

A chat with...

CHRIS BRAIN

Interview: Peter Tranter **Photos:** Chris Brain

Chris is such a well-known face in UK paddlesports that he hardly needs an intro. However, for those of you on further shores, Chris is a very popular and hard-working personality in all the disciplines of kayaking, canoeing and more lately SUP. He has an infectious personality and so loves the sport he is often featured in publicity campaigns for Palm Equipment and British Canoeing. So therefore, it is our great privilege to find out more about him in this huge and wide-ranging interview – take it away Chris...

Before we start – just let our readers know a little about yourself, family, background, etc.

I grew up and live in the north west of England and work full time as a paddlesport coach and course provider. I've been working on the water in some capacity for about 23 years now, and I still love it as much as I did when I started. I've had the opportunity to paddle in some incredible places, and I'm still motivated to get on the water and explore new locations.

Tell us about the start of your paddling journey?

Often people assume that my dad got me into it because he paddles too, but we started our paddling journey on the same day. My uncle (who used to be a kayak instructor) took us both out on a trip down the River Esk and into Whitby Harbour, and he could tell that we were keen, so he arranged to get some fibreglass kayaks for us to keep at home and use on our local river.

The River Irwell in north Manchester was within walking distance from our house, which meant we had walked past it lots of times, and it made sense that we would take the kayaks down there and paddle this stretch. After a bit of prep, sourcing some life jackets (we didn't know better), getting some paddles from a dinghy shop and armed with our cycling helmets (we assumed they would be ok), we headed to the river for our first paddle.

There was also an activity centre at the river, so when we arrived with our fibreglass kayaks and mismatched kit, asking if it was ok to paddle, it must have been obvious that we didn't know what we were doing! Fortunately, the activity centre convinced us not to paddle that day but to come back and have some lessons and join the local canoe club.

From that point on, we were both pretty relentless, paddling every weekend, getting hold of some more appropriate kit and learning and developing really fast. This was thanks to the input from the club, activity centre staff and other paddlers based around that venue.

I quickly started volunteering and working at the centre, which meant that I could be on the water every day through the summer holidays. My parents convinced me that it would be a good idea to gain some qualifications, and, aged 16, I became a Junior Level 2 British Canoeing Coach.

Where's your local paddling spot?

So geographically, my closest spot is still the river Irwell, but I'm probably more likely to head towards North Wales or the Lake District to get on the water these days. Rivers like the Dee and the Leven are my go-to for a stress-free and fun paddle.



What do you love about paddlesports?

I think this has changed over the years, but something about getting on the water still keeps my attention. I loved feeling like I was making progress and getting better at something in the early stages. Feeling skilful is such a buzz and being in control on the water and making your boat glide, carve and fly towards where you want it to go is a great sensation. As my experience has developed, I've loved travelling to different locations, being on the water with different people, and exploring new places.

It also feels like there is still so much to learn and ways that I can develop through paddlesport. The learning process feels like it will always be an essential part of my time on the water and is something that holds my attention and keeps me focused. I also really like the fact that you can get into paddlesport at any age, and it's possible to excel in different disciplines into later stages of life; I think that's something that makes paddlesport (and the outdoors) so unique.

And what don't you like so much and why?

I have been known to complain about cold weather and cold hands from time to time. Apart from that, I really love everything else!

What gives you a bigger buzz, WW kayaking, sea kayaking, canoeing or SUP? Or is it just about being on the water?

So the short answer for me would be whitewater kayaking! However, it depends on the water and opportunities available to me at the time. If there is

the option of getting to the coast, there is genuine excitement in a sea kayak. If I have the option of a multi-day trip on easier water, then a canoe would be my craft of choice. I love getting out on a SUP, and I like that direct connection you get with the water through this discipline.

Any wise words to somebody thinking of becoming a successful paddlesport instructor?

The key is to be passionate about what you are doing. You have to want to paddle at the weekend, in your lunch break, after you've finished instructing for the day, and you have to love it. Developing your communication skills and injecting energy and character into your delivery and conversations with people go a long way.

I've also realised that teaching technical skills and doing repetitive drills often does not sell paddling very well to your participants in the early stages. Focusing on helping them explore and understand the environment, developing some independence and understanding, and simply being outdoors is often a better way to engage people early on.

I believe that the instructors getting people on the water for the first time almost certainly have the biggest responsibility. They have to sell the experience of paddlesport to those who might be unsure or a bit nervous, and that is challenging and is very skilful to do well. When people come for some coaching or on a course with me, they are typically already convinced paddling is great, so my end of the job is easy.

How was the progression from sitting in a kayak to standing on a SUP?

Hmm, not as easy as I thought it would be! As a whitewater kayaker, my first thought was to do some whitewater with a SUP, but after endless swims and realising that I probably needed to learn the basics a bit better, I went and developed some skills on flat water. I found that I preferred the sensation of being on open water much more than being on whitewater on a SUP.

I enjoyed the physicality of SUP paddling and being a bit less cluttered with equipment as kayaking and canoeing can sometimes be. I loved the feeling of being stood on the board, and the fact that you get your feet wet is an excellent connection to the environment. There's a lot less falling off than there used to be, but I like that you can push yourself to those limits, and if you go too far, you can swim back onto your board.

WHAT DRIVES YOU AND INSPIRES YOU TO COACH?

“ I feel like I'm in a privileged position to pass the knowledge, experience and enthusiasm I've gained on to others. I love seeing people develop, doing things they didn't believe they could and taking the opportunity to push themselves when I'm here to help them if it goes wrong. I also feel like I still have a great deal to learn about coaching, and this process of learning and developing my coaching craft keeps me inspired to try out new things and keep innovating where I can. ”

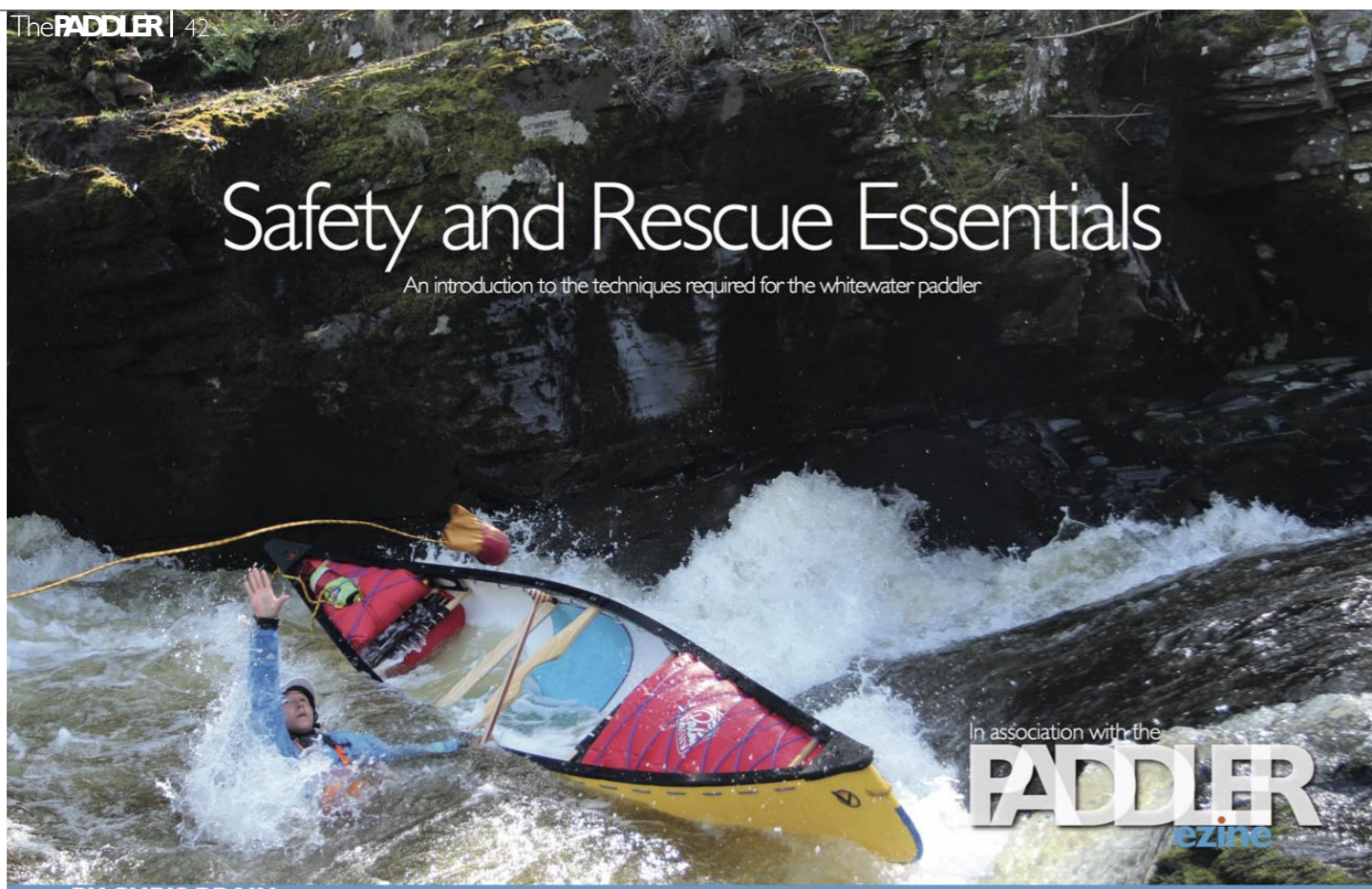


PADDLING WITH GAV BARKER ON THE RIVER DEE IN 1999



Safety and Rescue Essentials

An introduction to the techniques required for the whitewater paddler



In association with the
PADDLER
eZine

BY CHRIS BRAIN

CANOEING IN NORTH WALES



TELL US ABOUT A DREAM PADDLING DESTINATION YOU'VE NEVER VISITED AND WHY IT FLICKS YOUR SWITCH?

“ The Zambezi! Fingers crossed, there should be a trip happening later this year, which I'm very excited about. Originally my early travels to Uganda were going to be to the Zambezi, but due to the imminent damming in Uganda, there was a bit more urgency to travel there first. I feel privileged to have paddled in Uganda before any dam projects were complete. ”

If you had to choose one last thing you wanted to achieve within paddlesport – what would that be?

I really would have liked to develop my freestyle paddling more and to be able to throw some of these moves and combos that the top paddlers do. My early roots in whitewater paddling lie in freestyle (back when every kayaker was a playboater), and I feel like I have a strong set of core skills, but the level that people have taken it to in the last few years is something else. It would require more time and dedication than I can manage right now, and being closer to a better freestyle spot would be helpful. I'm stoked that some freestyle legends that inspired me when I started, such as EJ, Clay Wright and Corran Addison, are still shredding, so maybe there is hope for me yet.

If you could capture just one 'feel-good' moment in your paddling times, which would it be and why?

When I first arrived in Uganda on the river Nile back in 2007, I had this overwhelming feeling that I'd finally made it. Paddling on the rivers in the North West of England for all those years had paid off, and now I was in the premier league of paddling locations. It felt like I was actually starring in my own kayaking video; the water was warm, the sun was shining, the rapids were big, and it felt great... like really great!

How busy are you now with the increased interest in paddlesports through the pandemic?

More people than ever are keen to get out on the water, and that's great! As an existing paddling community, we are responsible for looking after these new people and welcoming them and giving them the best advice we can do. I can see a lot of parallels between the people who buy an inflatable kayak or SUP from a supermarket or sports shop because it caught their attention and me starting out with my lifejacket and cycling helmet all those years ago. We don't know what we don't know, and without people helping me, I wouldn't have got to where I am now. I think it's essential that we help people to enjoy paddlesports regardless of where or how they enter the sport.

You have written numerous articles on paddlesport and produced a safety book for paddlers; what motivates you to put pen to paper?

I really enjoy writing about what's on my mind at the time, whether that's coaching, paddling, safety or anything else. I try to write in a way that will connect with any paddler, so I try to keep my writing straightforward, understandable and, where I can, jargon-free. I always start with the intention that whatever I write should be helpful for someone to read, and that's where the safety book began. I planned to write a couple of short articles on trip planning, safe swimming and simple rescues, but by the time I finished those articles, I realised I wasn't done and wrote seven more sections! When I realised that these separate articles could be combined to make one book, it took

numerous hours of editing, re-writing, shooting new photos and completely reorganising to turn it into the resource it is now. It was also crucial for me that this information was freely available so that you can download a PDF version of it for free from my website www.chrisbraincoaching.com. It feels really good to think that someone might read it, and it makes a difference to what they do on the water to keep themselves and others safe.

Is there anywhere in the world that's got you hooked? Somewhere you want to keep going back to again and again?

I know it's a big area across multiple countries, but the Alps are a fantastic place to paddle, with varied locations depending on where you are. I've been to France countless times now, so I've definitely explored that area (although I'm sure there are runs I haven't done). I would love to see more of Italy, Austria and Switzerland, and there are loads out there I have yet to do.

Name just one thing we can do as paddlers to improve our rivers and their environment.

The key is to do something, even if that something feels small. If we all do a little something, significant changes will happen. Picking up just one plastic bottle or piece of rubbish when you go paddling will make a difference. If someone wanted to take more action, then organising a river clean and encouraging people to join will go a long way.



SUP paddling with Cal Major

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE THREATS TO THE GROWTH OF THE SPORT?

“ I think the lack of access (as mentioned above) is a genuine issue in the sport's growth. I've met a few people who have bought SUPs, kayaks and canoes only to realise that getting onto the water isn't as simple as they first thought. This is where existing paddlers and clubs need to step in and help show the people new to our community where they can access the water and find some of the great natural spaces available to them. ”



When preparing for a multi-day expedition or trip in challenging conditions, what qualities do you look for in a fellow teammate paddler?

There are just some people who bring specific energy and enthusiasm to a challenging trip or expedition. I value some people's ability to find humour in tricky situations and push through a challenge with a smile. It's also great to work with people who value teamwork and make decisions together rather than expecting to be led and leave tough discussions to others. A solid understanding of what is in and out of your ability is an excellent attribute for someone to have, but I also like it when people step up and push themselves, but knowing when to do this is critical. I like to paddle with people you know will hit you for the first time with a throwback and have taken responsibility for bringing some safety kit.

Is there anything you'd change within the industry to make it more inclusive?

I think the industry is making real progress in this area, but change does take time, and it may be a while before we see representation that reflects modern society being reflected in paddlesport. I think the perception of paddlesports with the public is changing. People realise that it is something that genuinely anyone can do, from any background and with any ability. Over the last few years, many people have realised that there are opportunities for paddlesport on their doorstep, that there are adventures closer to home, and that anyone can take up paddling has helped. I wish we could see more diversity in coaching and instructing at all levels and would love it if these people could recognise it as a potential career if they wanted to go down that route. I don't have the answers as to how to do this, but I hope to see some change in the future.

Do you think we will have the right to paddle all of our waterways in England and Wales one day?

I've got to give you the answer that I hope for here, and of course, I would love for us all to have the right to paddle all of our waterways in England and Wales in the future. Whenever I speak to anyone new to paddling and isn't aware of the current situation, they are

shocked. I think the perception from the public is that we can canoe, kayak and SUP anywhere. If more people were involved in paddlesport, then there would be a greater strength of numbers to challenge this. I also think open access would lead to more paddlers being spread out over more venues rather than everyone being focused on some of the accessible hotspots. I've also found that virtually every paddler cares about the environment they paddle in and wishes to be respectful to landowners and other water users. If we were given a chance to paddle freely, I think we would do the right thing and be responsible with our access as a community.

Which brands do you work with, and how do they specifically help you?

I'm fortunate to have excellent long-standing relationships with some fantastic brands. I'm fortunate enough to be part of Team Pyranha, Team Palm and a RedPaddleCo paddler. Through these brands, I also use VE Paddles, Venture Kayaks and Canoes and have a great relationship with Go Kayaking Northwest, where I can signpost people for fantastic independent advice on a full range of excellent paddlesport equipment.

I've always said that I wouldn't want to compromise the kit I was wearing for the sake of some kind of deal, so I make sure that I only have involvement with brands I can rely upon. I also want to make sure that as a coach, any kit I wear or use is something that I genuinely think is excellent, and I think these brands all produce fantastic products. It's also essential for me as a coach to give independent advice to the paddlers that I work with, as there are also other companies making great kit that I don't have any affiliation to.

These brands help me be on the water as much as possible, keeping me warm and dry on cold days and making sure I can paddle the most cutting edge boats and boards. I enjoy feeling part of the team and love being able to test and give feedback on new products too.

You work closely with British Canoeing; can you tell us more about that?

Part of my work on the water with British Canoeing is training course providers to be able to deliver some of the coaching, leadership and safety awards that are available. It's a great role, and I enjoy working with coaches and leaders on this level who would like to be able to pass their knowledge and experience on to others. I am proud to work with British Canoeing and believe that it is heading in the right direction and doing great things at all levels for the sport as an organisation. Many people would recognise that the organisation has seen significant changes and improvements over recent years. I know the desire is for British Canoeing to continue on this successful path moving forward.



FLYING ON THE WELLEBRUCKE



Sea kayaking in South Wales

Coaching



AUTOBOOFING IN ITALY

You've taken to running really well - where did that inspiration come from and why?

I've always known that my cardio fitness wasn't what it could be, I've never been any good at running and always hated it when I was growing up, and as a teenager, before I got in a boat, I was overweight, and that didn't help either. I've always liked the "idea" of getting better at running but didn't do anything about it (apart from doing one charity fun run a year!) About four years ago, I decided I would get some trail running shoes and start doing a bit of exploring on the hills near where I live. I went from running a few times a month to a few times a week to most days of the week, and then in 2021, I ran every day for a year. I am proud of my commitment to that goal; I went out in all weathers and sometimes very late at night when that was all the time I had to spare. The result is that I'm fitter and faster

than I have ever been, and I feel great because of it. The results are noticeable on the water, too, in terms of speed, flexibility and how much my boat floats!

Finally, where do you see your paddling going this year and why?

All being well, I should be heading out for some Alpine paddling to Sweden and the Zambesi. I want to spend more time in my freestyle boat as I feel like I don't do enough in that right now. I also have a sea kayak, so there's probably an adventure to be had with that! I also would like to do some kind of distance mission on a SUP, but I need to think about that first. As I get older, I don't just want to maintain my standard; I want to improve it; this means working harder than I have done before... watch this space!



Huge thanks, Chris, for taking the time out to speak to us.

CHATEAU QUEYRAS
IN THE FRENCH ALPS



Quickies...

If you could paddle with anyone in the world, dead or alive, who would it be?

I genuinely think that a trip down the river Spey in Scotland with the Beatles would be amazing.

Which famous person would you most like to play you in a film?

I think Chadwick Boseman would have done a great job.

Pick two celebrities to be your parents

John and Paul, of course (see above!)

What one luxury item would you take with you on a desert island?

Electric toothbrush (and a way of charging it?)

What would you prepare for us if we came to your house for dinner?

I can make a pretty good paella, I think!

What's in your fridge right now?

There's always a bottle of Reggae Reggae sauce ready.

If you could be a superhero for one day, what superpower would you choose and why?

I like all the tech in the Black Panther movie, so being King T'Challa for the day in Wakanda would be amazing.

Any final shoutouts to friends, supporters and sponsors?

Big love to the team and Palm, Pyranha, Red Paddle Co and GKNW; keep doing what you do! Head to www.chrisbraincoaching.com to see my coaching articles and get an insight into my paddling and feel free to follow me on Instagram.