



Interview: Chris Brain

Photos: Chris Brain, Mike Shaw,
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What is freestyle?

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 like BMX is to cycling.

Since its original boom, freestyle has evolved dramatically and for many paddlers in recent years has become separate from their whitewater paddling and river running. It wasn't uncommon at one point to see everyone running the river in their 'playboat' and spending most of their time stern squirting on eddylines and surfing waves.

DISCOVER FREESTYLE

But river running is so cool though...

Yes it is! We are all in agreement with that! Running rivers in a 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 paddlers who are introduced to the sport to graduate straight into larger creek style boats as they start to progress. This is a real change from when 'playboating' started to boom in the late 90s, the trend was the better you got, the smaller the boat you got in!

I asked a friend of mine why he was so passionate about 'playboating' and 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! People who don't learn how to play on the river miss out on so many skills."

It is true that for many of us, 'playboating' may well be a second discipline, something that we do every now and then, during warmer weather or when there isn't much water in the rivers. 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 develop 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 any whitewater paddler to learn to enjoy freestyle.



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Ten attributes that freestyle will help you develop...

SPACIAL 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 we are controlling a very nimble boat in some challenging situations, with every single tiny movement of your body having an impact on the boat. We are also transitioning from edge to edge very dynamically too, so your overall boat control will inevitably improve which will help your kayaking.

ROLLING

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 due to the inherent stability from modern boat designs. You might take a few swims when you start out freestyling, but you'll also get plenty of chances to work on your roll.

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 features on the river 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



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 develops your strength. As the boat is often at an elevated, 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 are 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!

COORDINATION

If you are the kind of paddler that paddles as hard as they can and hopes for the best, 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 co-ordinated with your paddle strokes and often the timing is the key as simply paddling as fast as you can or just throwing your weight around, won't cut it.



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and recovery

It's pretty hard to get good at it though isn't it?

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 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.

If you have no idea where to start, most clubs will have some freestyle boats available to paddle and inevitably someone who is willing to help you get started.

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 are wanting 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 your 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 a 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.



“Nothing worthwhile doing was ever easy!”





In recent years many kayak manufacturers have released modern cross over designs, which certainly take some inspiration from the days when we used to play and run the river in the same boat. Whilst typically not specialised freestyle designs, these boats blend the best of both worlds and will allow you to play, as well as run the river with ease.

Remember when you are starting out, you most likely don't need the newest, most expensive design and in fact some of the older style freestyle kayaks are in fact 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 by doing some downriver freestyle. Using your creekboat to play on the river can open up moves like rock splats, grinds, 360s 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 different you 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 to compete. Many competitions take different formats, but the norm is to follow the ICF rules, which gives 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 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, there are even personal performance awards with British Canoeing. 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. If you already have experience and are interested in learning how to coach freestyle, there is a development pathway with British Canoeing for this too.

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



Chris Brain Coaching

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 awards.

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