

THE HABITS OF HIGH PERFORMING PADDLERS

PART ONE

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What makes the best even better?

Just like pretty much every paddler out there – I'd like to be better! I want to feel better on the water, feel faster, fitter, more confident, smoother, slicker and for my boating skills to keep developing. I'd also like to know how best to maintain a level of paddling ability and how to stay fit and avoid being injured!

There are so many inspiring paddlers and so many people who operate at a level that I aspire to – I often wonder what they do differently to me? I can watch their videos, whether on whitewater, freestyle, slalom, racing, canoeing and question, "How did they get there, and what did it take?" This desire to learn from the best has pushed me to try and seek out the answer and find out what high performing paddlers do both on and off the water, what makes them truly remarkable and what can I learn from them and incorporate into my own practice.

The series will focus on what these paddlers do on and off the water and how they bring it together for the key moments to be at the top of their game. We will be identifying what drives and motivates them, how they train, how often they paddle, the lifestyle they choose to lead and the sacrifices they make in the pursuit of their mastery of the sport. I will be uncovering their key habits and finding common ground that they share regarding improving their performance and developing throughout their paddling career.



Photo: Will Copestake



Pete Caterall. East Greenland. Photo: Pete Astles

What is a high performing paddler?

This is a crucial aspect to look at initially as high performance isn't just about winning medals or holding a world record; other factors such as depth of experience and longevity must also be considered. However, this makes it difficult to compare individuals, as someone who completes an epic sea kayaking expedition is very different to someone who trains to an elite competitive level at a whitewater course.

However, in comparing such a diverse range of paddlers, here lies the fantastic knowledge that I am aiming to uncover. Undoubtedly, there will be many things that are entirely different for these paddlers, but they must also share so many elements of their practice.

For this series, I will be using the following as a broad definition of a high performing paddler, with the paddlers in some way meeting these criteria.

- National/international competitive paddler.
- Longevity in the sport at a higher level of personal performance.
- First or challenging descents/expeditions/trips.
- Innovative or groundbreaking in their discipline or paddlesport.
- Recognised as a high-performance paddler.
- Recognised as a technical/discipline expert or coach.

For this series, I will also be gathering information from paddlers who have previously met these criteria but do not currently. The experience and knowledge they hold in their field will still be exceptionally useful.

Photo: William Hauser



Photo: David Bain



THE HIGH PERFORMER'S JOURNEY

Becoming a top performer doesn't happen overnight and will, without a doubt, have been a long and challenging journey filled with sustained, purposeful practice and countless hours of water time.

I am interested in the correlations between these high performers and their development towards their top level. As with many elite-level sports performers, there will inevitably be a combination of motivational factors, cultural/environmental influences, access to resources and physical components.

For high-performing paddlers reflecting on their development, identifying the key aspects that have significantly impacted their development is potentially very straightforward but much harder to recognise at the time of it happening. If we can find these contributing factors and identify them, we can seek them out with purpose and incorporate them into our paddling. For example, would it be better for a developing paddler to seek out lots of easier rivers within their ability, therefore growing a diverse range of experience?

Or would it be better for them to regularly run laps on something more challenging but much more familiar? Would it be better to focus earlier on developing the physical component of your paddling and sacrificing some time on the water? Or would it be more beneficial to do all your training in the boat? Suppose we can identify these key common factors between those at the cutting edge of our sport. In that case, we can make our paddling and practice much more efficient and make some progress ourselves to avoid the dreaded plateau and take ourselves to the next level.

ARE YOU A HIGH PERFORMING PADDLER?

If you feel like you meet the criteria above, I would love to hear from you! If you have some words of wisdom to share and would like to impart some of your experience to others, please get in touch via email at chris@chrisbraincoaching.com, and I will outline how I am gathering and collating this information. Whilst I can't guarantee that everyone will be able to contribute, your enthusiasm will be welcome.



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Chris has been paddling and coaching for over 20 years and runs his own business Chris Brain Coaching, delivering coaching, safety and rescue courses.

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