

Coaching Matters

In this edition of Coaching Corner we're going to look at what happens when paddlers fall out of love with paddling,

and how we might help. I'm very grateful to be joined by Jenny Newland, who is both a White Water Kayak Coach

and a Psychotherapist. Here's Jenny's fictionalised account of a paddler she helped.

I've been working with Jack who had an accident on a river a year ago and hasn't been paddling since. He wants to return to paddling and rediscover the enjoyment he had before his accident.

When we met, Jack was feeling very alone with his situation. He didn't want to paddle with his club as he didn't want to damage his reputation as someone to be relied upon. He felt that fellow paddlers he'd met with since the accident didn't understand what he was going through. Few had even asked how he was.

Jack was worried that his skills would have deteriorated. He thought that if he could re-build his competence, this would help him feel better about returning to the river. We began off the water, giving Jack a chance to talk about his accident and the impact it had on him.

Meeting off the water

Jack felt very vulnerable. He had frequent flashbacks to the accident and a horror of rocks. He described how he could picture his head being smashed open whenever he thought about rocks in a river (even though that wasn't what happened in the accident). I listened carefully to Jack's story of his accident, accepting his experience of the incident, acknowledging his distress and feelings.

It became clear that helping Jack get back into river paddling wasn't going to be a quick process, and that it would be about much more than just paddling skills. When we've had a bad experience, our bodies can get confused, unable to differentiate between what actually happened at the time and our memories of it. This means that the body can repeatedly go through a version of a trauma response every time we remember the event, keeping the experience very much alive in the present.

I encouraged Jack to try experimenting with a psychological technique designed to put the trauma back where it belongs - in the past - so that his system could learn the difference between the memory and the event itself.

We also talked about not rushing things and giving space to the traumatised part

of himself. We made a plan to begin on flat water - it was just going to be about getting into a boat and seeing what it was like.

On flat water

Jack was keen to revisit his skills on flat water. I'd be there as a supportive companion and an observer rather than providing any technical skills coaching.

He loved the feeling of being back on the water and just paddling. He felt comfortable attending to his forward paddling and manoeuvring strokes. He was keen to try everything, including a roll which failed. He was alarmed that a skill he'd previously taken for granted had vanished. He came away from the session with a mixture of pleasure that he'd got on the water and distress that all wasn't how it used to be.

After the session, Jack admitted that he had felt panicked being under the water in his boat, even though he knew he was perfectly safe.

On reflection

I had opted to let Jack lead the session. On one hand, maybe Jack needed to discover for himself what was working and what wasn't, but on the other hand, if I'd been more in charge, perhaps he'd have avoided the disappointment when his roll stopped working.

I needed to find ways to make the steps back to competence and happy paddling smaller and more manageable. We decided that the theme for our next few sessions was going to be making friends with the water; finding ways to relax and have fun in the water instead of practising the roll.

On flat water again

With this in mind, we came up with a plan together to explore some manoeuvres that might involve capsizing, but with no expectation that we'd stay in the boat or attempt a roll. It was a warm summer evening, so I could be in the water next to his boat to pull him up as required. As part of the meeting, Jack continued to build up his paddle fitness, going for a paddle

across the loch and working on improving his technique.

On reflection

The session was light hearted and fun. There were no disappointments and Jack ended the session feeling much more relaxed than previously. Jack was happy to continue playing on flat water, gradually adding activities to his repertoire, before our next session.

A return to moving water

We met up on a short section of grade 1 with continued emphasis on making friends with the water. This was a section of river that previously Jack wouldn't have considered worth paddling, but it seemed to provide the right level for his re-introduction to moving water. We had a gentle paddle both up and down stream and did some easy ferry-gliding.

The fact that Jack's technical abilities weren't challenged in any way meant that he could enjoy the environment and the experience of feeling competent on the river. Even though Jack appeared both comfortable and capable, he admitted to feeling some trepidation at being back on a river. I encouraged him to allow, make space for and accept whatever feelings came up in response to the environment.

A river trip - grade 1/2

I planned for the day to involve a series of mini confidence building coaching sessions, helping Jack to re-connect with his river skills on a familiar section of river.

On the first rapid he caught some small eddies on the way down and was looking comfortable. At one point, there was a very small, friendly wave which Jack was happy to play on. The majority of the trip offered him the opportunity to enjoy being in the moving water environment without feeling overly challenged. Once again my job was in the realm of encouragement and support.

Towards the end of the trip we reached a larger rapid. Jack admitted to feeling nervous. He saw this as his first proper rapid since his accident. I was glad that the level was up a bit so that he would



Image courtesy Ed Smith

see more in the way of deep water and fewer rocks. He didn't want to get out and inspect it as he felt it was familiar enough to him. I was aware that he had a strong sense that he 'should be able to do this without a fuss', but he admitted to feeling worried about his ability to read the rapid on the move as he felt so rusty. I chose to respect his decision not to inspect from the bank as line of sight is good and I was confident he'd get down it without a capsize.

Instead, we took time to discuss in detail how he might choose to go about running the rapid. We talked about the various river features that he might encounter and how he was going to recognise them. I reminded him about looking ahead for future water and we also considered how he might use speed control effectively on his way down.

Running the rapid went to plan and without mishap. However, I could see that psychologically, this hadn't been easy. Jack admitted to feeling rather 'wobbly' at the bottom and while he was pleased everything had gone to plan, he was frustrated and discouraged by the level of anxiety he'd experienced on the way down.

Time for some more input from me I reminded him that recovery takes time. That his frustration was understandable, and that the traumatised part of him was going to need a lot of positive river experiences in order to recover and feel safe and sure of his skills again. His inner 'traumatised kayaker' needed to be free to feel whatever he was feeling and not be rushed. He was going to have to

accept the anxiety, fear and distress - this was an important step on his journey back to happy whitewater paddling. I could see that this wasn't an easy pill to swallow - his inner 'competent paddler' was impatient.

Just before the get out was a final river feature which Jack made good use of, finishing the day with some less threatening, more playful confidence building.

On reflection

This river trip really brought home to me how Jack's return to happy whitewater paddling was about so much more than the technical, tactical, and physical components of paddling skills. Of particular note was the frustration he felt when his psychological state was at odds with his expectations and view of himself as a paddler.

To the Tay

Jack had revisited the previous river section a number of times and was feeling much more comfortable on it. He'd also continued to paddle on flat water and revisited his roll. He had rolled successfully, but wasn't happy with it. It wasn't as good as it used to be and it worried him that it might not be reliable.

He felt ready to increase the challenge, but wasn't sure how to go about this without invoking too much fear and anxiety. He was also worried about his roll.

I decided that we needed to find a way to bring the focus back to relaxing and having fun rather than dialling up the environment. We needed a fun way to

challenge Jack's skills but one that at the same time posed no actual or perceived increase in risk. I suggested tailies on a section of deep grade 2 water. He was willing to give it a go as long as we could do some other things as well.

Warming up this time, Jack was looking good - much more at ease than the last time I'd seen him. He crossed the flow easily, and played about on a little wave without hesitation. Jack seemed to have a lot of theoretical information about tailies at his fingertips, but no experience. He also accepted that there would be a high chance of capsizing but reckoned he wouldn't really begin to understand how it works until he'd tried it.

As one of his goals for the day was to become more at ease with capsizing / swimming and rolling in moving water, I encouraged him to go ahead and have a go. He went over a plan a few times on the flat water in the eddy and then took it to the flow.

He dipped the tail of his boat on the first attempt, capsized and rolled up fast. He was both perplexed and delighted: "The roll was easy! - so much easier than on the flat water - it's as if something else kicked in." He tried again and the same thing happened. He was really pleased about his roll and quickly turned his attention to wanting to know more about how he could improve.

At the end of the session, Jack said that he'd enjoyed the challenge of learning something new and had loads of fun. He had plenty to go away and work on and recognised that it would take time for his tailies to become consistent.

Regarding the rolling - it seemed that

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being in a 'real' scenario made a massive difference. From Jack's perspective, his roll still wasn't as good as it had been before the accident, but he was now in a much better place to revisit it on flat and moving water to iron out the bits he's not happy with. At the end of the day, Jack felt that he had re-familiarised himself with a lot of what he used to know and was feeling good about it.

By the end of our time together, Jack still had a fair way to go to be paddling at the level he was prior to his accident, however, the important goal for him was to be able to enjoy the river again. He's open to the possibility that his kayaking and the way he has fun on a river now might actually be different from what they were before, but he's okay with that.

This coaching experience has emphasised the importance of fun not just in learning but in recovery as well. As a psychotherapist, I know only too well that there is no 'one size fits all' formula that's going to help every paddler. We have to pay attention to every paddler as an individual.

Helping students to find their fun will always be at the centre of my coaching and there may at times be a place for some sensitive psychological work.

Why do people fall out of love with paddling and can coaches help?

There are probably as many different reasons as there are unhappy paddlers. Common reasons are injury, traumatic events, anxiety and social factors. Often you'll find several of these bundled together.

Injury and trauma

As with Jack, this often starts with trying to find a way back, adapting and learning to live with some new vulnerability or restriction. This can change into accepting a new identity as a paddler - I'm not the same paddler I was before, so who am I in the light of what has happened?

As coaches we can help people reconnect with the fun. A good place to start might be what was fun before? For some paddlers it's about adrenaline, for others a sense of achievement, for others it's all about journeying through the environment exploring as they go.

For others it's competing and for others winning. Some people paddle to meet people, some to be part of a community, whilst others do it to get some space.

We can help people to identify what they get out of paddling. If we can find out what was fun then, that might unlock what can be fun now, so that fun can be had along the way!

As with Jack it's often about patience. Helping people set realistic goals and small steps; tickling the edges of their comfort zone rather than leaping out of it. Out on the water it can be about finding the tasks that allow people to exist in the moment. Just the right level of challenge where the paddler is completely in the flow and the internal voice is silent.

Anxiety

Anxiety tends to increase when we don't know what's going to happen next. We're predicting the future all of the time; from anticipating that my bedroom floor will be a solid surface, to picking a line on a rapid. For some, a level of unpredictability can be what makes paddling fun, but when the future becomes so uncertain that we're completely unable to anticipate what's going to happen we can find ourselves in a state of anxiety.

For many, the tendency is to focus on the things that might go wrong and create worst case scenario videos in their heads. Reducing the unknowns helps a person to identify the things that they can predict. This enables them to plan ahead so that there are future elements to focus on that make sense. Choosing activities which enable paddlers to anticipate various elements involved with a high degree of accuracy can go a long way towards helping to reduce anxiety.

Social

The people we paddle with are an important part of our well-being. When we paddle with the right people it opens us up to be ourselves, to be honest about how we are feeling, to experiment and to fail without feeling judged. All of which set us up to have more fun. Conversely when we paddle in the wrong group for us (which might be precisely the right group for another paddler), we might feel more anxious, less safe, worry about

our performance or what others might think of us'. In these circumstances, we probably won't be paddling at our best and probably won't enjoy ourselves as much.

As coaches we can have a role in helping paddlers notice the effect their paddling companions have on them and their enjoyment of what they are doing. This may mean having some important conversations with their fellow paddlers about what they need to feel more comfortable, or eventually finding new people to paddle with.

Parting thoughts

We've looked at how coaches might help. We also have to accept that we might be part of the problem. Coaching involves observing and changing performance, but feeling observed and judged can cause problems which mess up performance. People choosing to be coached are displaying a willingness to have their beliefs changed and their paddling critiqued in return for better performance. If we push too hard and too fast we break people; if we don't do enough paddlers feel they're not getting any benefit.

As coaches we may not always appreciate the influence we have on our fellow paddlers both on and off the water. Whether we like it or not, some folks will see us as role models. We cannot help but affect both people's image of what happy paddling should look like and the wider paddling culture.

Finally, it is OK not to love boating. As we journey through life we do change. But sometimes we can help paddlers rekindle their love for the sport - and when we do it's not always about skill development.

A huge thanks to Jenny for doing all of the heavy lifting in this article. If you have any comments, please share on Facebook @coachingcornerscotland. In the next article we'll take a look at choosing just the right environment for our coaching.

*Where this has been studied, people are generally far too busy worrying about how people see them, to spend time judging others.

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