. Because I was feeling really tired and drained constantly, I didn't feel I could do anything else other than work. And actually doing that probably would have helped me because it boosted my natural serotonin levels, it would have helped me sleep better as well. So Top Tip Two is make sure you're still partaking some physical exercise as a coach. Number three, really important to look after yourself. Sleep well, and eat well. Make sure and I know it's really easy because I've been there. After a session you eat well, don't just grab a McDonald's on the way home every night. Make sure that you're not just eating and feeding on doughnuts. If you're out in

the water all day, make sure you've got a nice balanced meal with you. And again, taking part in sports and then help you get to sleep in good time. Don't say up to whatever time replying to participants and emails and all sorts. Shut off, shut the screens off. Get some sleep. So that's it for be open with someone. Don't bottle it all in and keep the stress to yourself, because then it's just going to get 10 times worse. Talk to someone say I'm struggling with this. Can you help take some load off me? Yet no worries, lovely job. Or I actually don't feel I can coach today is only one that can cover. Yes, that's fine. Don't be afraid to ask for that help. And I think Top Tip number four is probably the shortest one is don't be afraid to say no. We've all been there where yes men. And we want to say yes to everything. Because we enjoy the sport. We want to not let the participants down. We want to be the best we can swipe to say no sometimes and have some time to yourself. Sit down, watch some Telly have relax, read newspaper, whatever you do to relax. It's okay to say no to the extra stuff. And have some time for yourself.

Lee Pooley 24:27

Cool. Well stuck to this stuck to the brief. That was five. Thank you, Ben. So really good, really good top tips. And you know, one of the one of the easiest things is to neglect is ourselves, isn't it? And I think you know, we're all very aware of recognize it and others but very seldom do we recognize it in ourselves. So I think it's a it's really important as you say, pause, stop, consider and you know, have someone you can talk to I think it's really I think deploys and head coaches also got a responsibility.

Ben Woodruff 25:05

Yeah, definitely. Again, it could just be checking in on that person. Or you're right. Are you okay with your workload, you want to talk it through, and then also reviewing that workload because they might not want to say anything. As I've just said people are yes, yes, men. Yes. Women. They're like, Yeah, I'll do it. That's fine. Just to make themselves look good, actually, let's review that workload. Let's see if it is too much. Is there potential to hire someone else to take some workload off as someone who's got less workload. And also, I think, as a Deployer, as a head coach is worth educating yourself around mental wellbeing burnout, anxiety, depression, PTSD, there's so many resources out there mind the mental health charity have some which are we've got some

educational bits on our digital library as well. And the Open University is brilliant. They've got some amazing courses around how to talk to people about mental well, being mental well, being in young adults, recognizing signs of mental issues. It's really, really important to educate yourself. And as much of a responsibility you have for the coaches as a Deployer, or head coach, never forget the responsibility to yourself and don't let the neglect fall on yourself. It's quite easy to neglect the neglect go from participants to coaches to head coach to employer Deployer. Don't let that happen. Always take time for yourself as well as being responsible for the others around

Lee Pooley 26:32

Yeah. Ben, thank you very much for joining us on the on the podcast today. You know, Ben, you are you are leaving British goon in the next couple of weeks. And you know, it's sad to see you go but where you go in is actually to follow on this research even further with your MSC. So I do hope that we'll see you back soon. You'll be able to come back and talk further on this read this research area. But thanks very much today really appreciate it and, and I hope everyone that's been listening, enjoys his podcast and if you need any further information, please visit the British canoeing awarding body digital library where you can get some of the links and the resources that been spoken about today. So thanks very much