

Lee Pooley 00:00:13

Hi, welcome everyone and this is the British Canoeing Awarding Body Coaching Podcast. My name is Lee Pooley. I'm the director of coaching and qualifications here at British Canoeing and I am delighted to continue this miniseries that we've been looking at and this is all based around what's in your buoyancy Aid and what's in your boat, but for some disciplines that could obviously be what's on your board or what's in your raft. I'm delighted today to be joined by Jon Best. Hi, Jon.

Jon Best: 00:00:39

Hi Lee

Lee Pooley: 00:00:40

Just for the listeners, do you want to give us a bit of a short bio about yourself?

Jon Best: 00:00:45

Yeah, sure yeah because before I came up. I'm at Plas y Brenin at the moment and before I came up to meet with you I was chatting to Chris Evans and it's funny because we grew up paddling together. So it's ties in quite well, so I grew up in South London of all places, the Whitewater Mecca that is, but it was really close to the Thames and there was a little Outdoor Adventure Base like a local Authority run outdoor adventure base there called Thames Young Mariners and in the school holidays my dad kind of pushed me off there and that's where I went and did sailing and kayaking and that sort of stuff. But I remember seeing a couple of guys Chris Evans being one of them who was playing around in back then it would be really old school play boats, and I was paddling this big kind of tank of a kayak around thought was really cool doing bow rudders and then I saw him doing some flat water tricks I was like, wow, that's really cool. And so I had a go with that and that kind of lit the fuse I guess for my freestyle kayaking and whitewater kayaking as a whole really so ended up. Getting a freestyle boat and started doing that and then somehow I ended up on the GB freestyle team age of 16. So as a junior going off to Austria to compete in the world championships, I think at that point I was a reserve.

And we had the feature there was really really horrible. This hole that was super retentive and was super narly and everyone was swimming out of it and it was atrocious and me being reserve meant I didn't have to compete which was great. But my dad was still like you must train with the rest of the team. So I was thrown in there the deep end and it was awful. So that was my experience at my first World Championships, but my freestyle then took me all over the world kayaking rivers. Not only freestyle but river running as well and amazing journey brilliant and it's funny because it's not

funded very well freestyle. It wasn't back then it's definitely improved a lot. But it's not an Olympic discipline. So a lot of freestyle kayakers because would be self-funded sponsorship but a way of staying close to the rivers and be able to train would be to work on the river. And that kind of ties into where my rafting career started I guess. Yeah.

Lee Pooley 00:02:47

And where are you based now John, where's home?

Jon Best 00:02:49

So yeah, a lot of people ask me this because I'm in North Wales quite a lot and then I'm over in the Lakes and Scotland every now and then but I'm actually based in the Midlands not far from Holme Pierrepont and Matlock so Matlock's a little grade one grade two river really nice of for rafting float trips or intro to Whitewater. That's a perfect actually for the new introductions to Whitewater course the one day I think would be brilliant so that sort of things excited to run those there. And then obviously the freestyle Mecca of Holme Pierrepont just down the road which is nice to have that obviously they do a lot of rafting there as well.

So based there and it's quite nice because only kind of a couple of hours From Wales from the Lakes. it's not too far from Scotland. So yeah works well.

Lee Pooley 00:03:32

Yeah. Brilliant. Yeah, you've obviously alluded to it because then today we're actually going to be focusing on white water rafting. So, we're gonna be asking you what would you carrying your buoyancy when you guide and also what do you pack into your raft? And how do you pack it? And so can you just give a bit of a flavour on a bit of your paddling in rafts?

Jon Best 00:03:48:

Yeah, so moved up from London moved to Nottingham fairly quickly because freestyle worked really well at Nottingham and the there was obviously rafting happening there. So I did a raft guide training course when I was 17 with Chris Walker and Tim So if there's any old school Rafters listening, they'll know who they are and my girlfriend at the time was like, you should do this raft course you can earn money and we can live here and that'll work. And I was like rafting really I'm Freestyle through and through but did the training course and then quickly fell in love with rafting and I think if you ask me why I think it's because I got much enjoyment from paddling whitewater it

was so amazing. It was brilliant and to be able to introduce people into that environment and see them enjoy it, I was like, this is really cool.

And I thought about it quite a bit. I think that's actually the fundamental reason why I really enjoy rafting is because you can introduce people that would never normally get into that environment or if they do it would be like a year's process they would have to learn to kayak and there's a whole rolling element. It's miserable in the winter and it's cold it puts people off. But with whitewater rafting you could be within 30 minutes, you can be on some really cool white water and people love it. So yeah it all started Nottingham and then from there I met some really cool people that you trained me Matt Blue being one of them a Mentor of mine and from there encouraged me to go abroad.

So I went abroad and did some rafting obviously with this worked in conjunction with when I was training freestyle as well. So some of the places that I went to do freestyle had rafting companies, so I could work on the river rafting and also safety kayaking all that sort of stuff. So it all tied in really well, I would come back to Nottingham just I could get a bit back into the UK see family see friends, and then away again, really good, so done quite a bit around Europe, over in the states and Canada, so North America. Over on the Nile in Uganda as well managed to get out to New Zealand and do a bit out there. All over the place rafting kayaking, great fun

Lee Pooley 00:05:53

And that's why you're here, Jon's also the chair of the rafting technical group for British Canoeing Awarding Body and helps out on a huge huge amounts on the development of the rafting guide qualifications. So with such extensive background, let's peer into your buoyancy Aid then Jon so, when you are raft guiding what do you carry in your buoyancy Aid?

Jon Best 00:06:16

Okay, here we go. So, there's something that we call a flip line. Okay, but actually it's a tape an open-ended sling with a Carabiner on the end. So everyone should know what that is. But for rafting we call it a flip line. It's funny because I was doing a Whitewater leader training course on the weekend and there was a raft guide on it and I was like, so what's in your buoyancy aid and he's like I've got my flip line. I'm like, yes, it's a piece of tape with a sling isn't it though, a piece of tape with the Carabiner? Slightly different application. You wouldn't be using a flip line for kayaking. But yeah so if you're Raft goes upside down then obviously it's quite a large vessel. So you would get on top of it and then you clip in to the perimeter line the rope that runs around the edge of the raft and then you can lean back and pull on the flip line and that would right the boat. Pretty essential really if you

haven't got one of those in your pocket and the raft flips, you're kind of stuck the boat's upside down really and that's not ideal. So that's really important.

So one of those and carabiners they're just really handy for lots of things aren't they so I carry a couple of spare ones of those as well. A knife cos you carry rope and probably people that paddle White Water are probably thinking yeah this is pretty similar actually to what we do and what we carry in our buoyancy Aid. I've started lately I've started carrying a bit more kind of snacky stuff some food. I run a lot of courses at the moment and you'll know that sometimes it's quite difficult to get your calories in. And so I do carry kind of protein bars now as well and actually lately, I've been opening my zip for my pocket more to get a protein bar out than for anything else. As well so yeah, that's really important so yeah I'll keep doing that actually it's really helping keeping energy up on the river and I think that's really important.

And the other thing that I carry is and I get out is my phone, mainly for pictures I must admit, pictures and video but yeah so find somewhere that I can get my phone out and I've actually got this cool little bungee thing that I can attach. So the times I've got my phone out and it's dropped and I'm just like that's lucky it didn't sink. So I've got this cool little bungee thing. That means that if I do drop it and at least it's not going in the river and sinking to the bottom, so that's nice. but yeah phone out and using it quite I use that a lot to take photos. It's really nice because the photos there's kind of date and time stamped and location and then when you refer back to say you use a river app to look at levels you can have a look and go oh what level was it that day that I was on the river and so phones, super handy on the river especially smartphones unbelievable for capturing all sorts of data when you're on the river. So I use that a lot, food and my phone which is not dissimilar to when I'm off the river to be honest. So yeah.

Lee Pooley: 00:09:01

And Jon you talk about a Flip line, what length of tape are you using?

Jon Best: 00:09:05

So I'm using a five metre. Which is quite long actually. For a Flipline you can get away with something quite a lot shorter. That this is just what I've got on me at the moment and it works but obviously because it's a piece of tape there's loads of other applications as well. So for setting up an anchor for example for rafting, you know they're big heavy beasts. And so if we need to put a lot of force through them we need when we're looking for anchors. We sometimes like to wrap tape around multiple times and then maybe pull off a few strands of that instead of just going off one. So something long like that helps you have to be quite careful with long pieces of tape for flip lines

because obviously when you pull the raft, And it's the right way up and you're in the water with it. It's a long piece of tape clipped into a piece of rope and you're in the water with it. So you have got to bear that in mind as well. Sometimes it can kind of get in the way a little bit.

Lee Pooley: 00:10:00

And then, obviously, we see a lot of Rafters going down the rivers and we do see that quite a lot of people wear a throw line on a belt on the back. Is that something you do?

Jon Best 00:10:09:

Yes, yeah, most definitely. Yeah. Yeah, I carry a throwline on a belt you may also see rafts with the throw lines clipped on to the raft we tend to and that happens as well the likelihood is if that's the situation is that the throw bag that's on the raft is for use for something different to throw bagging So that obviously it's quite easy to separate from your raft or especially on a Flip or you could fall out if you're separated or even just heading out and getting onto the bank and having to run upstream or Downstream and it's really nice to have your bag with you on your person. So you can't forget it. So you've always got it with you. So that's why we carry it on a belt. It's obviously on a quick release system as well. Yeah.

Lee Pooley: 00:10:52

Okay, cool, so going into the raft then, you're looking after how many sort of people are you looking after in the raft and then obviously, how do you look after them with additional kit?

Jon Best: 00:11:03

Yeah, so that chops and changes. There's some staples that we should always carry with us much the way any leader would on a river. So, you'd have that dry bag with your first aid in it and other bits of leadership style stuff, but it can change depending on the river some more technical Rivers where there's a chance the raft could be get pinned and wrapped on rocks. We may carry a bigger thicker line. So maybe like a 60 metre piece of rope and that would be a canyon line so floating rope.

You know rafts are really heavy. They're really heavy things and especially if they wrap around a rock and water is forced onto them because they're inflatable, they're not rigid. they fold and they do wrap. So sometimes when you get, when you're in a situation like that, it can be really really difficult to get the boat off and you need some quite heavy Hardware. So a canyon line's really useful. Where we wouldn't probably carry one is a high volume run down the river Dee for example where you're less likely to get into a situation where your boat is kind of wrapped around a rock something like

that. Some guides may choose to carry one all the time. It's just in their kit and that's what they do. So in rafting we have trip leaders and they generally are in charge of the flotilla of rafts. If it's just one raft you'd be a trip leader on the water, two rafts there'd be a trip leader and a raft guide. So trip leader would be the person that may carry that within their items on the raft themselves. Not every single raft may choose to carry a big piece of rope like that, but they might be much definitely one on the more technical River. If you're away from infrastructure out and where it's more difficult to get to a road or transport or your shuttle vehicle or your base, you might decide to carry group shelter. As well, maybe some warm clothes, especially this time of year.

Obviously dependent on what your clients are wearing as well, if in Iceland for example, the clients get dry suits which is pretty amazing. In the UK. It's all wetsuit based stuff. So people can get quite chilly, especially if you have an incident where people are waiting on the side of the river for a little while for a shuttle. So just something to keep people warm is important. Thankfully we're never too far away in the UK maybe less so in Scotland, England and Wales never too far away from infrastructure. So your shuttle bus, your base, a road something like that. So what we won't find in the UK as much is one raft with just gear. Whereas abroad you might find that they have a raft dedicated just to carrying equipment and stuff, especially on multi-day trips. And the beauty of rafts is they are a super buoyant and big and you can just strap loads of stuff into them. But in the UK, they're usually two hour three hour max trips, so we don't need to be carrying food and drinks and all that sort of stuff with us.

Lee Pooley: 00:13:50

And Jon you just said you strap stuff in I was gonna ask about that, because some other disciplines talk about leashes and lashing and also loose as well. What tends to happen within a raft?

Jon Best: 00:14:03

Yeah, so obviously we follow the clean line principle like every other discipline, but we generally trying to keep the stuff we store in our boats away from customers as much as we can. So as a guide, you're at the back, generally the back of the boat is where you'd have your bag and that would be strapped in and you probably see, if next time you go you go out and you're on a river and you see some rafts more manner of ways of stowing equipment, but roof rack straps work quite well, some people they'll just cut them down to size and you can wrap those around a thwart at the back of the boat and then you can clip into the roof rack straps something like that there are a couple of companies that make rafting specific bags. So they have these nice bags with straps on that you can wrap around a thwart and then pull them tight and then you've got the bag that you can put loads of

stuff in open and get what you want. It's the stuff that you need in there. You might need quickly to be able to get it out quickly that sort of thing. But yeah, obviously we try to minimise loops as much as we can especially because we've got customers on our rafts that don't know what a clean line is, and so we've got to make sure that we keep it tidy.

Lee Pooley: 00:15:07

Yeah, and what's in the top of your bag then so, you said, things that you might need instantly, so, what do you pack last as I imagine whatever you packed last it's the first thing you get your hands on.

Jon Best: 00:15:14

Yeah, it kind of changes really. I mean personally a lot of the time I don't ever open my bag. On a commercial trip it doesn't happen. The things that I get need to get out quickly would be on my person. So my phone, a carabiner that sort of stuff on some Rivers, we have incidents where you may want the first aid kit fairly close to hand. You may need, if you have a situation where you've got a boat pinned, you might need to get a wrap kit out. Some rafting operators will keep a pre-made wrap kit so a pig rig a three to one system where it's already set up and then it can be clipped into a main line that's going from the raft to the bank to the Anchor Point and that's where you'd look to use your Canyon line. So if you're on a river that sometimes regularly boats are getting stuck. You might find that there's that stuff pretty close to hand as well. I think I'd question if people are getting that stuff out a lot then that would be a question for the operation itself and the trip leader really. If you're getting boats stuck a lot.

But spare paddle as well. Always take a spare paddle on the river and it might not be that, not particularly the guides drop their paddle, but customers, they drop paddles if you end up with a flip or a high side where you have multiple customers falling out then largely. they don't hold on to their paddle. They're kind of let go.

Lee Pooley: 00:16:51

And it just be the one spare paddle?

Jon Best: 00:16:53

Yeah. One spare paddle usually does it. Again that kind of trip leader might take that. So you've got quite often if you see a flotilla of rafts going down stream, you'll see kind of the independent rafts, and they probably have very little and if they do it would be that guides personal preference to carry

something like that and then you'll notice the trip leader boat because that's the boat with kit. So that'll be the boat that has a spare paddle, it would be the boat that has the TL bag that has the first aid kit and that has the group shelter and that has the canyon line and that has the wrap kit that sort of thing so you can always spot a trip leader on the river because they're usually the boat that's a bit more laden at the back with some stuff.

Lee Pooley: 00:17:35

And would their line be different to the other rafts, because it's carrying all critical kit?

Jon Best: 00:17:40

And it can be, most definitely yeah. So for example abroad where I've rafted abroad there would be a boat that was dedicated just to kit and that mainly an oar boat so there will be a raft the same as the other boats the same size can be different size but generally the same size and then they'll have a centre mounted frame that's strapped to the boat. So it sits in the centre with oars. And that person could act as safety boat. That could also be carrying the trip leader kit.

Generally, so where I've TLed abroad I've not personally carried the TL kit, but it's been in the oar boat because why not it's a massive raft. It's got loads of space in it. And at that point they may choose to take a different line down some of the Rapids maybe a less flippy line or less a line that's a little bit easier potentially nice thing about that option if you have got some customers that might be a bit apprehensive they could go in the oar boat and purposefully take a different line down a rapid. For example, sometimes there's no option they just do and you see that the people on the oars, they're very experienced that. So that's abroad, we don't really have oars in the UK's maybe Scotland. Definitely more Stern mounted oars. So the frame is at the back and the customers are paddling. But the guide instead of having a paddle has a set of oars and they steer provide momentum kind of row using paddles at the back. So yeah, there's outfits in Scotland that use stern mounts.

Lee Pooley: 00:19:16

Any other kit you might carry in your raft or is that mainly?

Jon Best: 00:19:20

That's mainly it, but on my person actually there's a few little bits that I carry extra so part of your wrap kit is prussic and pulleys. So something that makes up a wrap kit would be obviously rope, prussic and we use pulleys a lot in rafting again going back to weight.

How heavy these boats are but when we are setting up our mechanical advantage systems, we need as much help as we can and so we'll use pulleys quite a bit. So I'll have on my person enough to be able to set up at least a three to one mechanical advantage system between my buoyancy Aid and my guide my throw line belt also has a little pouch on it. So I can Stow a carabiner, a pulley and a prussic in there, another carabiner, another pulley, another prussic in my buoyancy Aid. My Flipline has a carabiner on maybe a spare Carabiner... end up being quite heavy. and so that metal work doesn't lend itself well to floating I guess But I've got a good buoyancy aid so it's ok, so I float quite well, but it's a thing to consider for sure.

Lee Pooley: 00:20:23

As an experienced raft guide what type of carabiner is and what type of pulleys are you have?

Jon Best: 00:20:31

Yeah Yeah good ones. Yeah, mainly. Yeah, so the HMS style kind of pear shaped ones. They really handy and always go screw gate but this personally for me always go screw gate. Just in rafting, we clip in and we screw it up. And that's it just to avoid other things unnecessarily getting clipped in or the thing popping off especially through when you're setting up systems. If you have got a boat that's stuck so screw gate carabiners and then pulleys we generally look at prussic minding pulleys. So they've got a little flat... instead of the wheel. The body of the pulley being rounded like the wheel there'd be the wheel and there'll be a flat Edge.

And when you're setting up, we're getting quite techy now, setting a mechanical advantage system The prussic minded pulley does the job of someone that would otherwise have to hold the prussic open to allow the Rope to slide through the prussic. So that's nice so prussic-minded pulleys. Yeah and ones that have got bearings in so they're usually a little bit more expensive a little bit more techy in that respect. But if I'm going to put a pulley in a system I want it to work I want it to be efficient and so that's got bearings in a prussic minding pulley doesn't matter where I put it in the system then it's prussic minding even if it doesn't need to be. I just carry minding pulleys and it kind of works that way.

Lee Pooley: 00:21:48

And then you did talk about a canyoning rope. Didn't you? I think you said 60 meters and what's the diameter?

Jon Best: 00:21:54

So it can vary, generally you're looking at no less than kind of twelve mm for that. It's usually quite thick then you have to obviously consider your prussics with that as well the diameter of your prussics. You don't want that eating into your rope and bits and Bobs like that. So I think the length is important generally the diameter of those canyoning lines are all pretty similar. But I actually used a 40 metre the other day and surprising how quickly you run out rope. Even using 40 metres generally through setting up scenarios or training sessions where you're doing tension diagonal and that sort of stuff but it doesn't take especially with tension diagonals. Obviously, across the river at an angle. It doesn't take a lot for suddenly a rope to ... 40 metres. yeah, so yeah. I've got a 40 metre and a 60 metre and generally the 60 metres good good for everything.

Lee Pooley: 00:22:44

Yeah, I'd imagine the different personalities of rivers, a wider stretch of river you're probably going to opt for the 60 rather than a tight technical River in the UK.

Jon Best: 00:22:55

Yes, most definitely. Yes, we also just thinking about on the raft itself when we talk about ropes because we also use bow and stern lines. So they're like a painters on a canoe. We just call them bow and stern lines and they're wrapped onto the front and the back of the boat and we can use them to set up systems, but generally they're there to be able to jump off the back or the front of your raft and hold the raft. You can use that if you need to lower your boat down something you can use that. So yeah and they're usually a couple of lengths of the boat in terms of length of raft. So depends on the length of your boat, so there's quite a lot of rope going on.

Lee Pooley: 00:23:27

There is a lot of rope isn't there, but

Jon Best: 00:23:29

Yeah thinking about it. Yeah

Lee Pooley 00:23:31:

...as you said that the raft can cope with weight.

Jon Best 00:23:33:

Yeah, and that's the thing. It's heavy. So they're heavy boats and so the hard ware you carry is generally quite beefy stuff quite heavy stuff. Rope that's not super strong and it won't last very long during if you're having to pull a boat and sometimes even with the best gear in the world. You have to wait for the river to drop for you to come back and get your boat otherwise you start breaking stuff. But we carry it, just in case and and that's because over the years that's experience of people going on to Rivers things happening and really could have done with this longer rope or really could have done with this and this and it's kind of developed that way really but generally in the UK, we don't pack our boats. We don't need to carry loads on the river. We don't have the multi-day options that they do over overseas.

Lee Pooley: 00:24:28

So Jon really good insight to what you carry in terms of in your buoyancy Aid and including the protein bars and obviously all the different types of kit that you carry within the raft. Got two questions for you and didn't prep for these at all, Jon. So what's the best rafting river in the UK?

Jon Best: 00:24:46

I'm going to get a load of text messages after this aren't I. What's the best rafting River?

Lee Pooley: 00:24:52

Be controversial!

Jon Best: 00:24:54

Okay, so I think when the Tummel's running it's very good. I think that is pretty Epic. And because if I don't say the Dee or the Tryweryn... Yeah, but both of those I think for kind of type technical but then the Findhorn's also good. And then the gorge when that's going as well.

Lee Pooley: 00:25:21

Jon, you're only allowed one!

Jon Best: 00:25:22

And the Brann that's good. Yeah, I really like the Brann Yeah, I really like the Brann. I like the way it builds up, and it's quite technical and then you've just got these beautiful kind of grade four sections towards the end there and it's really nice I think and for customers that's important for customers

because of experience of them buzzing of it because you get off on a high. If you're on a river where you build up to it, you can train the crew, you can profile them. You can coach them if need be like guys, you're getdowns needs to be quicker. Your overs need to be quicker. The paddle strokes need to be like this and you don't want to be starting off on some really big stuff when you're trying to coach your crew and some rivers are like that, to be on it right at the start. So those rivers that build up and finish kind of on a higher everyone gets off absolutely buzzing it.

Lee Pooley: 00:26:21

Great and Jon last question. What river's on your tick list for rafting? And why?

Jon Best: 00:26:25

Okay, so I've not done the Grand Canyon. So I want to do the canyon with my family. So I got young family two year old a five year old and my wife as well and she loves rafting. She loves kayaking as well. And I've scared myself a lot on rivers that's good. And I think it's important to keep pushing. That's good. But I think I'd really really enjoy a family trip when they're old enough they're too young now when they're old enough and to do the canyon because it's a bucket list must do I think

Lee Pooley 00:26:57

Lovely, lovely. Thanks very much for you time and really appreciate you spending there a bit of time to talk around your experience, you're a highly experienced raft guide and how you go about kitting yourself up ready to ready to lead. So thanks very much.

Jon Best: 00:27:14

No worries Lee, thank you.