

Lee Pooley 00:00:13

Hi everyone, and welcome to the British Canoeing Awarding Body Coaching Podcast. My name's Lee Pooley and I'm the director of Coaching and Qualifications at British Canoeing. Today we are joined by Dan Wilkinson and Simon Westgarth. So hi Dan, hi Simon.

So tonight, before we get into the subject, which is around the Whitewater Safety and rescue courses, what I'd be keen to do is give the listeners a sort of a bio of yourselves, if that's all right.

So, Simon, try to capture in a couple of minutes, your experience.

Simon Westgarth 00:00:49

Well, I've been kayaking for more than 40 years now. Came from the scouts into a club creating a club in around Cheddar and then had a go at a bunch of different disciplines, enjoy slalom. And then when I was, soon as I finished sixth form off I went on the gap year to Canada and discovered raft guiding and big water and decided that I really liked it.

So after University off I went for a Gap two years and that kind of continued to become a career. Initially as a brand ambassador for Dagger and Palm, I got to travel around the world and part of my job was to develop kayaks at Dagger and product at Palm, but also looking for to develop products for the particular market of Europe and then from there I started teaching people.

Picked up a bunch of qualifications on the way, including a teacher's pgce and and a bachelor's degree and then just carried on. And then eventually the teaching became more coaching. And then I opened my own coaching business, Gene17kayaking that it's gone on for 20 years now, running trips, initially making lots of instructional videos. And then more recently we tend to do a lot more 1 to 1 long term development performance coaching with individuals and groups in core destinations of Slovenia, Italy and Norway and Norway is where I live now.

Lee Pooley 00:02:22

Well, thanks, Simon. So Dan, what about yourself?

Dan Wilkinson 00:02:26

It's incredibly intimidating to follow Simon's CV but I'll give it my best shot. I've been paddling for 20 years, so half the time, half the experience, hopefully. But I grew up in central London and I started paddling at a youth club that was based on the canal, and that they had some funding from the council to keep kids on the straight and narrow.

None of the kids that needed to not be on the straight and narrow were interested. Me and my brother managed to get our way onto this trainee scheme and as part of that we managed to go to the French Alps and Scotland. And that really opened my eyes to the world beyond central London. And whitewater paddling and what it could offer and give.

And so subsequently I failed my A-levels, took a few gap years paddling and then went back to uni and did a degree in outdoor leadership in the Lake District, which subsequently led on to living in North Wales for a decade, working full time in the outdoors and then moving back to the lakes about

six years ago. So I live in Kendal now. Through that time, I've picked up various qualifications and things and have been working professionally in the outdoors my entire actual career, I'd say.

And then as part of that, I've also completed a master's in performance coaching. On top of all the paddling qualifications I hold and the mountaineering qualifications I hold, got a bit of experience in the in the winter and summer hills. As a paddler, I've also been fortunate enough to go on expeditions to various places in the world, first Descents on three continents.

And you know, I've been supported by Pyranha for a very long time and have been involved in boat design and prototyping for them as well. So I guess a wide breadth and range of whitewater kayaking experience as well as doing some canoeing as well.

Lee Pooley 00:03:57

Thank you. And for those keen listeners, you will remember Dan from a previous podcast that we did, around on decision making. So welcome back Dan.

So one of the one of the things just to clarify for everyone listening is that both Simon and Dan are active members of the Whitewater Technical Group for British Canoeing, and they advise and guide and provide us with updates around the world of whitewater boating. I'm really pleased that you can be here today. And what we're here today to talk about is the suite of awards for Whitewater safety that are available from this winter onwards.

You know, I'll leave it to you how you answer this. But, you know, really, it'd be good to understand what the design process was in terms of getting it from getting the feedback from the safety review all the way through to the completion. Who's been involved, how did it happen? How did it work?

Simon Westgarth 00:04:53

Initially, the safety review was in 2020 and we had lots of good feedback that came through the strategic group, if I recall.

And the main takeaways were that people like the providers, they were doing a great job and the other thing was there was the content of the course were so stacked, there was a lot to fit in. People like the content, but there was a lot. And so providers were under pressure to try and get everything done. And to the point that people got a snapshot of solutions or skills or tools and not enough time to develop or even even practice, it was something you effectively took away with you to practice.

And with so much content over the classically 2 day course, it was people's brains were probably a little fried.

Lee Pooley 00:05:39

And who's been involved with the process? So, you know, this was this is the information that you were given by the strategic group really about, you know, the feedback that we received. So who's been involved with the design of these new programmes Dan?

Dan Wilkinson 00:05:52

So as you've mentioned, Simon and I sit on the Whitewater Technical Group, which is a group of seven volunteers, all of whom are really experienced paddlers, course providers and coaches. And we initially had a bit of a discussion and a chat around what we felt were some of the pitfalls of the awards and what we felt could be a potential way forwards for these awards.

So we bounced those around, chatted about what we're covering on courses as a provider group that we're not really using in the real world when we go boating for ourselves and what we do in the real world when we go boating, that's perhaps not covered in as much depth or detail on these courses as we thought could be done.

So so we between the seven of us, we kind of break down and had a real think about how would we structure a progressive series of courses that supported paddlers to become independent on the water. And then once we got a rough outline of what content might be in them, it was actually Simon's idea this, so we opened it up and asked for feedback on the content from a really wide range of independent paddlers and providers.

Some people that were international, so people from New Zealand that gave the time to have a read over our documents and quite a few British based paddlers as well. And the point of that process was to make sure that our biases weren't, from delivering just British canoeing content, weren't overshadowing the like what else is going on in the wider world there.

So when we were happy that we had a really healthy bunch of content for people to take away and play with, we then set about thinking about how we'd structure that into some courses, which then gave rise to the fact that we've ended up with a suite of three different courses for safety on Whitewater.

Lee Pooley 00:07:31

Yeah, so a really extensive process really in terms of, you know, I remember chatting both to you at the very early stages and 18 months down the line, isn't it really in terms of thinking about the content and where it is now?

You just alluded Dan to there's three courses now and three courses will be available in the winter period. So should we have a little bit of run through them, you know, what they called and who are they aimed at?

Simon Westgarth 00:07:57

Can I just slightly rewind for a moment? Part of the development was that within the group the technical group. We felt that the previous suite of courses were heavily focused on rescuing and providing solutions for problems that have already occurred.

So we as a group decided that we felt that it needed rebalancing. So good proportions of the course. And it turned out, for example, on the two day course, the first day is focused on safety to avoid to avoiding problems and rather than having learners develop their paddling skills and then get weeded out as leaders, we felt that we wanted a kind of a clear stepping stone where people can get all the safety early on in their paddling career and then they can then perhaps self-select to become leaders

rather than effectively, you know, have to learn it by the from the trade in clubs and the like and to eventually decide to be a leader. So it's almost like a stepping stone.

And then then back to your question, there are three awards on offer. I will pretty much match the two obvious ones. So the Whitewater Safety and Rescue is the outgoing course, and that's being replaced by Whitewater safety. And the advanced Whitewater safety and rescue is being replaced by the advanced Whitewater safety.

The third award is a new award, and this is the intro to Whitewater safety. This is a one day course where the others are two day. And the one day course is designed for people who are coming into Whitewater. They may have done an intro to Whitewater course. A classic example would be a group of freshers at university.

They've already been out with the club and they've done some flat water and then maybe they've done an intro to Whitewater session. So maybe after 6 to 10 sessions, they this is the kind of course where they would, the intro to Whitewater safety is the kind of course that they would look to do. So they have some skills and understanding of the Whitewater environment, whereas the others link across to where the, the outgoing awards are currently at.

One advantage with the Whitewater safety is that often on the Whitewater safe and rescue course, we would have people who were also novices on it, so the provider would find it difficult to be able to deliver the whole course content with the range of different users on the course. So we feel that this kind of opens up Whitewater Safety is definitely aimed at that kind of more experienced, moderate water padder.

Lee Pooley 00:10:37

I think that's a really, really interesting point that Simon is, you know, if you get such a diverse group on a course, there are people that will will suffer from that because, you know, you have to almost deliver to the to the person that's probably got the least of experience or you're looking after them more.

So I think that's a you know, having those three options I think is a really great way of looking at it. I'm glad you mentioned around freshers or, you know, around the club sort of environments that it's sort of aimed for the intro to Whitewater. So Dan what about what about craft? Because, you know, this is something that obviously we've got quite a multitude of craft now that we see on Whitewater. So how have you broached that?

Dan Wilkinson 00:11:19

We had a really big think about this because a lot of us work as independent providers as well. We see that balance in the in the wider world of people that are accessing the sport independently of clubs as well as through the club structure. We've got a really healthy club structure in the UK, it's brilliant, you know, I do a lot of work with canoe clubs and I think what they do is fantastic.

There's also people approaching our world from pack rafting, you know, the stand up paddle boarders that are coming in very much part of a social meet rather than a formal club and so as we were designing the award we kind of distilled down, as Simon was saying, into what do people need to know to be safe on the water? Well, what do I wish that 14 year old Dan knew when he started

out with those first tentative Whitewater paddling strokes? You know, in terms of going out with his friends to keep himself safe on a really simple river journey through to where Dan is now. And like paddling in advanced whitewater and thinking about the things that Dan needs to know for that. So when we were designing the courses, we wanted to make sure they were accessible to all the paddlers.

We're all paddlers together on the water, we are all sharing the water space. So an intro course is very much can be accessed by anybody in any craft that is suitable for Whitewater environment. That could be a stand up paddleboard, a pack raft, an open trad canoe all the way through to a slalom boat. I guess, you know, for those people that are starting out in the slalom world, what do I do if I fall in and how do you keep yourself safe as you move on from competitions at Shepperton to competitions in more natural environments?

Yes. So anyone with any suitable whitewater craft can attend the intro course. And then we took that thinking further and started looking at the whitewater safety course. And we've now got a course, it's aimed at people with a bit of experience and can be should be delivered to people with a bit of experience. We didn't feel like there was any reason or rationale for that, for excluding craft on the basis they didn't fit into our traditional or ideas of a canoe or an open canoe or whitewater kayak or anything.

So as long as the craft is suitable to go into the environment then people can access those awards, hopefully sharing the skill and knowledge and love that we all have for our sport, keeping people safe on the water so you can have lots of good times.

Lee Pooley 00:13:26

You talk about environment and I think some of the questions that the listeners may have on the tip of their tongues is what grade are we talking, you know, for the particular awards that you've put together?

Dan Wilkinson 00:13:36

So I live in the Lake District. I'll give a couple of examples local if I was delivering an intro to whitewater safety course in the lakes, I would consider using something like Devil's Bridge over on the on the Lune, fantastic single site venue. It's got a grade two rapid in it. Likewise Severn bridge, Iron Bridge on the river Severn where you know there's a single grade two rapids sort of thing where people can feel like they're safe to explore that environment we're not worried about on the intro course we're not worried about completing a river Trip.

What we want to do is share the environment, share the actions we might take in that environment to keep ourselves safe and look after ourselves in the event of a whoopsie, the very easily accessible single site venue would be something you'd use to deliver that award in.

Lee Pooley 00:14:19

Simon can you give some examples, you know, some different examples of environments maybe down in the Southwest?

Simon Westgarth 00:14:24

Yeah, you could easily use (*unclear*) on this. Again, single rapids where you walk up slightly from New bridge on the river Dart. There's two rapids there below the Little Rock where it would just be ideal, where you would have some line of sight challenges, where you can then indicate why, what decisions you make and why you go there and what you would find, and the nature of very nature of Whitewater.

It's a really well, just looking at some some structured Whitewater at that grade 2 really we're not looking to the top end of Moderate water for this.

Lee Pooley 00:14:59

And then the other courses the whitewater safety and the advanced are they on the same grade as the existing courses?

Simon Westgarth 00:15:06

Indeed so, exactly it just maps across to the identical environment.

Dan Wilkinson 00:15:10

A change that has been made Lee though that's worth just highlighting for listeners is that traditionally the advanced course have been written for kayakers and some canoeists accessed it with the change in shape of the award, we've managed to very much make an award that will fit the need by the open boaters, and they can go into their advanced remit, which is grade three, with a bit of four or whitewater kayakers, can access the award, go and do it on like a real three four grade four environment, like the Orchy or something and get these different the different learnings each group needs for those to go and use their craft in the environment, they want to use them safely with the same course content because the shape of it is the same.

Simon Westgarth 00:15:49

So in a way it doesn't matter what craft you show up in, as long as it's that's used on white water. And the main reason why we kind of took this approach that we're very aware that ten years ago pack rafts weren't a thing and white water SUP either.

And so the we have a lot of creativity in the river environment, and it's important that people can access safety training as suitable for whatever they want to do.

Lee Pooley 00:16:14

So they could yeah, you could have mixed courses. You could have single, single craft, you know, specific courses. It's really down to person accessing the course what they want from it really, isn't it.

You know, if they SUP they could join or have a course designed particularly around a paddle board and not have canoes and kayaks but you could also have mixed craft.

Simon Westgarth 00:16:36

Very much so. The idea was that you can have mixed craft because when you're paddling down the river, you don't know who you can come across. Maybe you have to rescue another craft. You've never seen before, but it's still within the ethos of what we're trying to establish with the suite of awards that they're useful for helping people.

Dan Wilkinson 00:16:52

And I want to build on that. Sorry Lee really quickly, because I think it's a really important differentiation for the wider paddling community to understand these.

And we sought some outside advice on this as well, that these courses weren't just for people that are preparing for leadership awards. The courses have been designed for participants, people who go and access those environments. Like if I'm just a moderate water paddler, I've got no interest in leadership. The stuff in there is what is going to be keep me and my mates safe if I've got no interest at all in being an advanced canoe leader I paddle my canoe regularly on grade three Whitewater.

The advanced course has got the stuff in it that you need to go out and be a safe paddler on white water. You know, they're not shaped around, although they're obviously loads of useful content and they're not shaped around just preparing people for leadership assessment. They're shaped around helping paddlers be safer on the water.

Simon Westgarth 00:17:45

And the clear interesting thing from my point of view is that I no longer live in the UK and paddle quite in many varied destinations is that these awards should be for anybody even in those destinations as we're well aware of Paddles Up training with the British Canoeing Awarding Body is spreading out around the world. And these these awards are meant to be for anyone who sees value in them.

Lee Pooley 00:18:13

It's really interesting. You paint, you talk about an ethos of the course, and I think that's coming across really strong. But I think what would be really important is if we can delve into those in those areas differently. So what's different from the previous courses?

Yeah, so what's the content and what's different from the previous courses and what should someone expect when they arrive and immerse themselves in the course?

Simon Westgarth 00:18:37

Rudimentary both white water safety and advanced white water safety are 2 day courses. And the first day of both of those courses is a safety day. It's a day looking for people to have experienced an example of safe paddling.

How their motivations to be there, the decisions that are made even prior to going to the river, what sections you go into, why you're choosing to go there, what are the environmental constraints in terms of the variable runoff, whether that's going to change these things and the underpins that makes it safe. So that's a huge change. And then the second day is the rescue day, and the rescue day has it.

We definitely look at developing skills that are useful and that more commonly occur on the river. So we're not looking for extreme advanced, overly technical solutions that rarely, if ever happen in someone's paddling journey in their career of paddling, but looking at rescues that are useful for the that commonly occur. So a lot more balanced.

Lee Pooley 00:19:41

Yeah, and I think it's really interesting listening to you then the start is really about why you go paddling, the motivations behind it and you know, and people to understand that.

And I think that's a real complete change in the approach to these particular courses. And I think it's a really healthy way to actually, people to start to understand that very early on in their paddling. I think that's so important. Earlier, Simon, you touched on on the safety review feedback and around, you know, it was packed and not a lot of time for people to actually have a go or practice. How has that changed within the courses?

Simon Westgarth 00:20:19

Well, as I previously just mentioned, is that the array of skills to develop is shorter because it's narrower. If it were because it focuses on skills that are commonly required rather than something that might happen.

Dan Wilkinson 00:20:37

I think when we were looking at designing the courses, we had quite a lot of jokes around, I'll just get rid of this bit of the old syllabus and stuff within the tech group.

But when we looked at it, we felt like if we could, we're not we're not thinking about these awards being simplified versions of the awards. What we're looking to do is develop robust strategies which will work in multiple situations, which means you'll get a few solutions and a load of different scenarios where the same solutions can be applied in different ways to solve the problem.

This is fundamental so you don't have to worry about, which knot where in the system. If you've made a really, if you've got a good fundamental understanding of accessing the environment, for example, there's no difference between a pinned boat or somebody having a foot entrapment, but we need to get something to that person or that craft to be able to remove it.

So the big thing there from a safety perspective is how we access how we get to that point in the first place. Whereas delivering the awards traditionally I was like, right, the boat got pinned and we've got a line to it because we haven't got time to mess about getting a rope to a boat, which is the hardest bit to do.

Once the rope's on the boat, it comes off. So by having some simple solution that you can use about wading and swimming and just think about accessing the environment and then using the time towards that, we now created in the course to try those out in different scenarios and see that the same thing works. Maybe with some tweaks, maybe some adaptations, but the same approach works to different scenarios.

Now we've created a really robust set of principles for people to follow out on the water rather than having a this is a tension diagonal and why I need to do this. If I do this specifically in this instance,

Lee Pooley 00:22:16

It sounds it sounds a real breath of fresh air. Isn't it that actually what's on the course is probably what you what you need rather than never having to use.

And I think that's a significant difference. You know, you use the word Dan simplify. I think it's a phenomenal amount of work with the level of complexity behind it. And, you know, when you look at it, it does look simplified but the thought process of how it's structured, the flow of the courses. That's the level of complexity there that exists.

I think it's yourselves, the whitewater technical group and those others that you've got involved with the development of these programmes. I think it's been great. So in terms of the courses will be up and running, We know, you know, the intro to Whitewater is already available in the UK, I would imagine the rivers are reasonably full at the moment.

You've already you've already said around freshers, you know, freshers going onto these particular courses and others. But would you be would you be recommending people to revisit courses so you know, if they've already done an advanced Whitewater safety and rescue, would you be, would you be encouraged to refresh? Yeah. What's your thoughts on that?

Simon Westgarth 00:23:27

I very much I would recommend they come and see what we're doing as providers because the whole safety tilt of the first day is fundamentally different from the previous courses.

And this is about allowing people space to decide and understand what's safe and how they can shape safe outcomes themselves. And there's space enough and time in the first day to have the discussions about these matters.

Dan Wilkinson 00:23:57

I feel like safety, these safety courses, they should be looked at a bit like a first aid course where we don't encourage people to do every three years, but definitely having a regular top up of some sort of safety and input, ideally from different providers. I'm really I'm really pro people going to do these same courses with different providers because you always get something else in from someone's different experiences that gives you. That's a really healthy way to look at it too.

Lee Pooley 00:24:23

You know, hopefully they attend the course and never have to use those skills because they're staying safe. So if you don't use them, you lose them.

And so I think, you know, as you say, going back and doing a refresher and attending a course is it's a good message.

Dan Wilkinson 00:24:39

I challenge everyone that's done a course recently to think back to the last time they deliberately practiced swimming, you know, and then think actually, this is a really good way to force myself to deliberately practice my swimming, which is probably one of the things if it starts to go wrong, is the thing that I can do the most to keep myself safe.

Simon Westgarth 00:24:55

And that's the classic analogy, you know, where if you're really good at safety, you rarely need to rescue anybody. Whereas of course, when you're new to kayaking, you've probably not so white water, you're not so hot on your safety and therefore you're rescuing a bunch. And so, you know, you might develop skills in one area and through trial and error. And the school of hard knocks. Eventually you're honing your safety. The point of these the suite of awards is that it no longer needs to be like that.

We've got the safety input on the safety day and we'll help you avoid the matter where you will be rescue ranger.

Lee Pooley 00:25:36

Yeah, no, I think it's I think it's really positive and really appreciate both your time to come on and talk about these courses and how they've been developed, etc. And I think, you know what I would hope is listeners are keen to get on these courses and experience the content. Before we sort of sign off, I always end these with a question.

So what's next for you Simon? Well, what's on the horizon for the next six months for yourself?

Simon Westgarth 00:26:03

It's winter, it's skiing season? No, I will be. I go to Slovenia to work in October and Devon, I'll be in Devon November and December, mainly doing personal coaching. There are some British Canoeing assessments on the itinerary then, but from late November I will be skiing here all the way until Easter.

Lee Pooley 00:26:26

And any planned trips?

Simon Westgarth 00:26:27

I'm going to do the Engadin ski marathon, but other than that, those of you who follow me on social media know that I tend to do these one day long distance skiing. Paddling trip wise. Definitely. I think next year is a return to Zambezi, is the hope anyway.

Lee Pooley 00:26:46

And what about yourself then? We'll see. What's the next six months look like for you?

Dan Wilkinson 00:26:50

Busy at the moment, which is nice. We've got also I've got a three and a half year old and a two year old at the moment that keeping me on my toes a little bit. On top of that, I'll also be skiing. Fortunately, I've got three weeks of skiing before Christmas this year, so a rare treat, just like trying to get out on time.

But looking ahead, I'd like to get back to the Himalayas next autumn. I think that's where I'd like to kind of put a bit of a focus of my time. And so trying to work through to make sure I'm around for the kids stuff before I head off for another trip somewhere I think is the big one.

Simon Westgarth 00:27:24

I notice on the itinerary we've not talked about the resources.

Lee Pooley 00:27:29

You're absolutely right. Do you know what? You should host this rather than me, Simon, I think you're all over it. So we have got some resources that complement the courses and what we are keen to do as well is to build on those resources over the next six to 6 to 8 months. So at the moment, we have some resources that are found on the British Canoeing Awarding Body website, but we are also keen to put in resources specifically around the use of video so people can actually see it in real time and also be able to access them rather than just the written word.

I don't know if you you've got any sort of thoughts on that and anything that you want to tease the listeners about what might be coming in the next couple of months?

Dan Wilkinson 00:28:14

Definitely. I mean, these courses are great. Part of the course has been designed around ensuring that people have access to resources after the course and prior to the course they've got a little bit of the moment as Lee's just said there's some pre-reading to be done. As things evolve, we'd like to highlight that we can get those into some video formats as well and then some more stuff around the more technical elements of the safety course in the advanced course.

You know, especially looking at boat unpinning and mechanical advantage things where we traditionally, as the feedback came through right back at the start of the safety review, we spent a lot of time teaching people to tie knots. Now you can learn to tie knots at home. So why am I why am I wasting your time teaching you to tie knots when you could have practiced that at home, you turn up on the course and we can look at putting those into action. So some resources to support people to turn up and get the most from that face time with providers would be really use positive.

Lee Pooley 00:29:09

Yeah. So. Yeah. Watch this space, we will keep you will keep everyone updated around the resources that will be available. So we'll just keep plugging those as we go along. So anything else from either yourself, Simon or Dan before we sign off?

Dan Wilkinson 00:29:23

Just the amount of volunteer work that went into designing these courses from a huge raft of highly experienced people like Tom Parker, Pete Catterall, Adam Harman, Chris Easterbrook, Roger, I'm sure forgotten, Georgina Maxwell. That's the core of the whitewater tech group there and the time that they've all volunteered to ensure that these courses are fit for purpose has been incredible.

So I'd just like to from Simon and myself, I guess I'd like to thank all of them for their work and efforts in bringing these through in quite short timeframe from conception to existence as full syllabus courses.

Lee Pooley 00:29:58

Absolutely Dan agree with you in that, you know, what we have is we've got some phenomenal people giving up their time on these particular technical groups and we wouldn't be able to do it without them. And the level of expertise and the time they give up is just phenomenal. So yeah, really appreciate you bringing that to light. Thanks very much, everyone. And thanks for listening and look out for the next podcast. Take care.