

Menopause, Paddling and becoming a BC White Water SUP Coach.

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I have been listening to the latest British Canoeing Coaching Podcast with great interest and one particular episode, *The Menstrual Cycle and Training* with Pete Catterall interviewing canoe slalom athlete Emily Davies, especially caught my ear (so to speak). Emily spoke eloquently about the need for Coaches to recognise female paddlers have a menstrual cycle and how this cycle impacts on performance and training throughout each month plus the simple and highly effective support measures that can be put in place.

This got me thinking, if this is a topic needing to be raised by and for younger female paddlers in 2020, what about those of us going through the perimenopause and menopause? Believe me it is hard enough to tell a close female friend you are going through 'the change', now picture how you would tell your Coach?

Incredibly, the menopause is only just becoming acceptable to discuss in the public domain. In the last couple of years there have been numerous articles in the general press and a surge of websites discussing the impacts on women both in their personal and professional lives. So much so, there has been a call for employers to recognise how very detrimental this hormonal change can be and how to support women for whom it is often a daily and very difficult struggle within the workplace.

Well an interesting subject you may think and one that needs discussing but what on earth has this to do with me giving you an overview of my experience of the BC WW SUP Coaching assessment?

To put it into context, earlier this year I wrote an article for British Canoeing about my experience of attending the very first BC WW SUP Coach Orientation. It was a very upbeat piece and was well received. What I failed to mention was that I nearly didn't attend and then very nearly bailed after the first day. This was down to the very real impacts of my hormones. It was only with the support of Coaches, Phil Hadley and Anthony Ing, that I made it through and came away having really enjoyed the experience.

So there you go, I have come out! I am one of thousands of women in the UK who struggle daily both mentally and physically due to the ongoing changes with my hormone levels. For me anxiety is a regular battle, insomnia a nightly one. Not enough sleep, rest, exercise, self-care and it all goes horribly wrong with my ability to cope with the every day. The one thing that keeps me sane? Paddling!

Let's talk specifically about the assessment. As you can now imagine, I kept reflecting on how I had reacted to the two days of orientation and I really could not envision making it through to being assessed.

To add to this, I was the very first of the group from the orientation to get a date in the diary and if I passed this would make me the first female WW SUP Coach, the first pure WW SUP Coach (no previous paddling experience) and the very first qualified under the BC scheme. Phil was again very reassuring and supportive; I was gritting my teeth!

The poor weather which had already been disruptive with river levels at Nottingham really set in. Four times we had to rearrange the assessment date. My incredible students, Adam Burke, Russell Drewery and Charlotte Spearing were patient, positive and determined to attend (in the meantime Barry Hughes became the first to qualify, Louise Royle the second) and as time progressed, the pressure started to ease. By the fourth attempt I was so fed up with having to rearrange the date, I just wanted to get on with it.

The river gods smiled, the water level dropped just enough, the sun came out and the assessment was going ahead!

My students were excited to get on the water and I was so thrilled to see them. It was an absolute pleasure to enjoy watching them having fun, to see how their paddling had developed and to be able to add to this. The vibe was that of a group of friends just pleased to be paddling. I forgot I was being assessed, my interest in paddling on white water took over and I was focused.

I had organised the session to include a catch up on where their paddling was currently at, what they were wanting to work on, medical conditions/injuries I needed to be aware of, disclaimer, equipment check, safety briefing, warm up and a quick flat-water assessment. We then moved onto the white water and here I played with changing the environment to aid the development of the students. Throughout, Phil would join in the conversations and the session was filled with lots of laughter. In no time at all my hand was being shaken and, much to my amazement, Phil confirmed I was now a BC recognised WW SUP Coach!

I started this article with Emily Davies highlighting the need for Coaches to recognise the impacts the menstrual cycle has on female paddlers. As Coaches, we know by reflecting on our own experiences, we can add depth to the many professional skills we carry in our toolboxes. Yes, I think it will need *women* Coaches to take the lead in broadening the discussion to include all that our bodies throw at us throughout our lifetime and the impacts this has. And the exciting bit is, by doing this I firmly believe we add another part to the jigsaw that is access and inclusivity, to the amazing world of paddling.

A huge thank you to Phil Hadley, Anthony Ing and my lovely students, Adam, Charlotte and Russell.

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