

Get Some Style

Article: Chris Brain



WHAT IS FREESTYLE?

Whilst taking a well-earned rest on the bank at the National Watersports Centre in Nottingham, having just had a fantastic freestyle session on the course, I was busy watching some of the local paddlers do their thing on the water. They were busy going end over end and making their boat fly all over the feature when I overheard a conversation between a mother and her young son,

Son *Look mum that man is nearly falling in all the time!*

Mum *Yes son, they don't seem to be able to keep their boat in a straight line*

Son *What do you think they are trying to do? Are they trying to get back up the river?*

Mum *I don't know, but it does look very dangerous don't you think?*

It was at that moment that I was once again reminded that unless you know what you are looking at, freestyle paddling is a very unique and confusing discipline in our sport.

Freestyle (or as it has been known previously playboating and rodeo) is all about performing dynamic moves, tricks and spins with your kayak (or even canoe!). It is exceptionally creative and dynamic, and like most areas of paddlesport is constantly evolving. When describing freestyle to my non-paddling friends I often refer to it as the gymnastics of paddlesport or what BMX is in cycling.

Michael Harper winding up for a blunt at Stanley Embankment



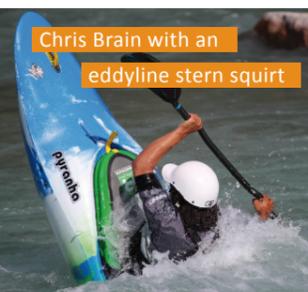
Hugh Mandelstam competing at the Younguns freestyle event



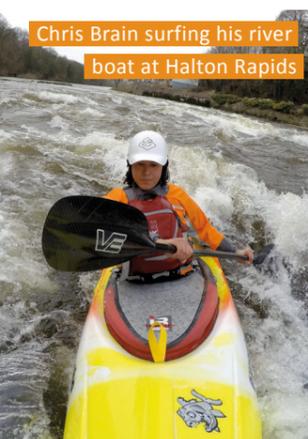
Chris Brain performing a rock grind in Argentiere, France



Current British Freestyle Champion Gav Barker at HPP



Chris Brain with an eddyline stern squirt



Chris Brain surfing his river boat at Halton Rapids

BUT RIVER RUNNING IS SO COOL THOUGH

Yes it is! We are all in agreement with that! Running rivers in a 80/90 gallon creek boat is a huge amount of fun and can be exceptionally rewarding, however, I feel that so many paddlers miss out on freestyle because the current trend seems to be for most beginners to graduate into bigger boats as their skill level increases. This is a real change from when I was learning to paddle back in the late 90s and early 00's, when the trend was the better you got, the smaller the boat you got in!

A friend once said these wise words when I asked him why he was so passionate about "playboating", he said, "The reason I do it is so that when I am getting trashed in a hole at the end of a big rapid in my creekboat, I have some idea of what is going on!"

It's true that for many of us freestyle may well be a second discipline, something that we do every now and then or when there maybe isn't much water. It is important to remember that many of the world's best paddlers (creeking, river running and even slalom) have at some point worked on their freestyle skills and it has ultimately helped them to develop into the paddler they are now. Many of the skills that you work on in a freestyle boat can have such a positive impact on the rest of your paddling, regardless of what your regular discipline is. It is because of these transferable skills that I am so passionate about encouraging whitewater paddlers to get into freestyle.

My top ten transferables are ...

Fitness

Freestyle kayaking gets your heart pumping! Incorporating a few freestyle sessions into your paddling will certainly help with your all round fitness.

Strength

Freestyle moves often require you to push the boat around or underneath you, and this inevitably makes you stronger. Freestyle naturally develops core strength,

which is important for successful boof strokes, lifting your bow over waves and even for breaking in and out.

Balance

As you spend so much time with your freestyle boat in all kinds of weird and wonderful positions, you inevitably improve your balance. The ability to hold an edge and to balance dynamically is essential to perform at a high level in any paddlesport discipline.

Flexibility

With the boat making so many rotations around your body in so many different planes, a degree of flexibility is required to perform the moves. If you feel like flexibility is an issue with your paddling, a dabble at freestyle could help to loosen you up!

Co-ordination

If you are the kind of paddler that paddles as hard as they can and hopes for the best, or just paddle around like a bull in a china shop, you could probably do with working on your finesse. Many freestyle moves require a set up, initiation, rotation and recovery. This does require you to be coordinated with your paddle strokes and often the timing is the key – simply paddling as fast as you can or just throwing your weight around won't cut it.

Spatial awareness

Freestyle is all about moving (and thinking) in 3D. You become aware of what your boat is doing above and below the water, horizontally and vertically! Like my friend said, when you're getting turned over in a hole, you'll be glad you practiced in your freestyle boat and if you make it look good, you could even claim it was intentional!

Boat control

Often in freestyle paddling you are controlling a very nimble boat in some challenging situations, with every



Crispin Agar on his first surf at Rabioux Wave in France



Beth Hume and Dan Butler with some retro surf moves on the Tryweryn

single tiny movement of your body having an impact on the boat. You are also transitioning from edge to edge, very dynamically too, so your overall boat control will inevitably improve which will help your kayaking.

Rolling ability

Freestyle kayaking = getting your head wet. It's pretty much a fact that the more you play the more chances you will get to practice your roll. So many whitewater boaters don't have a strong roll simply because they don't practice it. You might take a few swims when you start out freestyling, but you'll get plenty of chances to work on rolling.

Reading the water

Once you start looking for waves to surf and places to play, your ability to read whitewater increases dramatically. You'll be able to judge which stoppers you can get out of and which ones you can't! You will also start to recognise that the rivers features are just a big playground that you have fun in.

Fun

We all paddle because we enjoy it and freestyle is just another way to have fun out on the water. If you are having a bit of a lull in your paddling or a lack of motivation, then learning to surf and spin could be just what gets you back on the water with a smile.

ITS PRETTY TRICKY THOUGH ISN'T IT?

"Nothing worthwhile doing was ever easy!"

At the beginning, learning freestyle moves can seem like a daunting task and without a doubt you'll fall on your face a fair bit and will probably get quite wet along the way. However, with a little bit of determination and some hard work the results will certainly be worth the effort. There are plenty of skills and instructional videos out there (some good and some bad) and with a bit of research you will probably find the information you are looking for. Above all with freestyle keep positive, sometimes your body just needs to learn to do the motion (especially if you haven't done it much before) and before you know it everything will seem to click into place.

THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Getting the right tools for the job is always important when it comes to kayaking and freestyle is no different. A purchase of a dedicated freestyle kayak will inevitably help you to progress through some of the moves better and a flat-hulled boat with some edges is a must if you want to get spinning on waves. The second-hand market is always active when it comes to buying and selling playboats, so keep your ears open with you paddling pals and keep your eyes on the popular auction sites too. It is always best to demo a boat, however, as they often feel very different on carpet to what they do on the water. Also getting the right boat for your height and weight is a must, too much volume and you won't be able to get vertical, too little and you'll be sinking all the time.

Remember when you are starting out you most likely don't need the newest, most expensive design



Brad Porch after his first flat spin at Hurley Weir

and in fact some of the older style freestyle kayaks are actually easier to learn in. You shouldn't need to spend much money to get started with a second hand freestyle boat.

USE WHAT YOU'VE GOT

You could of course use what you've got! If you have a river running or creek type kayak, you can still use the river as a playground, doing some downriver freestyle. Using your creekboat to play on the river can open up moves like rock splats, grinds, 360's and you can even surf your river boat too. It is never going to be as dynamic as using a dedicated freestyle boat, but if you take the playboater's mindset to your local river you'll be surprised at how much you can push yourself and how differently you'll view the water.

TAKE IT FURTHER

Once you have got a taste for freestyle paddling you may well want to take it further. One thing that may appeal to you is competition. Many competitions take different formats, but the norm is to follow the ICF rules, which give you 45 second runs on the feature where you can strut your stuff and rack up points. The atmosphere at freestyle events is always incredibly supportive, with many paddlers cheering on their competitors from the eddy. It can be also be a fun way to meet other paddlers and to find some people to get on the water with too.

As with any other discipline of paddling, getting some coaching can also help to move your performance forwards and can give you plenty of ideas on how you can progress. A recent development with British Canoeing is the Freestyle Star Award scheme, which runs alongside the other star award disciplines such as whitewater, canoe, sea, surf etc. This can be a fun way to get some coaching, benchmark your performance and can be very good for setting goals for the future too.

So get out there, get in a short boat and start having fun spinning around and going end over end!

CHRIS BRAIN

Chris has been kayaking, canoeing and coaching for the last 15 years and runs his own business, Chris Brain Coaching, delivering paddlesport coaching, safety and rescue courses and REC First aid training. Chris coaches with the GB Freestyle Team and delivers the British Canoeing freestyle award scheme.



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