

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Canoe Slalom Recovery Plan (Plan) is to highlight some of the challenges faced in the development of canoe slalom in Australia and to identify initiatives that may assist in overcoming some of the challenges faced by the discipline.

The development of the Plan, to date, is the result of consultation between the Paddle Australia Canoe Slalom Technical Committee (PACSLTC), the Paddle Australia High Performance Team (HP), the Paddle Australia Executive and some feedback from the broader Australian canoe slalom community.

The Plan is still being developed. This is an opportunity to provide an update to the canoe slalom community on various initiatives that are being considered to gain feedback.

BACKGROUND

Despite the outstanding success of our canoe slalom paddlers on the international stage, the discipline of canoe slalom within Australia has been in decline for over a decade. Limited access to suitable whitewater, escalating costs and reduced access to coaching are some of the reasons for the decline in the number of canoe slalom athletes paddling.

More recently, canoe slalom has been especially hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic with lockdowns, state border closures and international travel restrictions further limiting to opportunities within the sport. The situation currently facing the discipline is critical and has prompted further consideration of some of the challenges, identifying solutions to start addressing the key issues.

While this Plan has been developed in the shadow of COVID-19, its recommendations and initiatives go further than simply being a response to the pandemic.

IDENTIFICATION OF AREAS REQUIRING ATTENTION

1. LACK OF ACCESS TO WHITEWATER

Outweighing any other issue identified is the limited access to whitewater. Without appropriate venues to train, attracting, retaining, and developing athletes within the sport is near impossible. Addressing this issue will require both long term planning as well as short term solutions.

Acknowledging that work needs to continue in identifying and developing suitable whitewater venues (both natural and artificial) to train, the immediate focus of the Plan is to identify more immediate solutions to provide increased access to whitewater venues and more specifically to Penrith Whitewater Stadium (PWS).

ACCESS TO WATER AT PENRITH WHITEWATER STADIUM

Penrith Whitewater Stadium (PWS) is the only Olympic standard whitewater facility in Australia. There is frustration and discontent within the community stemming from the difficulties in accessing water at PWS.

The following challenges have been reported:

- There is lack of access to 'Open' whitewater sessions, meaning individual canoe slalom paddlers are unable to book or access whitewater.
- The current booking system for water is inadequate and does not facilitate paddlers travelling from locations outside of Sydney for the purpose of using PWS.
- PWS can be closed even in times when there are paddlers wishing to use the facility.
- There is a perception that from time-to-time the National Centre of Excellence (NCE) sessions which are booked and managed by High Performance (HP), may have the capacity to provide access to non-NCE paddlers.
- Despite HP booking exclusive NCE water time, PWS still controls who is permitted to access the sessions.

Pre-COVID-19, it was considered that there was strong demand for water at PWS from the canoe slalom (and Wildwater and Freestyle) community which would justify more 'Open' whitewater sessions to be accessible through the PWS.

Whilst recognising that Paddle Australia has very little control over PWS management, we must accept that we need to operate within these constraints and identify solutions that we can control. Further, with the significant restrictions that COVID-19 has caused, including closure of the PWS, lockdowns and travel restrictions, the solutions below are all subject to PWS opening and the ability to travel interstate.

Proposed Solutions:

1. Western Sydney Whitewater Club to provide 'Open' whitewater sessions. These sessions will be underwritten by the National Performance Pathways Program to guarantee these sessions occur. Once the PWS is able to reopen, 'Open' whitewater sessions will be available every Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday. These sessions will be organised by the Club and any individuals travelling to Penrith will have access to these sessions on a user pays basis, providing that they book in ahead of time.
2. In addition to these weekly sessions, each month an Open whitewater weekend will be scheduled. This will involve 2 x Open whitewater sessions on the Saturday and 2 on Sunday. Once again, any individuals travelling to Penrith will have access to these sessions on a user pays basis, providing that they book in ahead of time.
3. NCE sessions will remain exclusive for identified paddlers within the NCE Squad. National Performance Academy (NPA) squad athletes, which is a new initiative, will also have access to these sessions, encouraging integration between the two National Squad programs. From time to time, and at the discretion of the national coaching staff, other identified athletes may be invited if the type of sessions permits, there is space available, and the athlete can fit in and contribute to the overall NCE session.
4. PA to continue liaising with PWS management for the provision of easier access to the PWS for whitewater opportunities.

ACCESS TO OTHER WHITEWATER VENUES

Whilst PWS is recognised as being an important whitewater facility for the performance pathway athletes, the sport should and needs to encourage access to alternate whitewater venues for all levels of participants. Development camps will still be held at various whitewater venues across Australia and Age Nationals and Nationals will continue to include suitable alternate venues across Australia.

Proposed Solutions:

1. The PACSLTC will confirm current active and inactive list of canoe slalom venues with the intention of exploring whether other venues are viable for training camps/competitions.
2. PA will continue to advocate and support local, state, and federal governments and other stakeholders for more whitewater venues. PA is already playing an important role as a member of the Stakeholder Reference Group for the proposed Brisbane 2032 canoe slalom venue.

2. CLARIFY ROLES WITHIN THE CANOE SLALOM ATHLETE PATHWAY

There is acknowledgement that high performance has a much larger 'footprint' within canoe slalom than is healthy. This is largely due to the lack of numbers within the sport, meaning athletes identified within the performance pathway often outnumber those athletes who sit outside the pathway. Inadvertently, this has meant that the canoe slalom community has become over-reliant and/or dependent on this support.

For canoe slalom to thrive, there is a genuine need to encourage active paddling for the pursuit of recreation, enjoyment, and health, as opposed to only for high performance outcomes. There is also a general need for capability building at the grassroots level across all levels of the sport including coaching, officiating and club development.

Due to the significant role high performance has within canoe slalom there is a natural assumption that high performance is responsible for all levels of the athlete pathway. Rather, the athlete pathway is a continuum from Participation through to Performance. The Performance Pathway that falls within the responsibility of High Performance begins once athletes are identified as having the potential to be successful at a future World Championship and Olympic Games.

Funding received by the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) for High Performance activities is strictly monitored. Athlete Categorisation is a national system, driven and monitored through the AIS to identify, track, and prioritise resource allocation to athletes who have the potential to contribute to medal targets at international competitions. Funding received from the AIS needs to be directly aligned with Athlete Categorisation and national high-performance initiatives and programs that support the achievement of medal outcomes at international competitions.

The core of this Plan is to ensure the sport flourishes and opportunities exist without relying on high performance. This requires active engagement at all levels of the sport. The responsibility for ensuring the strength of the participation pathway within the sport must sit with the State Paddle Associations (SPAs) and their member Clubs and be facilitated through the PACSLTC.

The Paddle Australia Performance Pathway already offers funding grants to States that assist the establishment and development of state performance pathway activities that are aimed at attracting, developing, and retaining more canoe slalom athletes and coaches to the sport.

Proposed Solutions:

1. The PACSLTC will take an active role in facilitating discussions, developing initiatives, and engaging the canoe slalom community in adopting and implementing activities that lead to the increased recruitment and retention of more canoe slalom athletes.
2. The SPAs and member clubs continue to play an active role in implementing development opportunities to attract, develop and retain paddlers within the canoe slalom community.
3. A Participation Workshop will be hosted by the PACSLTC to encourage best practice sharing amongst all paddle entities as well as to provide recommendations to the PACSLTC on how to bring new paddlers into the sport.
4. The PA Performance Pathway program will continue to provide funding and support to State Performance Pathway programs that assist the establishment and development of state performance pathway activities aimed at attracting, developing, and retaining more canoe slalom athletes and coaches to the sport.
5. High Performance will clarify and communicate each level of the performance pathway and the commensurate benefits assigned to each level, including a revised Athlete Categorisation criteria and associated benefits.
6. The Performance Pathway program will review the National Development Squad (NDS) program including the selection, size, and resource allocation towards this squad.
7. A National Performance Pathway Lead for canoe slalom will be recruited. This role will be principally responsible for leading the national performance pathway program and will be an active conduit between the national performance pathway and the PACSLTC as well as state performance pathway programs and aligned local clubs.

3. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE OF HIGH PERFORMANCE

With high performance having a large 'footprint' within the sport and access to whitewater being extremely limited, especially for those athletes who do not fall within the current performance pathway, there is a cohort of paddlers who wish to be actively involved in the sport but are unable to access whitewater and coaching.

This is a broad group ranging from junior athletes who are striving to become part of the performance pathway, to more established athletes who are on the fringe of becoming selected, to athletes who have recently retired who wish to continue to remain active and enjoy the sport at a more recreational level.

This group of athletes have been identified as the 'Wilderness Paddlers' and are largely disenfranchised with the sport due to limited opportunities and access to whitewater and coaching. The 'All States Program' (ASP) is an initiative established to address this problem and provide valuable opportunities for new paddlers as well as older paddlers who sit outside of the performance pathway. It is largely a self-funded program for athletes, administered through volunteers with an interest in this area.

Whilst it is recognised that it is not the responsibility of high performance to provide opportunities for this group of paddlers, there is a need to formalise opportunities to attract and more importantly retain paddlers within the sport. Attracting and developing more coaches within the sport is also important for growth. The benefit of the ASP is to not only attract and retain more athletes but to also provide coaching opportunities.

The role for the ASP going forward should be to build a calendar of events, including competitions, camps, and education, which is aligned with and addresses the gap between community level paddling and the Performance Pathway. The role of the Committee should be to oversee the ASP activities and to provide support, but not to be directly involved in the delivery of programs.

Proposed Solutions:

1. Formally recognise the ASP as an important and valuable program within the Participation Pathway.
2. The PACSLTC will support opportunities (through local clubs and SPAs) for this group to access whitewater and development opportunities (including camps and coaching support).
3. This will be achieved through collaboration with local clubs as well as State and National Performance Pathway Programs to identify mutually beneficial opportunities that are aligned across the athlete pathway.
4. Promote the coach education courses and provide development opportunities for coaches throughout the entire system.
5. Access to frequent 'Open' whitewater sessions at PWS will be made available through the Western Sydney Whitewater Club (as outlined above).

4. MINIMUM PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

Minimum Performance Standards (MPS) have been implemented within canoe slalom for many years. MPS are established based on historical data within international competitions. The practice has been to implement these standards when selecting National Teams to ensure athletes representing Australia will be competitive at international events. For National Team selection, an MPS equivalent to qualifying for a semi-final at a respective World Championship (Junior, U23 or Senior) has been established.

By applying the MPS, Paddle Australia does not always send a full complement of athletes to compete in international competitions. This has the effect of not only reducing the number of athletes selected to international competitions but given selection to Teams has historically been linked to accessing whitewater and coaching, the impact of non-selection is amplified. There has been an ongoing discussion as to whether it is appropriate to relax or even remove the MPS.

Whilst the concerns regarding MPS expressed by some areas of the canoe slalom community have been heard and debated, the relevance and importance of MPS is well understood and supported by the PACSLTC. The consensus reached is that relaxing or removing MPS would not achieve the desired whole of sport outcomes and has the potential of undermining the value of National Team selection. The objective of this Plan must be to build better opportunities for all paddlers regardless of their level of performance.

Nevertheless, there are some initiatives that have been identified which maintains the integrity of MPS but alleviates some of the concerns that the MPS creates:

Proposed Solutions:

1. Decouple National Team Selection with Athlete Categorisation criteria/National Squad criteria. This means, non-selection to National Teams does not necessarily mean access to water/coaching is impacted. NOTE: Athlete Categorisation criteria also has MPS applied but more account is taken of longer-term performance rather than relying on performances in 1-2 selection events each year.
2. The introduction of U16, U21 and U25 MPS standards. The intention is for these standards to be established and applied for both National Team selection as well as for Athlete Categorisation purposes. By introducing these standards, athletes entering an age category have a 'stepping-stone' in gaining selection (e.g. a 19yr old will need to achieve U21 MPS, as opposed to U23 MPS).
3. Promote greater access to whitewater as well as development opportunities through the ASP. These opportunities sit outside of high performance and are less reliant on achieving MPS (as outlined in other recommendations outlined above).
 - a) To provide more appropriate and cost-effective international competition development opportunities, PA will continue to liaise and work with New Zealand, Japan, and other Asia Pacific nations in establishing an Asia Pacific International competition.

CONCLUSION

The Canoe Slalom Recovery Plan is a response to the many issues which have led to the decline in the numbers of paddlers within canoe slalom. The small number of appropriate whitewater venues and the difficulties identified in accessing PWS has been identified as the core issue with the declining numbers within the sport. Many of the peripheral challenges that have been identified, whilst each important, can largely be linked back to the poor accessibility to appropriate whitewater.

The Plan acknowledges that much of the work in strengthening Canoe Slalom in Australia must be carried out independent of the resources and programs provided through high performance. The key objective of this Plan must be to build better opportunities for all paddlers regardless of their level of performance.

Accordingly, while the Plan speaks to grassroots initiatives to bring people into the sport, it places particular emphasis on how to provide better opportunities to paddlers once they are part of our sport. It can be difficult to cleanly demarcate areas of responsibility and some of the challenges faced are not neatly defined as the responsibility of solely one entity or even a group of entities. It will take the entire canoe slalom community to work collaboratively together to improve the health of this great sport.