

# Coaching In A Time Of COVID-19

## George Fell looks at the ways COVID-19 has changed coaching ...

In this edition of coaching corner, we're looking at how COVID-19 has affected us and how it has changed our coaching. We're all in our own unique situations - the groups and environments we coach in are all different - on top of which guidance changes from week to week. Inevitably we'll all have encountered different problems and perhaps come up with different solutions. Some things that work for one coach or one organisation might prove completely impractical for another, but I've yet to have a conversation about coaching and COVID-19 where I've not taken away some useful ideas.

Here are the experiences of a handful of Scottish coaches. A huge thanks to Cara, Mark, Laura, Dougie and Bruce for taking the time to share your thoughts and experiences.

### Cara's Experiences...

Within our club we had two distinct sets of problems directly arising from COVID-19. The first was the social aspect, simply keeping the group together and interested - we're a small club and it's important that our core members feel involved and 'part' of something.

However, this proved less difficult than imagined - we're lively on social media anyway. We put on a number of quizzes back in the earlier 'Ooh this is still quite fun' days, and added online boxing classes (taken by one of our members) when it became apparent that lockdown wasn't finishing any time soon. All this on top of the usual nonsense - links to paddling films (both aspirational and horrifying), sales at online gear shops, and interesting paddling tips we could practice at home (or look forward to trying when lockdown ended) - meant the club kept in touch and stayed engaged throughout.

The greater difficulty has come with the practicalities of the gradual easing of lockdown. Unlike some clubs, we're based at a paid-for, shared venue (Pinkston), and the limitation on the numbers of households that can participate affects not just us but Pinkston

itself. This means we absolutely have to play by the rules, because consequences of not doing so could have a quantifiable effect on paddling in Scotland - not just on whitewater clubs, but freestyle and slalom, as well as groups of kids and young people, some from pretty difficult backgrounds. That's a big responsibility.

Pre-Covid, our club had weekly flat water sessions at Pinkston, plus one monthly open session on the white water course, one monthly supported session, and ad hoc coaching WW sessions.

We have recently brought back flat water sessions because Pinkston agreed we could separate two areas of our large flat water pitch into two five-household groups, rather than one. In each five-household group we have one coach, which means we can theoretically have four additional households (up to 15 people total). This has proved awkward because we are used to having a number of extra coaches floating about and quite a fluid sense of who is coaching who at any given time.

We're also used to having massive rammys optimistically described as 'polo'. Neither of these things can happen at the given moment because we can't mix the five-household groups. Finally, we have had to start a rotating basis of who can book in when to make sure everyone gets a chance to paddle while staying within the five-household limit, and this needs to be eyeballed, not left up to the booking system. However, we've got all our fingers crossed that at the end of the month, all going well, we should be able to have up to 30 people on the flat.

On the plus side, we recently tried a coached WW session, and this was a big success. Again, we got dispensation to work within the same confines - two groups of five households, but working in different areas of the WW course - one on the course for 45mins, the other on the outflow, then swap (the understanding being that if anyone swam they had to self-rescue, and not mix with the other group). It was actually rather lovely because the group on the course had the entire course to themselves, whereas

usually we break it into three sections. Participants had to pay £2.50 more than usual so we could break even.

The big problem is still the open sessions. We share these nights with another club, and cannot see a way of making it fair and equitable yet financially viable. We couldn't block off the participants into two separate groups and dictate where on the course they had to go, so the level of mixing means we could only have five households on the water at any given time, and that would just be a total bust in all directions. However, we are really hoping that the relaxation to 30 participants means we will be able to restart as normal in September.

The kit issue, which I know has been a real problem for some clubs, has not affected us greatly because when the 5 mile regulation was loosened, we allowed members who had been with the club for more than a year (and who we knew would come back), to borrow boat and kit on long term loan for peer paddles etc. Essentially this means our container is only being opened up once a week for flat water sessions, and if the virus dies within 72 hrs, it should all be 'brown breid' by the following week.

We have had no official club trips since the beginning of lockdown, as it wasn't possible within the guidance at the time, particularly with regards to shuttles. We tend to put on more beginners trips within the usual club structure, which necessitate more rescues, and it's difficult to work out how to do this in a truly socially distant yet safe manner. However, improver peer trips have been encouraged, on the understanding that everyone takes responsibility for their own actions.

One member on furlough has taken easy weekday daytime trips for others on furlough which has been really lovely, and great for keeping the morale up - more about giving folk the chance to see each other than anything else.

Everyone in the club is delighted that the regulations are loosening - it's just that last stretch that seems so tantalisingly out of reach.

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### Mark’s Experiences...

Just before COVID-19 struck I was pretty engaged with sea kayak coaching, moving towards my moderate water sea kayak coach working with a great bunch of committed students. It was very easy to find time for folk who wanted some time from me.

As COVID-19 was first mentioned in the news I tried to anticipate likely restrictions and how I would manage them. When lockdown arrived, along with an end to non-essential travel, this pretty much stopped my paddling. Although I could walk to sea from my house, I was aware that I was very visible and a likely source for ‘misintentioned rescue callout’. I wasn’t able to coach others, so I spent time coaching myself instead; reading articles and updating log books. I found myself not really wanting to engage with kit fettling. When my paddling stopped, the SCA online group was very effective and welcomed.

As we moved to a 5 mile travel limit, I enjoyed some gentle paddles on the Forth and also started coaching remotely, mentoring my sea kayak group.

I’m still not travelling far, and I’m currently only paddling in small groups. That’s mostly my own reaction to the current COVID-19 threat as all of my neighbours are shielding. Looking to the future, I have four groups booked in for September.

### Laura’s Experiences...

The hardest bits are on land: starting the session by reminding people not to get too close; putting them in different spaces so we don’t exceed the limit for numbers of households indoors (we don’t have an outdoor space for getting kitted up, but do have two completely separate indoor areas); keeping them in strict pairs for moving boats, which includes asking them not to help people outside their pair; not stepping in to help with a spray deck or buoyancy aid unless it’s completely unavoidable.

Our sessions feel disjointed at the start, because we’re getting everyone ready before going down to the beach, rather than having a relaxed meet and greet, discussing plans and looking at maps together.

Once we’re out on the sea, not much has changed with coaching. Especially on longer courses, I miss being able to get tidal planning resources out in the classroom at the start of the day. Being on the west coast means that wind and rain often get in the way of beach-based theory sessions. When giving feedback or reassurance, I have to remember to come to the end of the student’s boat and face them, rather than rafting up alongside. I’m finding that I need a bigger area of shelter if I want to gather people together.

On the plus side my students are forced

to be more independent: even those on short day trips have to learn to adjust their paddles and footrests themselves.

We’ve started running through the process of a rescue before we head out, including having anyone who hasn’t done it before practise a heel-hook on land, just to minimise the chance of the coach having to grab someone to help.

In practice it’s quite easy to keep 2m apart during a sea kayak rescue, though of course you can’t avoid touching someone else’s boat and paddle. On guided trips I am very aware that a rafted tow would mean a period of very close contact. We are still teaching rescues, as we believe there are considerable safety implications in not doing so (a lot of our clients intend to paddle independently after our courses), but we’re emphasising self-rescue for anyone who has not attended with someone from their own household.

### Dougie’s Experiences...

Risk is something I’m used to managing, but I mostly understand the risks I work with when coaching/leading. I’ve spent years throwing myself down rivers, climbing mountains and sailing the oceans. I know it’s often said these environments are unpredictable, but mostly that’s not true. People, their reactions and decision making is generally

**As I’m pulling this article together at the end of August, it looks as though restrictions are about to be eased for organised activity, permitting paddlers to be within 2m of one another when necessary. Hopefully that’ll give us all fewer situations where we need to compromise our coaching to remain within the guidelines.**

**That said, the only thing that’s guaranteed is more change! Check the SCA webpage [canoescotland.org/resources/covid-19](https://www.canoescotland.org/resources/covid-19) for the latest guidance.**

**I wish you all happy, healthy paddling.**



where the unpredictability lies. But this - a wee virus that I couldn't see and where the understanding of how it spread was vague and changing daily was stressing me out.

My initial approach was to read, and then I read more, I spoke to friends and colleagues who had a better scientific understanding than me (thanks Bruce), then I read some more. I started to develop an idea of how I thought we could provide paddle sports, and when it came time to do it, I found it was more straightforward than I had thought it would be, but there were still risks.

What was difficult to do was quantify those risks. Was it higher than crossing the road? Was it more like riding a motorbike for six miles? This increases your risk of dying by a one in a million chance, but so does walking 17 miles. Trying to climb Everest has a risk of 38,000 chances in a million of dying. My point is nothing in life worth doing is risk free, but the increase in risk of catching Covid by taking part in paddlesport was difficult to quantify or compare with other risks we were used to. It was, and is, important to understand these risks in order to make risk benefit judgements. More stress!

Cleaning seemed the most notable way of reducing the risk (to an unknown level), hand washing obviously, then washing hard surfaces with ionic surfactant, words I'd never heard before, detergent to you and I. Long conversations, with lots of folks, as to whether it was ok to use Milton to clean textiles became the order of the day.

Understanding the risks of being close to others was even more nebulous and difficult to comprehend. Would being close to someone for a short period during a rescue be sufficient to catch the wee blighter? Did it matter as we'd always know if someone had symptoms, or could people shed the virus when asymptomatic? What were the benefits of face coverings? More stress...

About this time more information started to come through from Scottish Government via the SCA. This was really helpful, but added a level of complexity we had to consider. Maximum numbers per coach, only acceptable to coach existing paddlers, not sharing kit, households, bubbles, more ideas on cleaning... Again, it seemed complex at first, but there were solutions to most of it. Guidance was changing every few days or weeks as understanding grew and we found solutions that worked. At this time the coaching community really stepped up to the plate sharing insights and ideas. This was led brilliantly by the team at the SCA.

Tensions did arise in the community occasionally. Why can you paddle and we can't? I had huge sympathy for my many friends and colleagues who could not earn a living; less sympathy for those who just flaunted the guidance and put folks at increased risk. I think we all had angry moments. I certainly did. The only saving grace was that Dominic Cummings didn't go kayaking.

It's been stable for a while now. Changes come less often and by smaller increments. The challenge now is remembering the wee virus is still out there. Still need to clean, need to stay apart, still need to dip kit. It's a hassle, but we've got used to it.

I've missed my normal travels to boat, no Slovenia or Pyrenees for me this year (so far, I'm ever hopeful). I should also say that I was fortunate to have access to water early on when we could travel locally for personal activity. This saved my head. I felt guilty having access to it when others didn't, but it gave me time to de-stress and think. I guess we all knew this about our sport, but it took on a new importance.

I'm optimistic about the future of paddling and I think, as a community, although there have been incidences of the best and the worst of reactions, we have mostly responded well, but there may be bumps in the road ahead. When they come, we need to remember what we do is just splashing about in water, it can feel more important than that, but we have to measure it against the health of our friends, family and the wider community.

**Finally here are some thoughts from Bruce, who in addition coaching all things kayak is a chemist who has been involved in developing COVID-19 kit guidelines for other organisations...**

There's coronavirus safety and there's safety on the water and they're not necessarily the same thing. As we all re-enter the water more and try get back to the sport we love, how can we mix the two in a simple but effective way?

Know your game, horses for courses if you like. Let's start with some science, it's not fancy, in fact we've all been doing it for at least five months, maybe even a lifetime. Wash your hands. Wash your kit. Simple enough?

If we're in a rush we can use hand sanitiser and that's fine if our hands are dry. But remember, if you're paddling, your hands may well be wet, in which case, use soap. Wet hands will dilute hand sanitiser and render it less effective. When we've already got wet, soap is our

friend and not corona's. The virus has a surrounding envelope basically made of fat. So just like when cleaning your dishes, soap beats fat. Nothing actually beats it better.

You'll hear folks talk about bleach and it's great for bursting the fatty envelope too, but bleach is harsher. It's harsher on your skin, on the environment and on your soft kit. And kit costs money, which for many of us is a concern right now since times are tight. Milton is still bleach, i.e. Sodium Hypochlorite, and regular washing with it will still degrade your soft kit. You can use mild bleach solutions on hard surfaces as it quickly de-activates the virus, but if you don't have that, use soap and running water.

For white water paddlers who've used and maybe shared ropes... use some soapy water. The virus can work its way into fabric, but doesn't come out all that easy and doesn't transmit as well through water, so just wash your ropes. The soap works into them, then you can just rinse it out.

Other paddlers have different issues; the salty sea dogs out there might love their electronics. GPS, VHS, PLBs or even just folks' mobile phones. They might take the odd wash ok, but actually, as long as you've dripped them free of surface water, the best solution for gadgets is the high % alcohol sanitiser. It's actually kinder on electronics because it evaporates quicker.

If you end up having an impromptu swim next to a pal or even heaven forbid a stranger and it's not a practice situation, the risk of viral transmission through the water is still probably less than the other risks we face in our paddling lives so do what you need to do, and just think about how you clean you, your kit or even your pal afterwards. We can't stop paddling, we shouldn't for our physical and mental health, but we can stop the virus moving.

Thanks again to all of the coaches who took the time to share their thoughts. Hopefully we can continue to chat with and learn from one another. Other coaches I've talked to are making great use of the online world; replacing time spent chatting at the start of a session, with a zoom meeting a few days before it. That could free up more time to paddle, help to ensure that everyone has similar expectations and give the coach more time to prepare for a great session. Others have talked about just how difficult it has been to maintain social distancing on rivers, whilst others have jumped at the excuse to cycle shuttles and spend less time cooped up in the car.