



19 FREESTYLE

When I first started coaching freestyle, or playboating as it was then, people were finding the basic moves really hard to master and this led to frustration and a much slower learning curve. I soon realised that a lot of the freestyle moves required the paddler to break some fundamental rules that they were taught at a much earlier stage in their paddling life. Freestyle developments constantly challenge both the limits of paddling, and the people coaching this very dynamic and ever-evolving discipline of our sport.

► Do You Have To Be A Great Freestyle Paddler To Be A Great Freestyle Coach?

This question pops up all over the place partly because a lot of retired freestyle paddlers get into coaching and they're the ones we hear about in the paddling press. It does help if you can do the moves, especially for demonstration purposes, but the answer is no. You just need a great understanding of freestyle and an ability to observe and analyse the moves and be able to break them down into individual techniques that make up a move. A top tip for this is to visit good freestyle locations and spend time watching. Using a video is a great way to look closely at technique because you can slow motion and pause the action.

► What's So Different About Coaching Freestyle?

In most if not all aspects of paddlesport the aim of the game is to keep the craft upright, to get through stoppers and use waves merely to move around the river. In the sport of freestyle it's about the boat being upside down, in the air, on its edge whilst rotating and deliberately staying in a hole or pour-over. This is why the freestyle coach needs to think outside the box of normal thought to discover what is possible. It challenges and develops the individual's spatial awareness and alters their kinaesphere. As coaches we have to be able to help develop these areas with our students and some of the techniques needed are outside the paddlesport coach's normal repertoire of coaching skills.

► EQUIPMENT AND SAFETY

Getting the right kit for your students plays a huge part in their learning. A boat or paddle that is either too large or too small will certainly slow their progress or even lead to injury. The softwear they use is also important as they need to be able to move, so getting a specific freestyle buoyancy aid will give more freedom and look the part.



Photo 1 A well equipped freestyle paddler.

FOR THE COACH

Obviously, normal boating and safety kit is needed if you are going to be on the water. If bank-based, consider having a safety boater on the water; this could be the rest of the group if they are competent. As a minimum the coach should be wearing a buoyancy aid, have a throw bag, and a first aid kit should be at hand. Finding yourself on the edge of a weir with your student going round in the hole with no way of helping will be difficult to justify. Other useful kit is a video camera, small whiteboard and a model canoe/kayak as visual coaching aids.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Get this wrong and you will have a disaster! A huge amount of freestyle happens on weirs and these are very often the most dangerous places that you can paddle. Therefore it is essential that you have local knowledge and are aware of any changes that different water levels may bring. Choosing a location that is user-friendly and safe will have the knock-on effect of your students feeling comfortable and able to learn. Most of the fundamental work can be done on very easy sections of river such as eddy lines, small surf waves and even flat pools... you don't need a world class play feature to teach the fundamentals.

► THE EARLY YEARS

The sooner you get your paddlers spinning around, balancing the boat and even standing up in it and generally experimenting, the better. Even if it's their first time in a boat you can give them some great skills that can be developed for the future. Just give them loads of time to see how the boats move and understand how they affect its movement.

Think outside of canoeing as well. Other sports such as gymnastics, dance, diving and martial arts all have areas that link well to freestyle because they all require a high level of spatial awareness and body control.

BREAKING THE WHITE WATER RULES

- ✗ Rule 1. "Always edge into the turn when turning into or out of the current."
- ✗ Rule 2. "Never edge the boat upstream when side-surfing a stopper."
- ✗ Rule 3. "Don't let the bow or stern get sucked under."

When coaching white water skills we often use phrases like these to make sure our students don't keep falling in. Fair enough, but what happens after they have been paddling by these rules for a couple of years and then want to progress into freestyle? It makes even the most fundamental move, the tailsquirt, a really hard concept to grasp because you need to edge upstream. If we start paddlers out with the concepts above as rules they will stay as rules. If we change our language to reflect the fact that in most situations you edge into the turn but some more advanced skills mean edging away from the turn or upstream, your students will be more open to try things that before they would have been told never to do.



Photo 2 Warming up.

► WARMING UP

Freestyle is a very dynamic sport using a huge range of movement and muscle groups. It is essential that your students are ready for this type of activity. Try to warm up in a way that will reflect the movements that your students will be performing; this doesn't mean stretching, just getting the body warm, the blood flowing and the limbs mobile.

THE BRAIN

You will be expecting your students to try new things and coordinate their bodies in some new and unusual ways. By including some coordination exercises into the warm-up you will both warm the body and the brain, and then they will be both mentally and physically ready to learn and perform.

► As A Bonus

If you think about how to structure the warm-up and take time to observe your students' warm-up session, you can find out loads about them such as physical ability, coordination, flexibility, their ability to acquire new skills and even their preferred learning style in terms of VAK (visual, audio and kinaesthetic).

► FOUNDATION SKILLS

There are certain elements we should address before moving on to specific moves. These are balance, posture and edge.

BALANCE

This is an essential part of becoming a freestyle paddler. In other words the ability to balance your chosen craft both with static and dynamic balance and in a variety of body positions. Every time the body changes position the balance point will change, so it's important to practise balancing the boat with a variety of body positions.

POSTURE

This is how you sit or kneel in the boat. Poor posture can lead to poor technique or worse still injury. Posture is a personal thing depending on the physical make-up of the individual, for example whether a person has the flexibility to sit forward in the boat.

The seat position in the boat is also a factor to consider as most boats come with the seat fitted in the most convenient position for the fitters in the factory. Get your students to sit in the boat on the water and

look to see if it's balanced correctly for the paddler's size and shape. It should be balanced equally at each end; if it's not set up right then the paddler will struggle to perform through no fault of their own. A boat that is bow heavy will bury very easily. A stern heavy boat will feel very twitchy and the edges will catch, making it very unforgiving.



Photo 3 Posture



TOP TIP

Using a Swiss ball is a great way to develop better balance, posture and core stability. Get some good advice on how to use one and give it a go.



Photo 4 Using a Swiss ball.

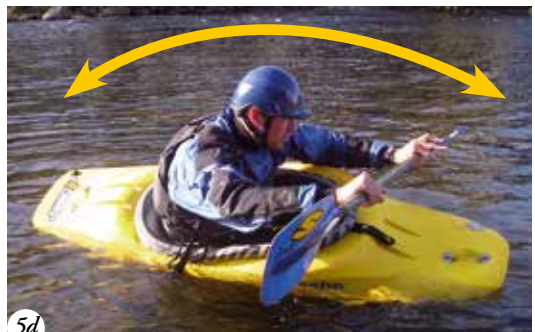
EDGE

Edge control is one of the most important elements of freestyle paddling. From being able to stay upright in a hole to initiating the front end of a cartwheel, most if not all moves are based around a change of edge or holding an edge and rotating around it. To achieve good edge control the posture must be good and so must the outfitting of the boat so as to prevent



PROGRESSIONS

- **exercise one:** Get students wobbling the boat from side to side then try it leaning back then forwards and see which technique gives more control over the edge (this will help them to understand good posture and the best position for edge control).
- **exercise two:** Facing and edging towards the partner.
- **exercise three:** Edging towards partner with body and head facing away.
- **exercise four:** Edging and leaning forwards and backwards.
- **exercise five:** On the move, paddling in a circle, try edging both to the inside of the turn and then the outside, (this gets the paddler used to the water pressure on the edge of the boat on the outside of the turn).



Remember everything must be practised on both sides!

the paddler sliding around inside. Take time to help outfit your students' boats to ensure a good fit.

Take time to get them to understand the ways in which edge can be achieved, such as a knee lift or hip drop/buttock push. Have them consider how body rotation causes the boat to edge and how each different technique affects the boat and which technique or combination of techniques is used for each different

move. For example a back stab uses a very dynamic hip and knee lift combined with body rotation, whereas a cartwheel uses more of a buttock push, progressing to knee lift, then into body rotation edge to create edge.

The ability to change edge is just as important. So make sure your students practise on both sides and have the ability to change from one edge to the other without a thought.

▶ USING THE POOL

Even though freestyle is a white water sport a huge amount of learning can happen in the pool, from rolling to flat water loops, stalls and cartwheels.

ROLLING

Whilst learning freestyle your students will soon be capsizing in a huge variety of positions and situations. Take time in the pool to develop a bombproof roll that works from a whole range of positions, from front and back loops and falling in whilst pirouetting. All will help when they are in the hole and getting power-flipped time and time again. The ability to roll quickly is essential so as to maintain position in the feature.

SPATIAL AWARENESS

As mentioned earlier this is fundamental for freestyle and the pool can be a great place to develop these skills by playing some games such as:

1. Pair up. One partner is to tuck up into a ball and the other picks a target for the partner to point at after they have been tumbled around in the water. This will help them to know where they are whilst spinning. This can then be repeated in the boat as well by rolling up and pointing to the target.
2. Modelling other moves. For example a semi-straight legged somersault (piked) is similar to the front loop.

▶ Introducing Balance And Rotation Moves

Fill the boat with water and get your students to try balancing the boat, first on the front end then the back. As the coach you help them by holding the position for them until they have found the balance point, this can be done both in the middle of the pool or using the edge for a bow stall. Then go on to do the same with the boat empty.



Photo 6 Bow stall

For the rotation fill the boat with water and get them to try pirouetting the boat around, firstly by using the paddle and secondly by only using body rotation.



Photo 7a Rotation with the paddle

Photo 7b Rotation without the paddle

▶ Vertical Moves

As a coach you can help your paddlers with their cartwheels by spotting them much like a gymnastics coach would. Be careful as there are boats and paddles being thrown around very close to you.



Photo 8 Loops

You can even coach loops in the pool by giving your paddler enough angle and down force that they can get the feel and the timing needed.

▶ WAVE SURFING

The ability to surf a wave and move around it is essential. Learning how the boat reacts on all the different parts of a wave will develop a great understanding of positioning, and positioning is key to achieving the more advanced freestyle moves such as blunts, flip turns, donkey flips and a host of other tricks that are still being invented.

ZONING AND POSITIONING

- 👉 Stage 1 - Start by getting them to be able to split the wave into zones and identify the differences across the wave. This will help them to understand the shape of the wave and which zone can be used.

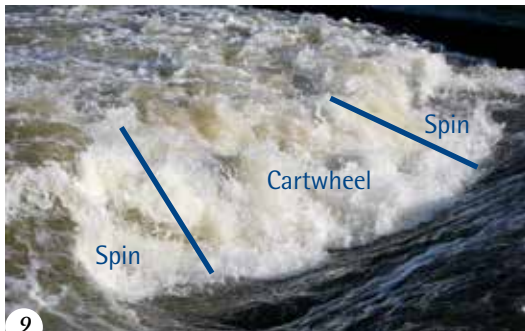


Photo 9 Split the wave into zones.

- 👉 Stage 2 - Get them to move around each zone and then hold position in each zone. They will soon learn which zone of the wave they can stay in and which zones mean they have to keep moving, which parts give them speed and which zones give them time to rest or set up for a move.

- 👉 Stage 3 - Encourage them to use their body to position the boat, using trim to gain or lose speed and edge control to move across the wave.



Photo 10 Using the body.

HOLE SURFING

Choose carefully. The right hole can be great fun, the wrong hole can be a very frightening experience.



Photo 11a Good hole!

Photo 11b Bad hole!

As with the wave, the hole can be split into zones. They can look for steep sections, release points, sticky sections and radials.

Before any moves can be learnt it's essential that they are comfortable in the hole and can exit the hole whenever they wish. Once this has been achieved it's time to start to move around the hole, with your students finding their way around the zones. They need to learn what each zone can be used for, such as the corners for spins or setting up cartwheels and loops, and using the sticky zones for regaining the hole.



Photo 12 Getting comfortable in the hole.

▶ GETTING VERTICAL

This is the one thing that every freestyle paddler wants and needs, the boat on end. Almost all the current moves are based around the boat being on end. Without the previous parts this just will not happen, so make sure they have good balance and edge control.

Find a good feature for performing enders and pop outs and you can work a whole host of vertical moves from pirouettes to cartwheels. This could be a small ledge drop, a pour-over or just a feature where the

water comes off a corner creating a drop. It ideally needs to be deep and have good eddy service.

By getting them to be able to control the boat on end they can progress to pirouettes and then to cartwheels.



TOP TIP

- When trying transferring flat water cartwheels to a hole, practise on the flat as if you were in a hole. Pick a target on the bank to aim the bow and stern at, and spot the point with your head. Make sure that every end falls in line with the target and this should stop the boat walking around.



EXERCISES FOR CARTWHEELS

- **exercise one:** Get your paddler to think about using their legs when turning on the spot, a scissor action with the legs and paddle.
- **exercise two:** Lifting the bow with combo of edge, body and paddle.
- **exercise three:** Pushing the bow down with the same combo.
- **exercise four:** Combine 2 and 3 to get the boat spinning around without using the paddle.

This exercise is good for encouraging paddlers to use the body more than the blade when cartwheeling. If this technique is then converted to a vertical axis it will lead to a smoother style.

With all the above exercises make sure they are not just throwing their weight backwards and forwards but are using the legs and hips in conjunction with the paddle.



13b



13c



13a



13d

▶ LOOKING AT SHAPE AND MOVEMENT

All freestyle moves involve the boat moving through from 0° to 180° to 360° on one axis or another. The way in which it moves is important as it can give away clues to how the paddler is performing it, its efficiency and whether or not it's actually performed correctly.

SOME COMMON PROBLEMS WITH THE FOUNDATION MOVES:

▶ Tail Squirts

○ The paddler keeps falling in when crossing the eddy line. This is commonly due to one of two problems:

- Either the angle out of the eddy being too aggressive, which can usually be cured by letting the boat turn further downstream before the initiation reverse sweep.
- Or because the paddler is not comfortable in dropping the upstream edge whilst rotating the body the opposite way.

▶ Cartwheeling

○ When cartwheeling ask yourself if the boat's ends travel through a circular motion? If they are, the paddler is using well-timed rotation between ends and will be able to retain the feature and have more control.

○ Are the boat's ends forming an elliptical movement? If they are the paddler is using a forwards and backwards weight throw to force the ends around. This will lead to the paddler flushing from the hole and losing control and will make it hard to link to other moves. The technique described earlier can help solve this.

○ Does the boat flatten out on the second end? This could be because the body is rotating too early for the next end. Get them to wait until the stern of the boat reaches 12 o'clock.

▶ Spinning

○ The paddler initiates the spin with the paddle after they have looked back upstream. This can lead to an inefficient sweep and the amount of spin created will be reduced.

○ The boat is badly positioned on the wave or in the hole. This will make the spin either impossible or a lot harder than need be. Can be solved by using the zoning described earlier.

○ When flat spinning, look at the path the boat travels through, and ask yourself is the boat spinning on the spot or does it travel across the wave or hole? If it travels then the most common problem is that the paddler is edging the boat too much, leading to the boat starting to carve. This is common if paddlers lean back whilst applying the forward sweep in the final 180° part of the move. If the boat does not travel then good technique is being applied and the boat is flat spinning.

CLEAN MOVES

These are moves that only use the paddle for part of the move, for example with a cartwheel. If you only use the blade for the first end and body rotation for the second end that would be a clean cartwheel. If you went to the third end it would be a super clean cartwheel. These type of tricks involve an enormous amount of control over the boat and body. The ability to spin the boat without using the paddle is essential. You can work towards this by giving them a C1 paddle as it forces them to use the body and not the blade for the stern end.

▶ OFF WATER EXERCISES

There are many things that can affect your student's learning. It could be the environment being too exciting, the paddler having to concentrate on staying upright or it could be that there is too much to think about, with the feature, the boat, the paddle, and capsizing all getting in the way of learning. By removing some of these factors we can coach the basic technique then put the environment back.

DRY WAVES

Using a dry ski slope or sand dune is a great way to help your paddlers to get the feel of speed under the hull. It can be used for coaching basic straight surfing, flat spins or carving turns. The paddler can try many new things without the fear of wiping out and taking a beating or the fight to get on the wave. They can practise the technique time and time again and gain a good understanding of the move.

▶ Safety

Be careful with using dry ski slopes as a crash can be nasty. Paddlers should be wearing gloves and helmet

and the coach should do a test run to check how high up the slope you need to take them. It's not normally as high as you would expect or like.

CANES

Tie two garden canes together at each end. Your student can then step between the two canes and hey presto they have the outline of a boat that sits on the hips and moves when they do! This is a great way of helping your students understand movement and where the boat, body and blade is during each move, whether it's surfing a wave, spinning on the corner of a hole or learning the sequence of a cartwheel in the car park next to the river. It works really well for getting the timing between edge changes, rotation and paddle switch.

MAPPING THE FEATURE

To help your students understand the different zones and where to position themselves on a particular feature, you can get them to draw the feature on paper or in the sand or dirt. A throw line works really well as they can get very detailed with it and there is no trace after you have finished. They can then walk through the different zones and model the moves on dry land. Add in the canes idea and the world's your oyster.

MAKING IT WORK EVERYWHERE

To help your students be able to repeat their performance in other features they must fully understand how the moves work and how each wave, hole and eddy line can be used. They need to be able to identify features and recognise which moves can be performed in each feature before going in to paddle it.



Photo 14 Canes

► COACHING MORE ADVANCED MOVES

Lots of coaches say: "I wouldn't know where to start with coaching the new moves". In truth the new moves are mostly adaptations of the easier moves or a few moves linked together, for example:

Pheonix monkey = Pirouette into front loop.

Tricky whoo = 2 split wheels together but using one blade throughout the move.

Take a look at any move and break it down, bit by bit and see what other moves are hidden within it. If you can use a video camera to do this it will be easier to slow the action down.

Freestyle is a fast-developing discipline of canoe-sport. As a coach you will need to stay in tune with all the developments, both in the moves and boat design, as new boats mean new thinking as to what is possible. This may mean going to freestyle events or purchasing good videos. Even better, go out and play. Freestyle moves are complex and a good demo goes a long way.

PETE CATTERALL

Pete Catterall is a Level 5 Inland Coach and works full time at Plas y Brenin, the UK National Mountain Centre. He is also the head coach for the GB Freestyle Team and helped them to medal successes at both the 2004 European and 2005 World Championships. As well as coaching, Pete has paddled extensively in Europe, India, Africa and South America and has accomplished three multi-day first descents in the previously unexplored region of Arunachel Pradesh in north-east India.

