



Finding feedback on the

RIVER

Words and photos: Jamie Greenhalgh and Chris Brain
Paddling whitewater has to be one of the most holistically fulfilling hobbies out there. The simple act of putting on your gear, hopping in a boat, and using nothing but your own skill and power to navigate a section of running river, is one that ticks a million boxes. It is engaging, challenging and invigorating. . .

It can also be inspiring, empowering and even calming. There is very little that can match the feeling that sinks over you after having had an epic day of river exploration. If you have paddled with friends, you revel together in the enormity of where you've been and what you have done, and if you are alone you can sit quietly and feel a deep satisfaction.

A paddler can develop faster and more effectively if they can tune in to the feedback they are offered from a range of sources, some of this feedback can come from traditional sources such as a professional coach or someone else observing your paddling. However, some of the feedback may be found internally, from the personal reflections we can make about our own paddling, allowing us to effectively coach ourselves. Of course we can also gain feedback from the environment we paddle in and understand how to respond to the messages it is giving us constantly during our time on the water.

Over the course of this series we will be exploring these four key places a paddler may find feedback, giving a three-stage approach on how to find and use this information to help move your paddling forwards.



THE PADDLER

A growth mindset – see your successes as mountains and your failures as mole hills

When a very young child tries out a new skill, such as riding a scooter, they will bound forward and go for it without thinking about it too much. If they don't get the result they want, they might try again, or they might change their approach a little and repeat the cycle until they get it. When they do get it, they are really happy and that feeling is their take-away memory. They are then driven to keep learning and trying new things. This is how kids learn. When an adult tries out a new skill however, they are much more likely to take tentative steps, do some research or preparation, and then have a go... In the hope that their preparation will give them a better chance of success right away.

When trying new things, an adult will typically have a far better memory for the things that went badly than for the things that went well, and they can sometimes hold on to those memories of initial failures for long periods of time. This is dispiriting, and means they're less likely to be able to keep a positive relationship with self-driven learning. Coaching yourself is a skill. You probably knew how to do it as a kid, without even knowing that's what you were doing. The good news is it's still out there. You just need to work on it.

If you've fallen out of the self-teaching habit and want to get back into it, the first step to running your own one-person kayak academy is to become comfortable with the idea of failure. Failure is not a negative in and

of itself... It's what happens afterwards that is the important detail! Depending on your mindset you may have to make some adjustments to the way you see and respond to failure. Thomas Edison failed 1,000 times to make a lightbulb. UK whitewater kayaking golden-boy, Bren Orton, has doubtless fallen on his face attempting freestyle tricks well over 1,000 times. Successful people are good at failing.

If you don't believe me, go and watch the outtakes of one of Danny Macaskill's biking videos. As Elizabeth Day says in her popular podcast 'How To Fail', "Learning how to fail is actually learning to succeed better." Trying out new things and challenging yourself is the aim of the game, and when you play, you should embrace the inevitability of failure, just as you embrace the thrill of slow incremental progress. There is no magic wand.

Get to know your own paddling – if you know what you're doing, you can improve what you're doing!

How do you do the things you do? Where are your weak areas and where are your strengths? If you've been paddling for a while, you probably have a well-developed motor-memory for the action of paddling, which means you can now do certain skills without having to think about it. For this reason, identifying exactly what you are doing again can be tough! You may even take yourself by surprise and find that what you do now is really different from the way you were first shown. This doesn't mean you've got into bad habits, just new ones! The trick is knowing what they are. If you know what they are, you can have a go at figuring out how well they're working, and what you might be able to change to make them better.





An example of this might be how you paddle through a wave or stopper in a rapid. Paddling well through a wave or stopper is a skill. That river feature is desperate to slow you down or send you somewhere else, and your aim is to bypass it without losing any of your control to the river. Getting to wherever you've got with this skill involved putting together a lot of different elements like timing, direction of travel, upper body movement, control of the boat's edges, etc. to come up with your best version. Think about it, what elements have you put in there? How effective is what you're doing? how many times out of 10 does it work as intended, and in how many different places? Once you separate a skill into all its ingredients, you can begin to have a play with making it better by changing something to see what happens. The worst that happens is the thing you're trying doesn't work... so you can always just move on!

Find the balance. Sometimes it's good to coach yourself. At other times it's better to just get in your groove

When you're focussing on a particular ingredient of your paddling it's easy to feel like everything else around it is falling apart. Suddenly, you're trying to decide and give conscious thought to how to perform

moves that you would have done without thinking about before. That's why it's important to pick your moments for reflective practice, and to pick your moments just to go for it. Your best performances will usually come out when you're in 'flow state'. Flow state is a term given to that addictive mindset where you're focussed completely on the challenge at hand, wholly immersed in what you're doing.

One good way to induce a flow state is to move quickly, thinking only of where you're going to next, and not how you'll do it... like a runner with their headphones in. Just keep moving through the river; setting little targets on the move: catching eddies; surfing; flaring over rocks; leaving no time to plan or rest; getting into the groove of flowing around the river. Spending time 'in your flow' is good for your performance and for your mental wellbeing. It also builds up the very useful skills of high-speed decision making and intentional focus, which allow you to quickly zero in on your target and push for it, without questioning yourself or overthinking the what-ifs. When you're really challenged, the words 'don't overthink it', can sometimes be the best advice you could ever hear.

If you can find a balance between spending time in flow state and spending time coaching yourself, you'd be surprised how far the ceiling can rise.



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Chris would like to thank Pyranha kayaks, Palm Equipment, Red Paddle Co and Go Kayaking Northwest for making fantastic kit and their continued support.

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Jamie is lucky enough to be supported by Pyranha Kayaks and NRS Equipment, both of whom make brilliant gear to keep him and his customers looking and feeling cool.
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