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AN INTERVIEW WITH SIMON WESTGARTH

SIMON WESTGARTH HAS SQUEEZED AN AWFUL LOT OF LIVING INTO HIS THIRTY-SOMETHING YEARS. HIS LOVE FOR THE RIVER AND THE SPORT OF KAYAKING HAS TAKEN HIM AWAY FROM HIS NATIVE DEVON AND ALL OVER THE WORLD. IN FACT THERE AREN'T MANY PLACES THAT SIMON HASN'T VISITED IN HIS QUEST FOR ADVENTURE! ALTHOUGH A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL COMPETITIVE FREESTYLER, SIMON'S HEART TRULY BEATS FOR THE EXCITEMENT AND CHALLENGE OF RUNNING AND EXPLORING RIVERS AND HE NOW SPENDS HIS TIME TRAVELLING AND RUNNING A SUCCESSFUL COACHING AND FILMMAKING BUSINESS.

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOS BY JASON SMITH

How did you first get involved with paddling?

The first time I went paddling was with the Scouts and it wasn't very successful. I think I was in the water at least three times on my first time out.

How long did it take for you to move on to the white stuff?

During my first year of paddling I ventured onto the infamous Symonds Yat Rapid. It took a lot of reassurance to get me down, but I did it and that experience led to some great days on the river, including the annual canoe camp and multi-day paddling trips. I remember all the gear you were supposed to take. No wonder we all had four-metre long boats, we needed them!

What drew you towards freestyle and competition?

I had a go at polo and marathon first, before spending three seasons in a slalom boat. After that I went back to running rivers and it was not until freestyle became a more technical event, with the advent of the retendo, that I was drawn in. Before that it was all arse wiggling, paddle twirls and orange juggling. I thought it was just a clown show and wasn't prepared to take it seriously.

How did you make ends meet when you first started travelling?

My first attempt at 'travelling' was in Canada when I was 18. I used the student work visa programme to get in and got myself a very stressful job in Tele-sales, made more difficult by my then thick Devon accent. There's a completely different work regime in Canada, with most people working hard for a season or two, straight through, with no days off, then resting up and enjoying the remainder of the year. This meant I could take time off for extended paddling trips, which was ideal.

Telesales is not the most unusual job you've had though, is it?

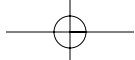
No, I've got a list as long as my arm of strange jobs, including filing clerk, baker, concrete worker, bricklayer, labourer, operations manager, taxi driver, tree planter, educational project leader and even a snow host at a ski resort. Still, my all time favourite was tying steel for the construction of bridges and tunnels in Canada. I ended up in charge of a team of illiterate French Canadians because I was the only one who could read the plans!

What made you decide to eventually go into teaching?

After the constraints of University, I hit the open road with my degree and no intention of finding a graduate job for the foreseeable future. Then one day I hucked Spirit Falls on the Little White Salmon, in Oregon, and nearly compressed my spine. While I was in the eddy behind the drop, contemplating my situation, it suddenly dawned on me that in spite of having a university degree, I had no career to fall back on if I became unable to paddle. I'd always enjoyed the process of learning, especially after discovering I was dyslexic during the final year of university, so later that year I enrolled to train as a secondary school science teacher.

Guardian of the West

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Chillin' out in one of his favourite places, River Soča, Slovenia



Espresso to go! Road trip coffee stop, Seattle

It's probably fair to say that you're driven. Do you feel this has helped or hindered you in life?

It was dangerous not to be ambitious in the town where I grew up. Two of my childhood friends later enjoyed stays at Her Majesty's pleasure, and it was all too easy to be too cool for school! The trouble was, back then, I didn't know what I wanted and I couldn't really see the point of school. Then I discovered rugby and kayaking and found a focus. Sometimes, being so focussed can lead to charging blindly forward, which is not always a good idea. But at least it got me into the right mindset and out of the danger of a future I didn't want.

What does creek boating and river running mean to you?

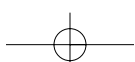
Since those early days on the Dart and Exe, in Devon, I have been totally hooked. Experiencing new adventures with friends and the challenge of running hard rapids is a magnet for me. And twenty years later, after paddling all over the world, that is still the case. I'm loving' it!

You were one of the first UK paddlers to travel to international competitions. How has the Euro-scene changed over the years?

I've been travelling to competitions since 1995 but my first Euro tour wasn't until 1998. Freestyle events, or rodeos as they were known then, was then the focus of white water paddling. With fresh moves and new people appearing on the scene all the time, it had a youthful, party atmosphere. These days, those fledgling events have become more serious, although the best ones are still excellent meeting points to plan for paddling adventures.

You've actively chosen kayaking as a lifestyle, rather than a sport. What's involved with living the life?

Like any travelling road show, there's a lot of planning in terms of what you need to take and where you're going next. And there's the larger picture too. Where ARE you going? Just drifting won't really help you with the bills or your goals. Don't get me wrong, I think the future of a boating lifestyle is bright and there are more possibilities than ever to sustain a decent lifestyle through paddling. It's just that it takes a bit more thought than it used to. If you have a sharp mind, there are plenty of opportunities in tourism, small-scale manufacturing, media productions and so on that will allow you to live the way you choose. One thing's for sure, if you're going to rely solely on your competitive success, the income will soon dry up when you stop winning. So you need a back up plan.



Is rodeo dead?

No, it's not dead, despite the hype, but it's no longer the flagship of whitewater paddling it once was. It's gone the same way as slalom with event quality, water time, near inaccessible moves, and very specialised boats making competitive freestyle paddling the pursuit of die hards and full timers.

So you think boat design is partly responsible for its demise?

During the growth of freestyle we saw many wonderful and weird boat designs, all aimed at an expanding market. Since then, very specific groups have been developed within playboating and products have developed that are specific to each group. But they are all amazingly similar. It might seem like we're all going to end up in the same boat with different branding but when you think that even the smallest changes to a boat's hull can make a huge difference to its performance, it makes that scenario very unlikely.

What's your view on sponsorship?

It's a two way street. The relationship between paddler and sponsor should involve give and take. To get into the position of being sponsored takes a lot of hard work. Obviously you need to be good, but you also need to be an excellent communicator and if you can provide informed critical product feedback, even better. However, there can be drawbacks to sponsorship. What if your sponsor starts to produce less than perfect products? Or wants you to go to every event under the sun. What do you do? Loyalty has its worth, but it's your life too.

You've never been afraid to express your views, even if it goes against the grain. Is that still the case?

I've learnt a lot about keeping my opinions to myself but some situations just demand a reaction. I'm not good at accepting that something is done in such a way just because it's always been done that way. If I can see an alternative way then I'll voice my opinion. For example, a few years ago there was an idea heavily supported by many pro-paddlers that if sponsors put up prize money for competitions the sport would attract more money and coverage. But I believed that if you spent these additional funds on producing wider media coverage, then individual sponsored paddlers could get money from their own media incentive deals. That would have meant everybody in the top ten making some money, rather than winner takes all. This view was never welcomed. Needless to say, prize money arrived from the manufacturers and sponsors but we didn't attract any new media exposure and so no new sponsors from outside the sport. As a result, these days there is less prize money and fewer pro-paddlers.

Many people will know you from your film productions. What made you decide to get into filmmaking?

After watching many action videos, I just thought I could do it better. I bought a good camera and began to learn. It took me two years to start to get any good footage, but I haven't looked back since. My company, Westgarth.tv, still makes retail productions but I've also started to get commissions, such as filming the recent Surf Kayak World Championships.



Getting jiggy with his devil stick

Guardian of the ^{West} West



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Creek boating, Norway, photo by Kate Donnelly



The other side of your business is coaching, which you seem to have a unique approach to. How has that come about?

I don't want to slam the whole coaching body, of which I am a member. It's just that I'm more interested in learning outcomes and the fact that a boat can be paddled in an effective, proactive way, than focusing on a prescribed methodology about learning certain techniques or being constantly assessed. There's been an explosive expansion of paddling techniques from playboating that has heavily influenced river-running skills. But there's not much evidence of its inclusion within the BCU's coaching structure. I'm just trying to tackle that issue in my own way.

As one of Europe's top creek boaters, do you feel that there'll be a return from park 'n' play paddling to river running?

With freestyle losing its flagship image, the true core of white water paddling, river running, is beginning to shine through again. The reason it looks like there's a shift is that the media has now become more balanced. There are also river boats that you sit in like a freestyle boat and can really drive down the river. Furthermore, many park 'n' play boats have become far less accessible, and fun, for the average river paddler, so these guys are replacing their

two or three-year old freestyle boats with new river-running playboats or creek boats. There has been a swing in sales too and, hence, a wider selection of creek boats from the major manufacturers.

How do you feel about the younger generation of paddlers taking to the creeks with little or no experience and possibly the wrong equipment?

It's here that I can bang the drum! There's no substitute for experience and often poor judgement leads to the kind of experience needed to learn and make good decisions in the future. I learnt this from being in a University Canoe Club.

Many of the young paddlers, especially those from a freestyle background, have great boat skills and balance. These young guns can huck their meat, getting clean lines through hard rapids. On Class 5 there are often rapids and drops with numerous requirements to change the boat's path in the air and drive through different features. That can demand excellent use of transitions. Using transitions requires considerable experience to understand exactly what to do and when to do it. Often the young guns don't have enough of this experience.

Regarding equipment. There are too many paddlers arriving at the

put in with crap shoes, (I mean wetsuit boots that will not grip wet rocks, or allow you to run over uneven ground quickly as rescues often demand), no knife or whistle, no throw line or the understanding of how to use one. This is a concern. Owning the right gear is good, but knowing how to use it is what save lives.

Where do you see the sport going in the next five years?

Willy Kern once said, "the future of the sport is right now", and for river running this is certainly true. Arrive at the put in, paddle the river, take out and enjoy! As for freestyle, there'll be more new moves. Maybe we'll go back to speed-generated moves like aerials, rather than using bounce separation to hop into the air that's currently in vogue. Whatever happens there's a lot of choice and many directions, locations and adventures to be had.

What about you personally, what are your ambitions/goals for the next few years?

This boy needs a home and that is what I'll look to sort out short term. This means settling down a bit and that's great, as I'd like to fly fish a little more and take time to enjoy some of the simpler pleasures in life. I have a really nice girlfriend and it's great to have time that doesn't gravitate around my own life.

What do you like to do when you're not working/paddling?

There are many things I enjoy. Fly-fishing is my retirement project and I don't mind starting early! In the past I've put up a few new climbing routes, mainly sport routes, and I've climbed a few mountains too. I love trail running and mountain biking when the rivers are low. Every year I try to get a snowboarding break and when I'm back in the UK I enjoy Tai Chi classes and I read in chaotic bursts. Listening to daytime BBC Radio 5 is another UK pleasure I really enjoy.

Sum up Simon Westgarth in your own words?

Direct, thoughtful, driven, trying to be mindful and clear. My Irish eyes are smiling too.

Any last words of wisdom?

Have a plan, make and achieve goals, roll with the punches when things don't work and then adjust your plan. It's not really wisdom just a method that gets me moving from here to somewhere else. Oh yeah, and enjoy getting wherever that somewhere else may be. You make of life what you can. Luck and talent will get you so far, the rest is down to hard work.

Thanks, Simon.

