

**Pete Catterall 00:00:13**

So welcome to the Coaching Podcast. My name's Pete Catterall, the Talent Coach Developer for British Canoeing, working across all the competitive disciplines. And the podcast today, I'd like to welcome Dr. Loel Collins from Plas y Brenin to introduce himself and then we'll get into the meat of the podcast and what we're going to chat about today. So, Loel, could you just give us a quick résumé of who you are, what you do, where you do it, why you do it? But yeah, we'll go with that.

**Loel Collins**

Okay, lovely. Yeah. I work as the Director of Learning and Development at the National Outdoor Centre in Plas y Brenin. Before that I was an academic and have spent the last ten years doing research and teaching around professional practices and professional decision making in adventure sports, in particular, what professionals do in that part of the sport.

My background before that was as a paddler back in the day as a whitewater kayaker and now more predominantly a canoeist. I was fortunate enough to get a bit of a reputation for throwing myself off waterfalls, and now I tend to like canoeing around the Canadian tundra and the Arctic. That's about me. Sounds, sounds nice, nice, very creative.

**Pete Catterall**

Sounds nice. And we've worked together over the years on and off for nearly 20 years now. So it's good to get to have a chat on here with you.

So you say Adventure sports. So that's the meat of this podcast is what is adventure sport? What is an adventure sport coach? And we'll start talking around what the differences are between adventure sports coaching and mainstream coaching.

So I wanted to get your thoughts are first. Loel is on what is an adventure sports coach. We're going to start with what is an adventure sport to you? So what's in, what's out? Give us your opinion on that.

**Loel Collins**

Unfortunately, it's not quite as black and white as that. Sorry! There are sports. Canoeing is a sport and canoeing has various types of activity within its sport.

So it has slalom, it has wildwater racing, it has freestyle. But what it also has is other versions of the sport that tend to get grouped as adventurous. So recreational white water kayaking or sea kayaking, for instance, or expeditions. So the place to start for me is that those sports are characterized by taking part in a natural environment and taking part under a set of sort of rules that the individual decides by. It's their own construction.

And the reason I put that is that sits in opposition almost to the opposite end of a spectrum – an Olympic sport, let's say, which is really, really heavily regulated. You know, it governs what the person can wear, what they can sit in, exactly what the sport is to undertake. And that frequently

nowadays also takes place in a manufactured environment to ensure that you can have person - against-person competition.

So you have these sort of extremes that are going on. There's a middle ground to this as well in that you have an increasing amount of activity in managed environments. So you have competitions that take place in a let's say a marathon race that takes place on a natural river. But the section is managed in some way to ensure that it's safe or is managed in some way to make sure that the track for the race, the route for the race, is clearly demobbed.

So you have this managed sort of category in the middle as well. But for me, adventure sports don't have a great deal of regulation and take place in primarily natural environments.

### **Pete Catterall**

Okay. Yeah. So do you see there's some blurred lines in there with some sports then, such as and so like zip line at the Extreme Whitewater Championships or something like the freeride skiing – the big kind of heli-lifted and people find their own line. Is that an adventure sport because it's got rules? Where does that sit?

### **Loel Collins**

And this is why it can't be black and white, actually, because you can have a hillside managed so that it's safe, i.e. the pisteurs go out and they'll make sure there's no avalanche or there's no high avalanche risk on that slope. And actually you then compete by interpreting that slope and skiing that slope and doing your tricks on the slope. And you get marks for that. And that is more towards the adventure sport end of that idea than it is perhaps towards the competitive side because it's not as manufactured for the environment. There are still some rules, but interestingly, those rules tend to value not necessarily just being the fastest or the strongest, but interpreting the terrain or going for a manoeuvre or attempting a trick.

So the other place you can [unintelligible] is something along the lines of park and pipe in skiing. Yeah. So you go and ski park and pipe and somebody who goes for a really, really good manoeuvre, really tough new manoeuvre but doesn't land it properly, is still given a great regard from their community of participants because they're pushing the boundaries.

So there's this little bit in that mid-ground where there's this recognition of pushing the boundaries of the sport, which is recognized as well. So it's unfortunate that it's not black and white, but there are these different ways of viewing these sports if that's helpful.

### **Pete Catterall**

Yeah. No, it is. Because my next question is going to move into the coaching of it and I think it's good to kind of work out what we're talking about and that might lead us into why – and I do agree – why you believe, but I also agree that coaching adventure sports is different to coaching mainstream or competitive sport. So let's get your view on that since you've done a PhD in it. It's probably a good place for you to talk. So why is coaching adventure sports – Why is that different to other sports? What the difference? Why can't I just apply the same skillset across from one to the other?

## **Loel Collins**

Right. So this gets a little bit convoluted, but the place really to start is that what we coach is people and if we say that we coach people, the sport or the activity that we coach them in is almost secondary to that. So if we are coaching people, the skills that we need to coach a person are universal. You could argue that that universal. So as a coach working in a competitive discipline, I use the same coaching tools as a coach working in an adventurous discipline. However, those ingredients come together in a slightly different way because there are differences in the sport. The first I mean the easiest one is go to the regulation.

There's a set of rules that govern what I can coach in the performance, that constrain the performance in a competitive sport. I don't have that. When I'm coaching somebody on recreational water, they can turn up in a boat that ranges everything from as long as their legs, three to almost four meters long and there's no requirement for them to get through a rapid in a particular time or in a particular way through a particular route.

They have to design the route themselves, so the ingredients are the same, but the recipe comes together differently. I think I've used this one with you before. Think of it like Bolognese and chilli. Bolognese and chilli both have a very similar set of ingredients, but they have a slightly different context. Bolognese tends to go on pasta. Chilli tends to go on rice. The ingredients are put together in a slightly different order and a slightly different format with just a little bit of difference in the seasoning. Think of the coaching like that. [...] What I was going to say is that what then comes from this is that adventure sports coaches do have to contend with – and they will coach in – a much more dynamic environment than perhaps we see in other coaching activities. So in a competitive sport, we may see that it's the end game that is really dynamic, but the coaching situation is actually controlled. In an adventure sport we frequently see that that coaching is taking place in that very dynamic situation as well.

There's another element that comes into that, which is that the adventure sports coach is frequently undertaking the adventure with the people that they're coaching. So for that reason, adventure sports coaches need to be capable in the environment that they're coaching in. It doesn't mean that they have to be top end performers, but it does mean they need to operate in the environment that they're coaching within without having to expend a great deal of thought on their part for their own performance because all their thoughts should be on their clients or on their coachees.

## **Pete Catterall**

Yeah. I'm just visualizing how that would work in other sports. Like a bobsleigh coach [...] he'd be in the bobsled. It's, you know, you are playing the game alongside the athletes in adventure sports. And the kind of attentional focus that that means you have to manage I think is quite high level as well. That, you know, you do have to be so comfortable that it's you're not worrying about you, but you still have to have that awareness in that.

## **Loel Collins**

And I think that's a really good way of describing it in that you should be on the adventure with the people that you're coaching, but you shouldn't necessarily be having an adventure. If you want adventure, you've probably pushed it too far for the folks that you're out with. You are along so that they can have an adventure.

And sometimes for folks that's ... they can have that experience with you knowing that you are the backstop to fish them out if it goes pear-shaped. But equally, they can come to you as an adventure sports coach and want you to teach them so that the next weekend after you've worked with them, they can go and have their own adventure completely independent of you.

And so there is this idea of what the end point is of the coaching process, which is the individual undertaking their own adventures. And that's dead interesting because it means we see a lot of high-level adventure sports coaching actually happening with intermediate-level performance because when you've been successful, they're independent of you. So the advanced performers aren't coming back for coaches. Does that make sense?

### **Pete Catterall 13:25**

Yeah. And I think that typically that the duration of the coaching relationship is very different in an adventure sport, not exclusively, but the world I work in, the competitive guys there have quite long-term relationships with the athletes. And when I was coaching adventure sports, I might have hours, days, maybe a week.

I might get them back again at some point. But most of the time I have to get up and running with these athletes, participants, whatever we want to call people, pretty quickly make decisions about them because they want to be coached in an adventurous situation and I don't know them very well. So what do you think about that, the sort of coach's decision making to be able to do that job?

### **Loel Collins**

Well, you've alluded to two things so far that comes slightly before the decision making. And one is a piece of work that we've done recently, which is all to do with the coaching process in adventure sports and a typical coaching process works out what the athlete participant client needs, and then designs a program to address that.

But in adventure sports, what we see going on is an identification of what the client thinks they need and what they want. And then we actually have to put the client in the adventurous environment to find out whether what they believe they need and they want it actually what they believe and need and want. And then we redesign the coaching process on that.

So the planning process for adventure sports coaching seems much more sophisticated because you almost have to make a plan, go out and then almost immediately remake that plan because the description of that person's performance or that professional person's performance in those conditions on that day all force you to change. So you see adventure sports coaches as what are called adaptive experts, and which means their skill is in their capacity to be very, very agile with their coaching activity.

They can adjust and change what they're doing as opposed to making a plan and sticking to it and being dogmatic about it. Sort of being too attached to a plan. So we find adventure sports coaches are very, very adaptable experts, which is a characteristic that we see in very high-level coaches in other activities. But we see this across all levels in adventure sport coaches.

### **Pete Catterall**

Yeah. I mean, I work with a lot of groups and coaches now that do a phenomenal amount of planning because it's, you know, it's based around a competition or Olympic cycles or, you know, selection or it might just be a winter block of training and you know, it would be, you know, they are adaptive because, you know, like you said earlier, we coach in [unclear] that react differently to different stimulus. So, you know, it's still within a kind of bandwidth of what we expect.

But but it is planned for and it is well timetabled out, I'd say, in a different way to, you know, if I'm helping somebody prep for an expedition, then I know when that's going to be. But it's quite loose.

### **Loel Collins**

Right. And see, that's a lovely observation because for me that links back to this regulation. If I'm working within a structure, I've got to get that person prepped for 2021. I'm working within a framework. I have a set of constraints that I work within. Whereas when I'm working outside of that and I'm prepping somebody for an expedition or prepping them to undertake their own adventure, their trip to the Ardèche in the summer or whatever, it doesn't necessarily have those same boundaries based on it.

### **Pete Catterall**

Yeah. And again, you know, it doesn't have the same – to a certain extent – doesn't have the same pressures and outcomes. They're different. They're not a lot less value or more value. One is about performance on a day, which means they get a nice medal, and the other one is potentially life threatening if it goes wrong. So things I think Yeah.

### **Loel Collins**

So this, this then touches in two areas. Adventure sports are not particularly risky actually. When you do the numbers, horse riding and rugby and football probably make greater demands on the NHS.

But the challenge is that when it does go pear-shaped where we are, the consequence is higher. So that's, that's your consequence-against-likelihood thing going on. The other bit that you have that's really important within that is this idea that people perceive adventure sports as being risky sports. So we get lumped in with extreme sports and high-risk sports. actually we're not. We're actually very safe. It's just that when it does go messy, it goes really messy.

**Pete Catterall**

Yeah. The instances of actual accidents are minimal. [unclear] Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. So just, you know, we've, we've got off on some good tangents here, but I like, I like tangents. I don't like sticking to the plans as you probably remember when you worked ... So for adventure sports coaches then, developing that coaching craft has to be different then compared to mainstream coaches I would guess. What do you think? Can I go down the same learning my craft coaching for if I want to become a football coach as I could to become an adventure sports coach in whatever discipline or do I need, you know, how do learn my craft, I guess, is what I'm saying, right?

**Loel Collins**

So what I would do is I would go back to my ingredients analogy. You can learn to recognize a tin of tomatoes and you can learn to recognize half a pound of mince and an onion. Yeah, but understanding how they come together is the crucial bit. So there's a very good argument for genetic training of the appropriate core skills, but they need to be transferred into the right context very, very rapidly so that the application of those skills into the context is brought together very quickly.

So that means you can have a genetic coaching skill training, but it has to come very quickly with - Okay, so how do those things apply into a white water environment? How do they apply to a sea kayaking environment? Now crucial within that is that you need adventure sports coaches to be reflective. So and there's a couple of parts to that. The crucial part is they need to be critical. So when somebody tells you something, you should be going: 'Are you sure?' 'How does that apply to me?' 'Does that apply to me?' 'Is that source useful?', 'Should I believe Pete Catterall when he says ...?' Yeah, and then I apply it and I go, 'well actually Pete was quite right to say that this is one way of doing this job, I like that.' And you then reflect upon it. You think about, did it work, could it be changed? Could it be modified? So that the next time I go out to use it, I can then refine it and improve it. So we find that adventure sports coaches are quite reflective in what they think about, but interestingly, they're not reflective in the way that the academics think about it.

So when you read a lot of stuff on reflection, you find that there's quite an emphasis on 'do the activity and then think about it in a structured way afterwards'. But we find that adventure sports coaches – and this links in with that adaptive expertise thing – are continually reflecting and making judgments and decisions and taking actions and auditing and reviewing them throughout the coaching process.

So they're reflective in the action, in the coaching process, which is really important. And that's really demanding on the adventure sports coach. Then, you know, cognitively, mentally, it is a very, very draining activity to do really, really well.

**Pete Catterall**

That's something I see, when I think about a lot of slalom coaches and the sprint coaches working is is that process going on? So I think that's something where the lines definitely blur. And I see that an enormous amount whether it's whilst slalom paddle is doing another lap, they're quickly evaluating am I doing the right thing? How do I move that on? Do we need to progress that skill? Do we need to regress that skill? Do we need to change the environment for that skill?

So I do see I see that going on at a pretty high level. When you see the coaches afterwards looking like they're just a bit drained at the end of this session when they've been working hard.

### **Loel Collins**

And that's because it is. You know, if you're continually planning, replanning, adjusting it. It's a cognitive answer. It is a cognitive process. It's an explicit tool on your part to do that.

You broke up a little bit there, but you touched on something that was really important is this idea that we vary what we ask the individual to do. We were in the environment in which the taking part in that activity and we vary the task as well. And because we're operating in these natural environments, there's a there's a natural variation in the locations in which we're coaching, which is really beneficial to the coaching process.

But there's also a lot of thought going into how a technique may adapt and change to suit that individual in that boat with those paddles in that situation.

### **Pete Catterall**

Yeah. We talk a lot about the coaches I work with. It's not so much me anymore. I just listen to them talking about, you know, how each athlete, each paddler creates a technical template that works for them for their body shape, their size, also the way they like to paddle and move.

### **Loel Collins**

Yeah. So you build your picture of a performance on a technical template and from that emerges what's called a mental model of the type of performance that you want to achieve. And technical templates are really, really good. And they work really, really well in those aspects of paddle sport where there is a technical template. The challenge – and we see this in adventure sports – we would probably also see this in things like paracanoe as well, is that there's technical templates don't always fit the variation of the individuals or the craft or the environment that they're in.

So we find that adventure sports coaches and paracanoe coaches again, are characterized by this ability to adapt the technical template to the individual that they're coaching. That's really quite sophisticated because when we look at that in other coaches, we see that in very, very high-level coaches, but we see it routinely as a factor in adventure sports coaches.

### **Pete Catterall**

Yeah, and you know, I [unclear] that across all of those things. You know, I see a lot in slalom and in sprint. You know, they know what we're aiming for but how someone who is six foot compared to someone who's five foot four does something. You know, me and you paddle the same section of river but will have a slightly different style about it just because we are different size and different shape.

And I think that's you know, it's about back to what you said earlier. We're coaching people not paddlesports. We're just coaching those people how to paddle. Yeah, a really good quote came our from ... I'll quote him, actually. Luke Smyth, one of our slalom coaches. He coaches the person before the paddler, and I heard him say that the other day and was like brilliant that he's got that to be fair fairly early days in his first few years of coaching, which is brilliant.

So we'll start to wrap up the ... I think we might have to have a part two to pick up on ... But I guess my last question was, you know, where is the next development, I guess, for adventure sports coaching? What's next? When I think about the sports I work with. We've got as a slalom coach or a sprint coach or freestyle coach or whatever. We've got access to a technical coach and then we've got a string of supporting people. So we've got physiologists, we've got strength and conditioning coaches, we've got physios, we've got sports psychologists that are stood behind us. And that's a phenomenal amount of support that the coach can access. And the coach does have to have elements of all those things as well, because when they're coaching, those people aren't just stood around waiting to ask questions. They're support staff.

So how does that come out? How do we really make adventure sports athletes as good as we can without that support? I know we didn't talk about that, so throwing that at you [laughs].

### **Loel Collins**

So the bit that comes from this for me is it comes back to adventure sports coaches is that they have to be able ... they have to know enough to be able to deal with all of those things in the field. You clearly can't take with you a physio, a psychologist, dot, dot, dot when you're out in the hills or when you're out on the sea. But it is expected that the adventure sports coach will have enough knowledge of those areas that they can support an athlete in those ways until you get back at the end of the day. And that that kind of overlaps with one of your earlier point is that a typical slalom coaching session might be, what, an hour, 45 minutes, whereas a typical adventure sports coaching session could be a day or two days or three days. So we are we are juggling a little bit in there, but we're also using the same ingredients and in subtly different ways.

The direction for adventure sports coaching for me is all about judgment and decision making. And the reason for that is that we know that most accidents that happen in the outdoors stem from a poor judgment or a series of poor judgments. And we also know that effective development of any performer is a series of choices made about the approach that you take with that performer in that situation.

So for me, it's all about judgment and decision making. So the focus of coach education for me hangs around how to make good calls, how to choose to do the right thing with the right person in the right place, at the right time. But we could talk about that next time.

### **Pete Catterall**

Do you know what? That was probably the best way to finish this one up, because that's exactly where I was thinking of going with the next one is how we how we start, how do we develop that? How do we build on that? How do we evaluate it?



Yeah, So let's leave that there and let's talk about that on the next one about decision making, and we'll use the context of adventure sports, but also in that the ... this is obviously from a British Canoeing sense a paddle sport and we might just look at it from a bigger picture.

So thanks for your time. I know you've got to get back to working out how we're going to restart the world of the outdoors after this lockdown. So hopefully that's been a nice break from what you have you were doing before. But thanks for your time and I look forward to part two.

**Loel Collins**

Brilliant. Thanks, Pete.