

Ken Langford

In December 1960, Manchester Canoe Club had a stand at a 'Hobbies Exhibition' in the City Centre at which grainy *super8 mm* film on a loop showed exploits of the club from previous years including canoe slalom.

I had left school three months earlier and was earning money as a bank clerk. I had passed my driving test a month earlier and had access to my father's car. I was already a Queen's Scout (one of the youngest in the city at that time) and was proficient in camping and outdoor living. In fact, I had all the pre-requisites of a slalom canoeist apart from a canoe and experience of canoeing! I was hooked.

Sessions twice a week in the New Islington baths enabled us to hone our skills on the three slalom gates that were suspended over one of the pools. In the other, we learnt eskimo rolling. There was no coaching but we learnt from copying other paddlers. Manchester was the top British Slalom Club at the time because its Secretary, Maurice Rothwell, was also secretary for the National Slalom and White Water Racing Committee. In the Fifties and Sixties, anyone at the top of the sport joined Manchester Canoe Club to receive the regular Newsletter that kept them informed of all the developments in slalom. At that time the majority of international paddlers were members of Manchester (and sometimes their local club too). This meant that the paddlers I copied were often at the top of their game. The training I did was their's. BUT they were better than me so I did more!

Apart from regular river trips on the Tees, Ribble, Wharfe and others, I trained on the canal three times a week and twice each week in the pool. I was ready for my first slalom on the Trent, at Swarkestone Division Four, in July 1961. I lost! I actually came about 15th, but was so devastated that I decided not to compete again until I felt capable to do justice to a slalom course.

Back at home, I decided to make changes. I left the bank (where I worked) and joined the Civil Service – also in the City Centre - where I was able to do 'flexi-time' and finish early on Fridays. I joined the YMCA, and used their gym each lunchtime, paddled fourteen miles on the canal three times a week, and continued with the weekly baths sessions. Weekends away using my father's car became more frequent. By the Spring of 1962 I *really* was ready. By June I had been promoted to Division 2. By the end of the year I was in the top division. The continued level of training – now more than twenty hours a week with a full time job of forty hours on top – delivered the ideal reward - second place in Division One at Grandtully, Easter 1963, - behind Martin Rohleder, one of my 'idols'. He had competed in the World Championships in Dresden, in 1961, before I had done any slalom events at all. He was one of those training in the New Islington baths.

My first international was at Monschau, Germany, in May 1963 – just twelve months after starting to compete, and still using the wood and canvas kayak (JS Mk.VI.) that was still required for international canoeing. It had to be a folding canoe.

I went on to compete in five World Championships in slalom, and two in White Water Racing, and was British Slalom Champion in 1968. I was more successful in 1969 with five international medals including silver in the team event at the Worlds in Bourg St.Maurice.

The sport of canoe slalom in the fifties and sixties was not just 'amateur'; it was amateurish. It was not taken seriously. It was a recreational pastime. That was my view. Ten years earlier, athletes such as Roger Bannister were in serious training to break the four minute mile barrier. Many slalomists in the top division were not even training on gates outside competition weekends. Without really thinking about it, I had to do something about it. First I had a place on the club committee, then was elected to the National Executive of the Slalom and WWR Committee, and, because I was almost a guaranteed team paddler, the Selection Committee. Slalom courses were seldom designed. They just happened! Gates were suspended from convenient poles and trees with little consideration to the ability of paddlers. It was impossible to differentiate between a Division One and a Division Four course. We finally got a group together, approved by the National Executive Committee, to design and erect courses for the top division, and to 'vet' courses designed by others. The idea was to enable paddlers to train for sequences and moves they would encounter in slaloms. Whether it was successful in British competitions, I cannot be sure. Nevertheless, by incorporating course design ideas from Europe, our paddlers were better able to compete. I would not call it a personal crusade – but it was!

I never had a coach. I think Paul Farrant was the only successful paddler of the Fifties who had a coach. That was Oliver Cock (who became the first National Coach but not for slalom). By 1965, I had decided that working in the Civil Service five days each week was stopping me progressing in my sport, and decided to go into P.E. teaching, where I could train more and increase my ability to perform at a higher level. In 1966, I went into teacher training and also started running team training weekends across the country. Chester College was always popular because Dave Mitchell's mum was the catering manager, but we had weekends at Llandysul, Worcester, Matlock, and others. I seemed to have much more time, and took on the Team coaching role, although it was more a case of organising training than actual coaching. I relinquished my coaching role in 1969 to train for the Bourg St.Maurice World Championships, and because grants were now available for support staff in the run-up to the Munich Olympics where slalom was to be included for the first time. I even secured a six week trip to Australia - coaching the Australian Team in January 1972, which I thought would be useful for my own preparations. I did not get selected, and when I was asked to consider the role of coach I declined.

At the end of 1972, I moved to teach in Stafford. As there was no canoeing group involved specifically in slalom, I resolved to start one. So, with the help of Jon and Pauline Goodwin (who were already living in the area), I started the Stafford and Stone Canoe Club in April 1973.

After the Olympics, many paddlers and officials retired or stepped down. There had been concerns over the way the team had been selected which resulted in the first ever 'selection event' for a British slalom team - for the World Championships in 1973. I was selected. However, the lack of personnel meant I was Team Manager, Team Coach, driver of a support vehicle, and competitor in individual and team slalom events. Albert Woods stepped up to perform the managers role,

although I did have to step in as an International Judge to help re-design the course when the river rose two metres.

On returning to the UK with the largest slalom team of non-medal winners, I agreed to take on the role of National Team Coach on condition we only took paddlers to world championships who we expected to come in the top half of the competition. This was agreed. In 1975, only six paddlers were selected for Skopje, and we had two paddlers in the top ten for the first time ever.

By 1973, Great Britain had achieved a total of four medals since 1949. Between 1977 and 1995 more than twenty medals were won including four individual world champions - some of whom are multiple winners. As National Team Coach, I felt I had played a significant part in this improvement. More specifically, Stafford and Stone Canoe Club became the most successful canoe club in the history of British canoeing, and was the base for the West Midlands Centre of Excellence (managed by John Court, while I coached the group), attracting paddlers from across the country – including a young Richard Fox!

When Great Britain was awarded the 1981 World Championships in Bala (1981) it became clear that I was the only person who was both a Team Coach and ICF judge. I 'fell on my sword' and stepped down from my position as National Team Coach so we would have representation on the Course Design Commission for that event. Conflict of interest prevented one person from doing both roles.

I subsequently returned to international coaching for the world championships in 1987, and then worked as Ladies Coach through to the Barcelona Olympics where, despite some early misgivings, we qualified the full complement of three ladies for the team.

Having been on the Course Design Commission for the Bala World Championships, I was in the same position for the Nottingham World Championships – the only Team Coach who was an ICF judge. Having helped the Ladies to a World Championship team medal in 1993, I was required to step down again to be on the Course Design Commission. It was still good to see Lynn Simpson take the individual gold in Nottingham. I resumed my position with the Ladies for the Atlanta Olympic Games in 1996.

In more than thirty years as paddler and coach at international level, I hope I have made a positive contribution to canoe slalom, and left it in a far better place and respected across the globe.

For more information see the book -

Ken Langford (2006)– The Making of a Canoe Slalom Coach. ISBN 9784125107697.

Available from [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk).