

Finding feedback on the

RIVER²

Words and photos: Jamie Greenhalgh and Chris Brain

There is fun and adventure to be had on every grade of white water. Being adventurers at heart however, paddlers will rarely be satisfied by doing the same style and grade of kayaking forever. The technical challenge of putting our skills to the test on white water that we find engaging will always attract us to push our grade. The rewards of 'upskilling' can also be great. Most of the world's best whitewater destinations require a paddler to be confident on a minimum of grade 3 to ensure a great trip. As much as challenging white water is fun it is also hazardous by nature, and the consequences of being beaten by high grade rapids can be very high. So how do we get good enough to paddle challenging white water successfully?

A paddler can develop faster and more effectively if they can tune in to the feedback they're 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.

We have previously focused on how you as a paddler can coach yourself (Part one: the paddler) and now we will focus on how you can use the feedback from the river to develop your paddling skills.



THE RIVER

Learn to read the water and then keep on learning

Aim to see the challenges in the river as opportunities

Reading and understanding the river is probably the most essential skill in a white water paddler's arsenal. As you are introduced to river paddling, priority one should be to build your understanding of the moving water environment. With a basic understanding of moving water, you can successfully navigate your first rapids. Anyone can do this by simply looking at the path of the water from start to finish, distinguishing major features like rocks and stoppers in the flow, and then deciding where to go to find a clear route.

By continuing to develop this practice of 'reading and running', you can progress quickly through these initial stages. To continue beyond this however, we need to learn to look at the river in a whole new way. The path of least resistance is no good to you any more, and those features you had been avoiding need to become your best friends and training partners.

It may be useful to think of the river as a skate park, filled with obstacles such as ramps, half pipes, rails and platforms. A skater could easily steer around these obstacles from end to end staying on the flat ground, but where would be the fun in that! With an open mind and a touch of optimism, the parks' obstacles become opportunities for the skater to play and to push themselves. That's what they're there to do! What's

more, the more time they spend in the park playing with those obstacles, mucking about and figuring out what's possible, the more opportunities they will begin to see.

A new skater might see a ramp and spot of an opportunity to ride up and use gravity to change direction. To a seasoned skater however, that ramp is an invitation to a seemingly endless list of possibilities. Now let's go back to the river. We don't have concrete ramps and rails, but the white water in the river is thrown up by countless other obstacles that can become epic opportunities for skillful movement if we let them.

If you can think of a rapid in this way the chances to practice, experiment and play multiply by a thousand. A wave isn't just a problem to be avoided. It could be a chance to launch your boat into the air by paddling up the front face and launching over the back. It could also be an opportunity to switch your direction mid-rapid, surf the front face, and even to use your air-time to perform a kickflip by flipping your boat over and around before landing. In this way, a wave on a rapid is not so different from a ramp in a skate park. The next time you get out of your boat to scout a rapid, try to really look at its features. What makes that stopper? How does it affect the path of the flow around it? Is there any way I can use that to do something fun or different today?

ASK THE RIVER FOR FEEDBACK BY BEING DECISIVE AND SETTING TARGETS

When we use the features of rapids as opportunities for play and for skill progression, we also give the river the chance to give us feedback on how we're doing! With no biases, prejudices or white lies, the feedback you get from the river is the truest you will ever



receive. The trick is to know how to ask for it and to know how to translate the answer when it is given.

The first step to asking the river for feedback is to set yourself an aim. How can the river possibly comment on what you've done if you weren't trying to do anything specific? To give yourself maximum chance for quality river coaching, a good tactic is never to leave an eddy without setting yourself a goal, no matter how small it is. An example of your goal could be, "I'll catch that eddy next," "I'll boof over that boulder," or even as simple as, "I'll get at least two metres out into the middle before I let the boat go down." If you can do this, all the time you spend paddling you will be collecting feedback in the form of, "Yes, I got it!" or "Not this time!"

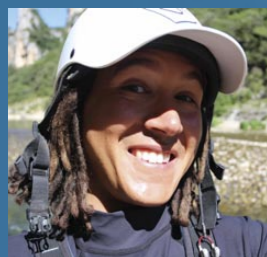
These nuggets of feedback are gold. Not only do they develop your understanding of the river, but also help to build a picture of your own skill level. This means the next time you see a rapid or challenge that has a similar feature or must-make move, you've got a backlog of experiences to draw on. You know when to be confident and when to back down. This is how kayakers can build justifiable confidence and can become smart decision makers.

USE THE RIVER'S FEEDBACK TO TELL YOU ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR TECHNIQUE

One of the most important things that the river can do for your progress is to inform you about how effective your technique is. Great paddling skills are formed when the right technique is applied to the challenge. The challenge won't change to suit your preferred technique, so it's up to you to adapt your technique to suit the challenge! That means that no matter how cool you feel initiating your perfect bow rudder, if the river tells you that it isn't fit for purpose, you have to be ready to listen.

If there's a move that you can't seem to get right, try stepping back for a second and working through these questions. "What is the challenge?" "What problem am I having with it?" and "What could I do to solve this problem?" This might sound unbelievably simple, but it's surprising how effective an open-minded thought process can be in helping you find solutions.

Here's a quick example: You're out working on your river skills and have been trying hard to make a new move across the river to a tight eddy just a short way downstream and across from you. The problem is



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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. www.chrisbraincoaching.com

that there is a very powerful current between you and it, and as soon as you paddle out you can feel your boat getting pushed around hard. It's hard to know why it isn't working... You're applying the same technique as you always have done but this time you feel as though you don't stand a chance!

What's really happening here is the river is trying to tell you that you need to make a change. Instead of getting frustrated and declaring that only the really good kayakers can do this one, let's think about the problem and try to solve it. If you're being overpowered by the strength of the current, what can you do to keep your control? Can you put more force in through your paddle, or somehow apply that force differently, or is there a way you can approach that means you'll feel the flow less forcefully? By keeping an open mind when it comes to technique, you allow yourself to really listen to and use the feedback that the river is giving you.

Your feedback from the river won't always be as simple as, "Yes, you made it," and "No, try again," and this is where it gets trickier. We all know when there's room for improvement, and if you're not styling a move on white water that you'd consider to be easy, you can't expect to do so when you're really put to the test. The good news is that there are plenty of more subtle aspects of your performance you can pay attention to that can give great clues to how to improve.

Paddling a rapid with complete control can look almost effortless, like a bird in flight or a horse at canter. The boater should be completely at one with the environment they're moving through, and their mind fully attuned to what their body can do, and what it will do next. The movement as a whole should look fluid and smooth. With this as an ideal, it becomes possible to drive your training forward by drawing comparisons between your ideal performance and its reality. If you can see an imperfection, then you can work to rectify it by measuring all sorts of factors such as number of strokes, perceived effort, how stable you felt, how fast you completed the challenge, and many more. Struggling with a move in a hard rapid? Try really perfecting a similar one in an easy one.

FEEDBACK

The river's feedback is there for you, and if you know how to collect it and use it to direct your training, long-term self-driven progression can be at your fingertips. As a final point, modern kayaking equipment has been developed specifically to give the most user-friendly experience possible, which sometimes dulls your feedback from the river. If you're struggling to see how you could make your lines smoother, consider down-sizing your boat, or switching your carbon blades for a set of hand paddles. You'll soon find ways you can improve!



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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. www.paddle365.co.uk www.deeriverkayaking.com

