

# Finding feedback on the RIVER<sup>3</sup> The friend

**Words and photos:** Jamie Greenhalgh & Chris Brain  
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Maybe you're dreaming of a river that you'd love to one-day paddle. Perhaps you're working towards success in a competitive discipline like slalom, sprint or freestyle. Maybe you want to paddle with a group of paddlers who are better than you, and you want to feel like a valuable team member, not a burden to be carried. This article aims to point out the places that someone who is driven to improve can turn to in order to get the inspiration, practice and feedback they need.

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 paddling, allowing us to coach ourselves effectively. 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 frequently during our time on the water.

In our two previous chapters, we have looked at how you can coach yourself and how the river can give you feedback to help you develop (<https://paddlerezine.com/finding-feedback-on-the-river/> and <https://paddlerezine.com/finding-feedback-on-the-river-pt2/>). Now we will focus on how you can use the observations and feedback from other paddlers to help you with your progression.







## The Friend

Encourage creative play and watch others as you do this.

Creative play is at the heart of outdoor sports. The game that paddlers play with the river, bikers play with the trails, and surfers play with the waves, is not one with a rulebook. Unlike traditional sports, in the outdoors, we are often only bound by our own rules and typically are limited only by our imagination. Many pioneers of paddlesport have been people prepared to step outside of the norm and to try something different.

Sports such as skateboarding and BMX have utilised the power of creative play between peers from the very origins of the sport. The process of watching someone else make a move or trick and then trying to match (or beat) it is an incredible way to develop not only your physical ability but also your mental approach to what you might be capable of and what might be possible in the future.

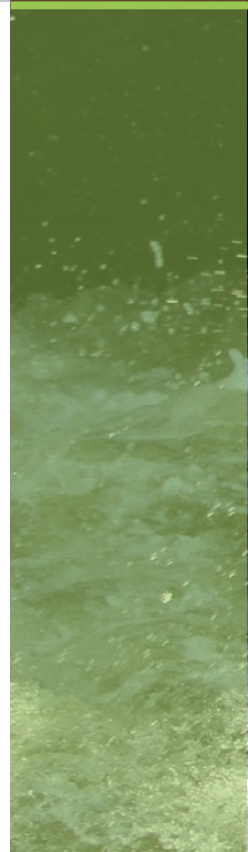
When we apply this to paddlesport and use this opportunity for friendly competition, we typically start to attempt moves that we might not usually go for; surfing waves to the left instead of the right, catching the eddy at the top instead of the bottom

and so on. If we observe our peers effectively, we can pick up on their successes and failures, using that to influence how we choose to make the moves. Gaining the feedback from their technical and tactical choices, the effort they put in and the difficulty (or ease) that they experience, is a great way to learn from others.

The ideal situation is that we would paddle with a group that we could be an effective member of on the water; but that the group would contain members that have a degree of experience or technical ability that either meets or exceeds our own. When we paddle in groups like these, we can often find ourselves quickly challenging our skills in creative ways and developing faster than we would have been if we remained in our comfort zone.

You can gain so much from observing and paddling with skilled peers, consider incorporating the following challenges into your paddling.

- Ask them to name a challenge for you (and then you can name a challenge for them!).
- Follow someone matching their stroke for stroke down a rapid.
- Get someone to follow you down a rapid matching your stroke for stroke.
- See if you can observe specifics in peers paddling, looking at their boat/body/blade.
- Observe their flow and style and try to emulate their character on the water when you paddle.







**ASK OUR PEERS TO OBSERVE OUR PADDLING, BUT ASK THEM TO FOCUS ON SOMETHING SPECIFIC.**

When we are paddling in a group or with a friend, we can look to them to help us to develop our performance. Even if our peers have no coaching knowledge or experience, they can still give us useful information that we can use to help us become better paddlers. The process of observing each other's paddling when we are on the water will be happening already, and the flow that we fall into when we move down the river or play on a feature will facilitate this. These natural observations that we are continually making are a resource that we can tap into if we focus the observations effectively we can use them to great advantage to help us develop.

It is common to see paddlers using peer observation and feedback when they are out on the water, and I will often hear statements such as, "Watch me on this wave and tell me what I'm doing wrong," or "Tell me if I'm breaking in/out the right way." Whilst these requests for observations and information from our peers might seem initially useful, they are too vague, and we can struggle to make sense of and put into practice the information we receive. If we ask our peers to focus on something more specific, it can help to make the observations much more useful. For example, we can change.

*"Watch me on this wave and tell me what I'm doing wrong" to "When I'm on the wave I keep flushing off, can you tell me where my boat is when this happens?"*

*And, "Tell me if I'm breaking in/out the right way" to "Can you tell me what my angle is when I am entering the flow?"*

Just a simple change in our approach to the question can give us more information; this will be much more useful for our development.

As we develop this rapport with our peers, asking them to focus on specific parts of our paddling (and doing the same for them in return) we can also start to think about the way that we ask for and give feedback from these observations. Some of the most helpful information that we can receive about our paddling is factual information rather than your peer's opinion of the observation. Whilst it can be argued that the 'facts' could still be subjective, gaining knowledge in this way encourages the paddler receiving it to interpret it and decide what it means. For example instead of saying

*"When you're falling off the wave on the left, change your edge and push back the other way."*

*Try, "You regularly fall off the wave on the left-hand side, what could you do next time to stay on?"*

Whilst this, of course, starts to become a coaching situation, the focus here changes to the paddler deciding how to solve the problem rather than the observing peer telling the paddler what to do. There is, of course, plenty of room to give help and tips and suggestions to others, but structuring it like this encourages the paddler to develop self-coaching and problem-solving skills.





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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](http://www.chrisbraincoaching.com)

**USE THIS FEEDBACK TO DIRECT OUR PRACTICE**

Now that we have some specific and factual observations from our peers, we need to decide what to do with this information. The feedback we have received should directly impact how we structure our practice.

- Will we dive straight back in and have another go?
- Will we change our approach?
- Do we attempt to use a different technique?

Repeating the same type of attempt over and over again can become tiresome, so don't be afraid to vary it up a bit. Think of all the variables that could be changed and encourage yourself to be creative and ask your friend for suggestions too! Can we approach from different sides? Try a left stroke instead of a right stroke? Spin the other way? Break out high, break out low? Paddle slowly or paddle quickly? Changing some of these variables will help to keep the challenge fresh and will help develop a broader range of skills.

Exploring the variables that we have available to us to achieve the task can be a great way to narrow down what we think works and doesn't work. Think of all of these options going down through a funnel until we have the two or three



options that we feel will work well and then focus our effort on these. As we do this, we should be continuing to bounce these ideas, opportunities and variables off our peers, utilising them throughout for advice, and asking them to point out when we don't give 100%.



**JAMIE GREENHALGH**

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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](http://www.paddle365.co.uk) [www.deeriverkayaking.com](http://www.deeriverkayaking.com)

