

## Chair's Report for the British Canoeing Slalom Committee 2023 Annual Consultative Meeting

What a year 2023 has been: Whilst there have been and remain various challenges, 2023 has been a great year with great racing at all levels, which everyone involved should feel proud to have been a part of.

I must start off with a big **THANK YOU** to everyone involved in this sport, at whatever level, whether on the bank and on (and sometimes in) the water. I am always impressed by the paddlers at all levels who get on and show everyone why the sport is so special, with such dedication and drive. Equally, I am in awe of the volunteer effort that is required and selflessly given by so many people every day to the sport and its participants, whether it be on the water supporting beginners, coaches on the bank, club volunteers, the race organisers, officials, bib officers and/or the myriad of unseen teams of people providing the infrastructure for our racing season and/or problem solving behind the scenes...

Following similar notes in previous year's reports, participation remains the key concern and numbers at the entry level must remain the key focus of our efforts going forward. It has been great to see and be involved in the various discussions that have been ongoing through the year about participation, and I look forward to further thoughts and discussions at the ACM, at the coaching conference tomorrow and in the coming months at all levels.

As many of you know we started the year trying to garner several working groups. Thank you everyone who has been involved in the groups directly and/or who have provided information and feedback to group members. In particular, I would like to thank and acknowledge the progress made by the Participation Working Group leading to motions to be discussed later and for prompting many other conversations which are helping to unpick the questions we need to be considering. It is fair to say there has been a mixed level of progress; not due to lack of will but time and energy as people balance their various other roles and – shock horror – actually paddling. I would encourage any interested persons to get involved and join a working group, by either speaking to the relevant leads here at the ACM, on the riverbank or by email; the more input and discussion we have, the more we can identify the specific problems and consider practical solutions – however revolutionary – and develop the best strategic way forward.

One topic of note relates to slalom sites, notably the unfortunate and sad events at Grandtully leading to the current hiatus on access for slalom, and the continued loss of Washburn – two vital sites for both local paddlers and the wider slalom community. On a positive note, 2024 sees the much welcome return of racing at Abbey Rapids and Fairnilee. Thank you for all those who are working hard to maintain our slalom sites (despite the British weather's best attempts) and develop relationships with landowners and other stakeholders to secure access to key training and racing sites.

In the current climate, it is also important to acknowledge and consider the other significant barrier to participation affecting not only athletes and their families but also volunteers - the current 'cost of living crisis'. This relates to the entry fees / venue costs / membership costs, but also the associated costs with travelling to and attending events, as well as affecting the amount of time that people can contribute to events and the running of our clubs as they are required to work more. This is a difficult issue which we need to be aware of but have relatively limited ability to control.

On the international racing front, as noted in other reports tabled for the ACM, 2023 has been a very successful year of results and medals at all levels, in both canoe slalom and Kayak Cross. Congratulations to all involved! An outstanding season overseas was topped by the excellent ICF Senior World Championships held at Lee Valley, where we truly had success on and off the water. It was a fantastic world class level exhibition of our sport and something that we should all be proud of, noting it would not have happened without the dedication and hard work of 100's of volunteers (a number of whom have asked about volunteering at other races and events going forward having never been involved in slalom before), the paddlers and their support teams, and the British Canoeing Events team.

I would also take this opportunity to thank the wider teams throughout British Canoeing for their support, assistance and discussions over the past year. I look forward to working together to develop a coordinated strategic future for the sport.

One last look back at 2023 on a personal note: Despite having been on the slalom committee for a few years, the last twelve months have often been an eye-opening experience and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the committee and the slalom community for their assistance, patience and feedback. Thank you also to Nick Penfold, Duncan Berriman, Dee Lindesay and Dave Spencer for keeping the IT systems working!

I will have undoubtedly forgotten to thank some people in this report – apologies. However, one person I cannot fail to thank and recognise is Colin Woodgate, who is stepping down as secretary to the slalom committee. He has kept me and the rest of committee in line for many a year. Thank you, Colin!

So what about 2024 and onwards? My key question is how we go about developing the slalom community in the UK? We are all here, at races, training, in clubs, and on the riverbanks for a common reason – the love of the sport and wanting to see people and the sport grow from strength to strength, as well as the friendships and sense of identity and pride with the sport. The development of that community is crucial for the growth and sustainability of the domestic sport; it is the buildings of friendships and fun experiences that develop from the moment paddlers first sit or kneel in a boat, and then continues throughout their involvement in the sport, even hopefully after they stop paddling.

So how do we do this? This is the key strategic question which needs development with all stakeholders. The following are some immediate questions that need a review:

- How can the community support clubs and regional / national slalom (e.g. England Slalom Committee) groups to allow them to support and develop our clubs, current paddlers and future generations of paddlers?
- Is it possible to simplify the route in to coaching?
- Can we consider different types of events / competition weekends, e.g. combining standard racing with team events, shorter course races and/or kayak cross events, pre-race coaching,...?
- How do we enhance the paddler (noting a single class paddler spends only 3-5 minutes actually racing a day) and the spectator experience, without (i) diluting the sport, and (ii) overloading the volunteers?
- Should we counteract some of the negative side-effects of technology (i.e. the staring at results on mobile phones rather than milling around with other people looking at a results board)?
- How can we support our volunteers and maximise their experiences at events?
- How can we increase the exposure of the sport on social media / Youtube and in the wider media?

We cannot forget that 2024 also brings about some fantastic opportunities that we need to harness the benefit of:

- Paris 2024 – Not only a great opportunity to see top class racing, we need to consider if / how we can capture people's imagination and benefit from the 'Olympic bounce' as interest is raised when TeamGB win those medals.
- Kayak Cross – Need to further develop models how this can be rolled out in a safe and fun way at all levels, so that we can make use of this as it appears on television for the first time.
- Rebranding of British Canoeing.
- Community events – Interclubs is back (thank you, Donna Hawkins *et al*) and plans are afoot for a multi-race weekend event at the Tryweryn – watch this space!

So, in summary, thank you everyone, congratulations to all the paddlers for the successes of 2023, and all the very best for 2024!

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