

Debbie Thompson 00:14

To mark Neurodiversity Celebration Week 2024, taking place in the UK at the moment, today we are rereleasing a fascinating episode from early last year focusing on the experiences of neurodiverse athletes. In this conversation, Caragh McMurtry and Nerys Hall share the barriers they have faced in sport and strategies they've used to improve their performance. The episode also discusses how coaches can consider neurodivergence and adapt their practice to support neurodivergent paddlers and create inclusive environments. I hope you enjoy the episode!

Debbie Thompson - 00:50

Hello, everyone, and welcome to a new episode of the Coaching Podcast on British Canoeing Awarding Body. My name's Debbie Thompson. I work in the Coaching Department as a Digital Learning Designer. And for today's conversation, I'm joined by three people. I'm really happy to be firstly welcoming my co-host, Helena, because Helena Russo is returning to the podcast - a guest star coming back.

So Helena is the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Lead at British Canoeing. And as I said, we've been lucky enough to have her on several episodes of the podcast already. So we want to continue this EDI strand of the podcast. And today we're going to be focusing on a really fascinating topic: neurodiversity. So Neurodiversity Celebration Week has just taken place in March.

So we thought this was a really good time to start talking about this, particularly in relation to sport, and of course, paddling. So Helena, if I hand over to you, perhaps you could explain a little bit more about the topic and then introduce our guests.

Helena Russo - 01:57

Thank you very much. Thank you so much for having me back. It's great to be returning to the podcast, and I'm also really excited to be touching on this topic. I think it's something that isn't wholly understood generally or in the sport sector, so it's great to have this resource available for our coaches. What I'm just going to do I think, is touch a little bit on

what neurodiversity actually means and how that definition exists, because it is something that some people are relatively unclear on.

So neurodiversity is a rapidly evolving topic and a definition of a person's cognitive experience of the world around them. And neurodiversity as a term is used to reference neurological differences and the variety in brain function across a population. So populations themselves are neurodiverse, but people who have neurodivergent conditions are those that might have conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (or ADHD), autism or dyspraxia.

And the language that we use around neurodiversity is really, really important. And it's important to highlight that there is no "normal" way of thinking or learning. We all have different ways of experiencing the world around us and how we break down what happens in our lives. And it's often the world around us that means that people who do have neurodivergent conditions or experiences experience more challenges, more barriers to their day-to-day life, whether that's in education, work, sport and there are very varied experiences across those with neurodivergent conditions.

So I'm really excited that we're going to delve a little bit deeper into what all of this means. And I am super, super excited to invite two people into the conversation today. So I'm going to allow them to introduce themselves. But we have Nerys joining us and we also have Caragh. So thank you very much to both of you.

Nerys If I hand over to you, it'll be great to hear a little bit about you, your background and all things canoeing.

Nerys Hall - 03:43

Yeah. So I'm a Nerys, I'm 18 years old. I'm in my last junior year of racing as a marathon sprint flatwater kayaker. I was diagnosed with ADHD, I think last March, so 17, which is quite late for someone and I started medication just after that, which has been a great help.

Helena Russo - 04:01

Thank you so much, Nerys Thank you for joining us. Caragh, can we come to you to tell us a little bit about your background?

Caragh McMurtry - 04:07

Yeah, sure. Thank you for having me, firstly. I think it's really great that you have this coaching podcast and also that you're featuring neurodiversity as a topic. So my name is Caragh McMurtry, and I'm a former Olympic rower, so not canoeing, kayaking, but still a water sport and I have a diagnosis of high functioning autism. But like Nerys, I didn't get that diagnosis until really late in my career.

So it was actually 2019 when I was diagnosed and before that I spent seven years on the GB Rowing team. Five of those were the misdiagnosis of bipolar disorder because neurodiversity, especially autism in women, wasn't something that was understood. That wasn't a great experience at all. I was on a lot of medication and obviously medication works when it's the right thing, but it wasn't for the right thing and it was a pretty traumatic experience.

But the difference between that period of time on the squad and then how much I thrived when I had the right diagnosis, the right understanding, was huge and it's led me to what I'm doing now, which is trying to advocate for neurodivergent athletes and just to raise awareness and understanding that everybody's brain works differently. And we could all help each other if we understood that a bit more.

Helena Russo - 05:26

Definitely. Thanks, Caragh. Looking forward to diving into this.

Debbie Thompson - 05:30

Brilliant. So we've heard a little bit about the sports that you're involved with, but we like to dive a little bit deeper into that. So Nerys if we come to you first. We've heard a little bit about your sporting career to date, but yeah, could you tell us a little bit more about your involvement, maybe kind of where it started off and what your experience has been like so far?

Nerys Hall - 05:48

I started kayaking at my kayak club. I've been there for six years, so it's a really good community that's been built there and it's a really good support system. So I started competing internationally in 2021, which was like a really big step for me mentally because coming out of COVID it was a bit of a [...] bit all over the place.

We didn't really know what we were getting into. It was a really good experience for me, but it came as quite a lot of challenges and new pressures, which especially before my diagnosis of ADHD, I didn't quite know how to deal with. So that was such an important part of my kind of journey as a paddler in the last couple of years.

But before that it was it was difficult to understand me and how I worked and it caused some problems of relationships with people, how my coaches coached me and balancing the life of a teenager, like school, social and and sport. So I went through a couple of years of what we thought was anxiety and depression. But clearly after that we worked out it wasn't it was a moment of clarity when we found out about my diagnosis.

And as we've gone through, it's been so important for me to learn how I work and how I can kind of get the best out of me in the sport and make adaptations and learn that it's okay to make an adaptation for yourself and kind of teach other people how to how to accommodate for that. Because as we know, there are many neurodivergent people in sport, even if they're not aware of it, even themselves. So making accommodations can even help the people who don't even know it yet. I think that's really important.

So I did a presentation in October, I think, to some of the coaches in the community, just try and develop an understanding, to start a conversation. And that was really helpful for me,

even if it wasn't for the coaches just to kind of get my word out there and kind of make something happen out there. So ...

Helena Russo - 07:36

So, Caragh, if we come to you as well, if you tell us a little bit more about your involvement in your sport, in rowing - really high performance - and what your experience has been like alongside that [...] you touched on a little bit, but it'd be great to sort of understand what your highlights, what your lowlights were in in that space.

Caragh McMurtry - 07:51

I think highlights were like very early on. So I started rowing through an outreach project. I was really keen on a lot of sports. I found that sport was a way for me to communicate through my actions and not my words. And I come across quite eloquent a lot of the time, but that that's hiding a lot of difficulties that I have with communication.

It's kind of partly what attracted me to sport in the first place, and especially rowing. I found it really therapeutic to be on the water to feel part of a team, but also to have that like solo element. So that was a really nice balance. And I found that I was quite good at it straight away and I think a lot of that was to do with my neurodivergent traits. Like if I, if I enjoy something, I'll put everything into it. I'm a good problem solver. I have good attention to detail, very determined, and I think a lot of that is down to my autism. But obviously, at the time I didn't know it. I ended up making it to the Junior World Championships, getting a silver medal. Got a silver medal with the under 23s. Got onto the senior squad. And for a short period of time while I was still at university I was doing well because I still had a bit of freedom to control my own time in the way I did things.

I'd say the low lights [...] The low lights came the five years after that where I was obviously misdiagnosed with bipolar. And that misdiagnosis came about because I think obviously - Nerys touched upon it then - when you're not understood or you don't understand yourself, you're not understood, you're not doing things the way that's ideal for you, like I was able to

do when I was more in control of my own time and my own journey, you end up just almost like burning out quite a lot.

And I think that burnout and then the regrouping - because I naturally am quite determined person, problem solver, like I said - from the outside, it could have looked like some kind of mood disorder, I guess. And yeah, and I think I just trusted the so-called experts around me and I was just so determined to do better that I just took the advice and I probably didn't quite listen to my own true thoughts and feelings about it.

And the five years that were like, not so great at all was just it was felt like five years of me just doing mental gymnastics in my head. Having a thousand different rules and like an equation for each situation. And that is just exhausting. And I didn't get the best out of myself at all. And the other people around me didn't get the best out of me either.

And I went from someone who was like thriving and meddling to someone who was just treading water and only really just able to sort of stay on the squad. So B Final quite consistently. I look back and in context, I'm like, "Wow, that's still incredible". But at the time it's, you know, you don't want to be sort of hamstrung and just doing well "in spite of" you want to be doing well "because of" which is what it was like before.

And then when I got my actual diagnosis again - like Nerys - it was everything suddenly fell into place. And rather than beating myself up and constantly trying to fit myself into a box that I didn't fit in or kind of allow others to try and push me in that direction. I learned the formula to my own success and I learned also how to self-advocate.

It gave me a bit of confidence to say draw where the line was. And I think having that understanding - obviously not being on the medication but having a bit of a communication plan, which was really simple - and a bit of therapy directed in the right way, I think any therapy I had before that was trying to change me, whereas this therapy was like, okay, you know, what's happened to you? Like how do we resolve this? How do we make sense of it? And then how do we give you strategies to get the best out of yourself? That really enabled me to go from spare in 2019 to being selected for the Olympics twice because of COVID. And I got a medal at the World Cup in 2021. But I still faced stigma and discrimination, and I think that came from a lack of understanding and awareness.

So it's like I, I knew the formula to my own success. I was like, okay, it's going to be very much pot luck as to whether I can actually action this. Very much depends on who's around me. And I guess I was just really tired from the ten years

I was tired from the ten years of fighting and that's why I was like, okay, I think it's time for me to use this huge amount of knowledge in a way that's going to be most effective, and that would be to help current and future neurodivergent athletes, and do that by educating, raising awareness and educating. Think it's probably [...] Which is why I love the fact that you've got this podcast.

I think the people that can make the most difference with the least amount of effort are coaches, and it purely comes from an awareness and understanding. And then people are intelligent. If they have that basis of knowledge, they'll be able to make those tiniest little adjustments in the day that could make all the difference to a person.

It might just be, you know, you see you see someone's behaviour in the context of knowing that they have autism and you know that that means something different to a neurotypical person. And you think, okay, I just need to check in with them. Or, you know, someone's behaviour in the context of ADHD and you know that you might have to [...] “Okay, they're not interacting with this. I might need to use another type of language or I need to explain this using imagery or something like that.” I don't think neuro-inclusion in sport is difficult, but [...]

Helena Russo – 13:36

It's just not well understood.

Caragh McMurtry - 13:38

It's not understood and it starts with that understanding.

Helena Russo - 13:41

Yeah. Thanks, Caragh. That was amazing. And Nerys, I could see you nodding along to quite a few of those pieces there. So hopefully there's a lot of bits in there. And I know the bit I wanted to touch on were also from kind of your involvement in sport as in your presentation that you talked about to some of the community coaches.

You talked a lot about understanding yourself and being able to kind of self-manage with things like good sleep, rest, diet and things like that and actually having that understanding that actually you managing your ADHD gave you some of those tools to address that. So is there anything in there that kind of you wanted to pull out? Was there anything that that Caragh said that that you wanted to kind of tap into and share your own side of things?

Nerys Hall - 14:15

Yeah, well, I mean, the majority of stuff that Caragh just said crosses over to ADHD perfectly. But I think that the big thing is the little adjustments like it's not that difficult to help a little bit. We don't expect everybody to just like, drop everything and be like, "Look Nerys, are you okay? What do you want? What did you want to do?" Like, that's not it's not really what the expectation is.

It's small things you can do in an everyday training session and it's just little adaptations. Like for me and a lot of people with ADHD we really thrive on positive reinforcement. That is [...] It's so important. And if you're not in an environment where that's happening, I'll have a breakdown, sometimes if it's a pressuring environment that sometimes is classically given in sport with, "Oh, put pressure on them and they'll perform well". That doesn't work for me. And I think people perceive that as a weakness or lack of mental toughness or I'm not committed or I'm not trying hard enough, or I'm looking for excuses. And that especially as someone with stereotypically low self-esteem anyway, as you know, divergent people are, that can have a massive impact on you because in your moments when your doubting yourself, not having the reinforcement from people around you that you are doing really well and you have you have the potential to make it so much more difficult.

So by putting things in place, you can prevent a whole chain of things happening from that. And I think it's really important that people know what they can do, because I do understand that you can be told, "Oh, can you help me?" and you don't know [...] coaches don't know what to do. Like I wouldn't expect them to know without them asking and having conversations about it.

And I think it's really important that coaches have conversations with the athletes because it might be an awkward conversation - like you've never talked about that before. But I can guarantee most people will be incredibly grateful that you've shown an interest and are willing to have a conversation about it.

Helena Russo - 16:12

Brill, thank you. And Caragh, I wanted to come to you with a question about I guess, you know - with both of you are performance athletes. Both of you sit in a space that is - as you've said, Nerys - very kind of high pressure. If there was a kind of top two things that you think coaches should be thinking about in terms of bringing into their sessions or their practice? Is there anything that really worked for you, Caragh, when you were kind of working towards an Olympic spot, or is it just that, you know, some of those conversations grow and change through the process? Was there anything in particular that you think was is really impactful for coaches listening to this episode to take away and think about?

Caragh McMurtry - 16:47

It's really hard to speak for all and pick a top two. I just wanted to say that I so agree with what Nerys said about. I think in sport there's this ethos of to make a strong athlete, you have to be hard and you have to challenge them mentally every day. But we have to appreciate that a lot of neurodivergent people are fighting every day in the rest of their lives and actually a little bit of of kindness or like just encouragement can go so far. And that's not being soft.

You're actually just [...] You're allowing that person to access parts of themselves and to push themselves harder and further. So I just wanted to agree with that 100% that this old-

school style of coaching is definitely doesn't work for everyone. And I'll just leave it at that. So I don't go too far down that path and offend a lot of people. But in terms of top tips, for me personally, it would be please explain your workings out.

I think in my experience, a lot of coaches have got quite almost like affronted when I ask a lot of questions. I mean, speaking to a lot of neuro-divergent athletes, I've heard that this is quite a common experience. I think if you don't know about bottom-up thinking and sort of like that kind of autistic thinking, of course you're going to interpret those questions as a sort of like an undermining action.

But if people understood just that little bit about neurodivergent brains that, like I said, that bottom-up thinking, you can't just take things at face value. You can't just hold this instruction in space. You have to know everything that comes underneath it or before it for it to stay there. That's kind of how in my head, how I picture it and how I explain it well. Like it doesn't just stay there. I need the foundation of knowledge to make it make sense and to be able to invest. So if I'm asking a lot of questions, it's not because I'm like, trying to show you up. I'm actually trying to understand so that I can really buy into it. And yeah, I've had a lot of had a lot of backlash from that in the past, and I wish people just knew that my intentions were [...] I actually really want to buy into what you're saying. I just need to fully understand. So that's an example for me again.

Helena Russo - 19:23

I think that's so interesting. Because I'm a coach - not in paddlesport, but in another sport - and I think I'd be really honoured if like somebody wants to work with me to really understand that breakdown. And you know, definitely we have a person-centred approach at British Canoeing. That's part of our philosophy. And having that curiosity is a really lovely part of that, sometimes of that coaching process. So it's really interesting that you raise that. And I could see Nerys nodding along furiously there. So I think there's some really kind of shared elements there, which is fascinating.

Caragh McMurtry - 19:51

And I would say quickly. It's just you saying Nerys is nodding along, and we both have different diagnoses. But this is why I like the term neurodivergent, because it is an umbrella term and like I have a diagnosis of autism, but I have a lot of ADHD traits as well. And often people do have overlapping neurodivergent traits like you will find actually just educating yourself on neurodivergence in general will allow you to help a lot of people: neurodivergent and neurotypical.

But yeah, I totally. It's funny that you say that you would feel honoured, but unfortunately some people don't. And maybe that's because you are more aware of neurodiversity and different ways of thinking, and some people haven't ever been in contact with that. So they'll take it in a way that it would come from them. So if they were asking someone a lot of questions, perhaps it would be that they're questioning them on the validity of what they're saying and the knowledge. So because I imagine that's where it comes from. So it's just understanding that some people think differently. First and foremost, really.

Helena Russo - 20:57

Absolutely. Brilliant. Anything else on your top tips? Is there anything else?

Caragh McMurtry - 21:00

Yeah. I'm just thinking about what was on my communication plan. So my communication plan was three things. It was so in the morning, you know, the coach might check in with their athletes to try not to ask me open-ended questions, especially about my feelings. And it's not that I can't understand my own feelings, but it's that it takes me a bit of time and sometimes as well, it would be hard for me to really access that part of my brain and communicate that in a room where we're all stretching and there's loads noise and like lots of people around.

It does take me a bit of time to be introspective so we could come up with a strategy that's like, I don't know, like a scaling system or ask me something objective rather than

subjective. And then if you want to really get into the nuts and bolts of my feelings, let's have a quick meeting. After training or email me some questions and I'll think about it in the evening and tell you tomorrow.

But in terms of the day-to-day, if you come up to me and you say, "How you feeling today?", I'll answer - 99% of the time will be "I'm fine". That will be my answer straight away, because it's just not a question I can access the answer to there and then. So that was one thing on my communication plan.

The second thing was just to check that I got the right message from a briefing. So that's like a group briefing. You know, it could be as simple as - while is everyone stretching or while we're walking out towards the boats - you just say, "Caragh, what did you get from that?" And then I'll repeat what I think I got, and then they'll just say, "Yeah, nice. You got it." Or they'll say, "Actually, you've interpreted that slightly wrong. We want people to do this or think this way." Perfect scenario would be that a coach would say, "Well, you know what? I hadn't actually thought of it like that. Let me let me incorporate what you just said into, into my thinking." But yeah, ultimately, it's just making sure that, you know, the very start of the session and just make sure that I'm on the same page as you because it solves a multitude of problems down the line.

And just know that if I, if I've interpreted something differently, it's not because I'm not listening, it's because I think differently. But thinking differently isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's innovative and you need to think differently to progress.

And then the last thing is not necessarily for the coaches - it's more for like support workers in the building as a whole - but it was just to make sure that there's plain food available in the cafeteria. Just because when I get like really tired, it's one less thing to have to deal with is like really intense flavours. And I don't want to have to be [...] I already feel different and weird a lot of the times. I don't want to be that person that goes up to the chef and says, "I'm sorry, you've just cooked this amazing meal and everyone is ranting and raving about it, but can I just have some plain pasta? Thank you." I'd rather just be there. And, you know, I wouldn't mind being honest about it if people had a background understanding of neurodiversity. And that I'm not just being awkward, but if people don't have that

background knowledge, then I would rather just do on the slide. Then I don't have to explain myself in every situation, which gets really, really tiring.

Helena Russo - 24:17

I can imagine.

Caragh McMurtry - 24:20

Yeah. I think the only the only other thing I was thinking a good bit of advice and it was something that [...] So it was [...] I was talking to a swimmer who was a GB swimmer and he like was I think he was Adam Peaty's training partner and he does a bit of coaching now. So he has high functioning autism.

And I asked him like, what would your best bit of advice be for a coach who - say in swimming - they coach like huge numbers of like kids at one time and you know was playing devil's advocate. And I was like, well, how do you accommodate for another neurodivergent individual in that situation? And he was like, okay, right. The best bit of advice I could give to a coach, if you see like potentially discriminatory or bullying behaviours, you do something about it and you say, "No, that's not okay."

And it's as simple as that. But like he was talking about how, you know, you might have a person with autism or something and like they're really enjoying themselves in the pool. And because that looks a bit different, or maybe they're working really hard because that looks a bit different, you get those sly looks, you get stares or you get someone calling them a name. Straightaway you say, "No, stop it. That's not okay." Because ultimately, how the coach views neurodivergence, how they treat neurodivergent people, how they ensure that they're not discriminated against, that like drips down and everyone will follow suit. So it can have like a cascade of a positive effect or negative if you're turning a blind eye. Yeah, that says a thousand words. So don't turn a blind eye.

Helena Russo - 26:04

So active allyship almost, isn't it? Of you know [...] You would manage it with any other kind of behavior, wouldn't you in that sense? If it was racist language or, you know, homophobic abuse, but actually understanding that they may be, yes okay, that athlete or that individual might be acting slightly differently to the rest of the group, but there's no reason for that to be an acceptable behavior. So, yeah, that sort of active allyship. I think that's a really great point. Thanks, Caragh.

Over to you, Nerys. Same kind of question, what are some of the things that you've been working on with your coaches? Is there anything that you think has worked really well for you or that you've seen for other neurodivergent athletes that coaches can kind of be picking up and thinking about in their sessions or when they're working with athletes?

Nerys Hall - 26:43

I think a lot of the things are quite similar, just in a slightly different way. But touching on the second point, you said, I think for me one big thing is knowing sessions beforehand. If I'm on a training camp, knowing what's happening on the training camp, knowing where I need to be at what time, or being like set out beforehand.

So I don't necessarily have to ask all those questions that I don't always like asking, and it means that I can have that certainty and just focus on what I need to do and not get overwhelmed with all the things and the checking - that I understand - that is also really important. So what I do is my technique coach and it's always a conversation when we talk about a technique. So it's always [...] he says something to me. I go, "Oh, never thought of that. Okay." Back and forth conversation. So he's kind of verifying that I understand. So I repeat back what what I've understood from what he said to him. And he goes, "Yeah, cool. Give it go." And nine times out of ten I do it right or close to doing it right. You know, it comes across comes across properly. I think that's pretty important.

And I mean - slightly opposite to what you said, Caragh - sometimes I'm not listening. So sometimes, sometimes I do need it repeated. I think that's just being receptive to that. So I just go "Oh, sorry. I wasn't quite listening there. Can you repeat that?" And it's not being

like, “Why weren't you listening? You should be paying attention, you should be engaged”.

It's just being like, “Oh yeah, no, no worries. It's this.” And I think that's really important because it makes you feel just more comfortable because you're being accommodated for.

I think the other thing which is similar with my technique coach, we have a very good relationship and some me especially, I think that's really important that you make an effort to get to know your athlete, even on like a friendship level, it doesn't even have to be in a sport sense at the start. It's just, it's just being friendly, having conversations outside of it. I think that's really important because once you have that level of trust, you can start having those conversations of what you can do to help us, what we can do to help you understand. Like it just makes everything so much smoother and it's easier for me to receive like positive reinforcement. For me that just makes that easier and create an environment that I work best, I think.

Helena Russo - 28:59

Awesome. Thanks, Nerys.

Debbie Thompson - 29:01

I thought that was really interesting, the way you're both talking about some of the maybe kind of umbrella things that might go across different people with varying conditions. But then also really important the individual as well. It is making sure we're not just thinking, “Ah, I understand that neurodivergent people will want X and Y” and not having that conversation with the person in front of you, the person that you are coaching.

Carah McMurtry - 29:26

Yeah. Agreed.

Debbie Thompson - 29:27

So Caragh, looking now at your post- athlete career with Neurodiverse Sport, you're supporting sports and coaches to address the lack of understanding around neurodiversity and improve other people's experience so they don't have to go through some of the things that that you went through. How are you doing that? What are the steps that you're taking?

Caragh McMurtry - 29:47

Yes, so it's pretty much a three-pronged approach at the moment. So we've got the awareness raising, sort of changing perception side of it. I like to sort of call it the rewrite the narrative project. So I interview athletes pretty much every week and I put the interview out on [...] It might be a reel, it might be written, it might be a video interview - whatever they're comfortable with.

But really talk about some of the struggles, but not in terms of, "Okay, why does your condition make you struggle?" It's more like, "why does the environment make you struggle?" Because I think that it's environments that are disabling, not conditions. And then we talk about, okay, what has your condition given you that's made you a really good athlete?

And I think that focus on the positive is really trying to combat the stigma that currently exists and, you know, try and do a bit of myth busting and at the end I might say, you know, "what is it you want to see change in the space?" or "what are your top tips for coaches?" Part of the awareness raising.

So rewrite the narrative project, as well as changing other people's perceptions. Like a big part of it was creating role models and a sense of community. Because I think those two things, because people are advised to not talk about the neurodivergence, they don't want to, they're worried about stigma. You end up being like little islands, even within a squad, but also spread out throughout different sports and you don't actually communicate with each other. And the only people that you see is role models, say like Michael Phelps, who's got however many Olympic medals and is seen as an exception to the rule. You don't see all these people who are working every day and achieving. And it's really important to see

those people and see that you don't have to be - I guess, like you obviously aspire to be that amazing person - but you can be like everybody else as well. You can be working towards that. You don't have to be there a straight way. So yeah, so that's, that's the awareness raising side of it, changing perception.

And then starting to do a bit of education work. So like workshops. And I'm actually potentially going to be partnering with the EIS to do some of that stuff. So that's very exciting, and it's really exciting that they're obviously really keen to develop their understanding in this area and to be a catalyst for change. So that's really great.

And then the third thing is research, because there's just not enough research in this area as much as I've got a lot of anecdotal evidence because literally like be going for four months and I've had so many athletes contact us and some of them want to talk, some of them just want to say, "What you're doing is great. Thank you so much. I'm not ready to talk." Because a lot of athletes are struggling still in the shadows. As much as you've got lots of anecdotal evidence, fundamentally you need to get the research going so that we can analyze properly. And that's only going to help us to be able to advise better. So we've got some research in the bank. We're going to be rolled out in the next few months with Reading University's Centre for Autism Research and King's College. One of their departments is focusing on like ADHD in sport. So that's very exciting. And then the innovations department at the EIS. So it's all kicking off considering there was nothing like when I did my initial research and literature review everything for Neurodiverse Sport, I literally couldn't find anything.

I think I found three articles that were vaguely related to neurodiversity in sport. One was French. I know. Yeah. But like it does feel like a topic that ten, even five years ago was not talked about. And it's literally happening right now. And it's really, really exciting. But yeah, somebody needs to get the ball rolling and hopefully we're kind of helping to do it, hoping to join the dots at least between the little places where it's kind of developing.

So yeah, those are the things that that we're doing. And also after this call, I'm going to get back hold of Nerys and say, "Hey, you want to be on my monthly blog?"

Nerys Hall - 00:34:13

Definitely!

Caragh McMurtry - 34:14

I'm definitely grateful to [...] I genuinely am so grateful to the athletes who are brave enough to speak up because a lot of athletes get advised to not talk about their neurodivergent conditions. And, you know, although the narrative is changing, it's really scary and it's really brave of the athletes to do that. Like, I only felt able to do it after I retired.

So I just wanted to say thank you so much to all of the athletes who have reached out and who have spoken. And also Nerys, it's really amazing what you're doing. And also to you guys because you're like hosting this.

Helena Russo - 34:49

So thank you. It's been lovely to have you. Thank you for all of your input.

Nerys, I wanted to come up to you to sort of wrap up some of this conversation. I know you've talked so wonderfully about your real, you know, moment of clarity, the transition that you've had through from kind of knowing that the set up around you. I think, Caragh, I completely agree with you in that it's often the situation that is causing those barriers to how well we're doing and you're doing in that space rather than any condition. But are there any misconceptions around neurodiversity or neurodivergent conditions in the main or your ADHD, or your experience of ADHD that you kind of want to debunk for any listeners? Things that might surprise people to know about your experience of ADHD.

Nerys Hall - 35:31

I mean, I think there are many, firstly. But big one for me and that has I think has been the big one in the past few years when I've been learning about myself is, is the lazy

misconception. People, especially with ADHD, they assume that because of the way we work, we don't care and we're too lazy and we're not committed, and we don't work hard enough. And that is such a difficult thing to deal with, and it's just not true. There are so many things that we have to deal with behind the scenes, and it can take ten times as much energy for me to do the things in the day that you don't even think about. So by the time I get to training, there are all these hurdles that I see behind me that you haven't ever experienced, which I wouldn't expect anybody to know.

But it's I think it's just because people don't see it, it's not denying it's there. You see people a lot being, "Well, you're fine usually. Well, you're working hard now. Why can't you do that all the time?" Just because you don't see how I have to cope with things and the stuff I have to do doesn't mean it's not there. And just because you don't understand the condition doesn't mean it's not real. You wouldn't talk to her like a rocket scientist and go like, "Oh yeah, I don't understand the maths behind that. It must be fake." When you put it like that, it sounds so stupid, but I think really getting rid of lazy attachment to it.

Stuff like ADHD paralysis, for example, is a big part for me. And it's just, it's just the state you get in when you just can't do it. You so overwhelmed, you get so tired, you just can't do anything. And the best way I can describe that to people is if I asked you to put your bare hand on a hot hob. I will give you a thousand pounds if you put your hand on that hob. and people go, "Well, I can't do that."

My hands are not doing it. Something in my brain stops me from doing that because I know it will hurt me. And that is the best way I can describe ADHD paralysis is that something in my brain is stopping me from doing what I need to do because it's going to use up all my energy because I only have a certain energy source. Or it's perceived as stressful and I don't want to have to deal with that. Or I think I won't be good at it. Or all these things that are always there, like low self-esteem, all those things that manifest in that.

And I think that's a really important thing to understand, because that is where some of the lazy connotations come from.

Helena Russo - 37:46

I find it so interesting that you touch on that actually, because I know in your presentation to the community coaches, you talked about some of your super powers - if that's the right way to use - in terms of the things that are part of or a component of your ADHD actually help you to be a really great athlete. You touched a little bit on your hyperfocus, for example.

That's something that as a high performance athlete has really helped you out in terms of being able to commit really, really hard to training sessions. So it's interesting that you bring that up, that there are so, you know, we know that there's so much stigma that sits around neurodivergence still, but actually you've talked openly about how actually it's supported you really quite widely in your in your career. Is there anything else that's really sort of driven you in this space?

Nerys Hall - 38:28

For me, perfectionism has always been a big thing in my life. Sometimes it's been a bad thing. Sometimes it's been a good thing. And I am only now learning to balance between the perfectionism of a routine and knowing what's happening to the adaptability side of it. But in a sport like kayaking, where technique is such an important part, perfectionism is great because I can get really interested in why that's happening, why do I need to extend this arm on out to here? Like, I'm really willing to get into that because I want to get it right and I find it really interesting. And I think that's a big thing about ADHD is that if I find it interesting, you can't pull me away. There's no question that I am totally invested.

And it is something to manage. That can be difficult and hold you back in other areas. But if you use it in the right way, it can be so helpful. Like I have the ability [...] So for example, I do textiles A-level. I have the ability to sit there for eight hours and my work, but I'm not going to do that all the time because I've learned that if I do that, then I'm absolutely knocked out and I can't do anything the next day.

So it's working with your coaches to know where your limits are, I think. Because some coaches, if you only see my physical energy, then I could keep going on forever. But if we

keep going until I am mentally run down, you're not going to see me for however long because I pushed it too far. And in my development long term, that's not going to help me.

So it really helps me adapt my training plan. And I need to learn to manage my energy and just kind of listen to how I'm feeling and I need a [...] It's good to have coaches that are able to adapt to that and accept when you've made a decision for yourself and that that's according to that.

So another thing, it's not just about enough off is the, the difficulty you have from masking your entire life. Yeah, because masking is basically when you, when you change your behaviour to fit more into what is societal. And I was diagnosed quite late. Seventeen is quite late for lots of people, but many people will go on even longer. Some people get diagnosed and stuff fifties. It can go a long way and I get that being diagnosed diagnosis this early is a big privilege, but it can cause so much stress and so much trauma that you've got to work out after.

Because I was a very quiet kid. I was like, a pleasure to teach, got good grades, all those things. And knowing now that all of that was kind of fabricated by me is quite a difficult thing to come to terms with. And that can [...] All good things come out of a diagnosis. In the long term, it's a great thing. But it can be quite a difficult thing to deal with in the short term because you're working out why you did things, why you were like that, and you're kind of almost grieving what you were like before in an exaggerated sense. Because I'm not like that anymore. Because I'm letting myself be more me and work out a way that works better for me.

And in the long term, I'll be thriving more. But in the meantime, it can be difficult because I'm not performing at school the same way as I was before. So I mean, I'm only doing one A Level and one AS now instead of three A Levels and this time last year I wouldn't have said that on a podcast because it was something that I found very difficult to admit because I used to be such a smart kid, if you like.

So I think it's just important to highlight that it's not just the diagnosis that can make it difficult. It's the being undiagnosed for so long, which is something that can be fixed when we bring more awareness and people get diagnosed earlier. And there's better support for that. So, yeah.

Caragh McMurtry - 42:00

So I was I would really agree with that. And it's why I had trauma therapy. It's part of the reason why I had trauma therapy [laughs]. But also it's just an example for people to understand why we mask. One of the first things that was said to me when I walked into Caversham, the National Training Centre. I mean, I remember it. I literally remember it. I walked up the stairs and some of the heavyweight men were coming down the stairs. And one of them came up in my face and was like, "Smile". Yeah. Just it's just because, like, my resting face, is impassive. And straight away. I was like, "Okay, I need to mask here as well. I need to get my masking going."

Sometimes it's small things like that. And then like I said, I was and ended up being like a walking bunch of rules because I was like, "Must smile here." "Must stay true to myself like this." "Must do this." "Must not be myself because it's not acceptable." But that's just a good example of lots of little things that happen.

Nerys Hall – 43:04

That's exhausting within itself, isn't it? That's like, that's another thing that contributes to it.

Helena Russo - 43:09

It's like the mental energy, isn't it, of having to think about that.

Nerys Hall - 43:12

It takes so much energy to do something like that. I think that just contributes to it. It just exacerbates everything that you find difficult about it when you're tired.

Helena Russo - 43:20

Thank you so much for all of your insights and everything you shared there.

Debbie Thompson - 43:22

Thanks to everyone for listening. We hope this conversation will be helpful to reflect on your coaching practice. Perhaps if you're working with neurodiverse paddlers or maybe even your own experience as a neurodiverse coach. Thank you for listening and until next time.