

FIVE STARS!

"EXPECT TO MEET A WOOLLY BEHEMOTH, WITH STRANGE STARING EYES, A CHIP ON BOTH SHOULDERS AND A NAPOLEON COMPLEX. IF YOU FEED THIS POWER CRAZED, SOCIALLY MALIGN, INDIVIDUAL WITH PROSTRATE SUBSERVENCE FOR THE ENTIRE WEEKEND, YOU AT LEAST STAND A REMOTE CHANCE OF MEETING HIS EVER CHANGING STANDARDS"

WORDS AND PICTURES: MARK RAINSLY

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU WENT ON A BCU COACHING COURSE? DOES THE NOTION CONJURE UP ALARMING IMAGES OF BELLOWING BEARDED BULLIES, WEIGHED DOWN BY AN ARRAY OF BADGES UNFASHIONABLY SEWN ONTO THEIR BUOYANCY AIDS? THE QUOTATION ABOVE WAS POSTED ON ONE OF THE INTERNET MESSAGE BOARDS, IN ANSWER TO A QUERY ABOUT BCU COACHING COURSES. IT PERFECTLY ENCAPSULATES THE PREJUDICES POPULARLY HELD ABOUT THE COACHING SCHEME. WHILST THIS MAY WELL REFLECT THE REAL SITUATION IN SOME CASES (CERTAIN FOLK CAN'T HANDLE POWER...), IT'S WORTH CONSIDERING THE POSITIVES OF OUR COACHING SCHEME. EVERY PADDLER IN BRITAIN HAS BENEFITED FROM IT. NO OTHER SCHEME WORLDWIDE DEFINES AND PROMOTES THE SKILLS OF OUR SPORT SO EFFECTIVELY. IT IS THE ENVY OF OUR AMERICAN COUSINS! MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE SCHEME HAS PRODUCED MANY FIRST-RATE COACHES, WHO HAVE MOVED BEYOND CLIPBOARD-FIXATION TO SEE THE BIG PICTURE... THAT COACHING IS SIMPLY ABOUT HELPING PADDLERS TO DEVELOP THEIR BOATING ENJOYABLY AND SAFELY, ON THEIR OWN TERMS.

WITH THIS IN MIND, 'PADDLES' MAGAZINE WENT 'BACK TO SKOOL' AND SPENT A WEEKEND ON A COACHING COURSE LED BY SIMON WESTGARTH OF 'GENE17'... 'INLAND FIVE STAR TRAINING'. THE BCU'S COURSE OUTLINE IS PRETTY DAUNTING...

'THIS IS THE ENTRY TO THE TOP LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE, INVOLVING LEADERSHIP IN ADVANCED SITUATIONS, AND HIGH PERSONAL SKILLS.'

In plain speak; it's not quite so scary. The course is basically aimed at paddlers wanting to paddle with their mates on Grade 3 and 4 whitewater rivers, without the trip turning into a train wreck. It's aimed at being accessible and challenging both to mild-mannered club paddlers and to heroboaters looking to turn the spotlight onto their performance. It's also a prerequisite for Coaches wanting to teach on harder whitewater.

Our course was held on a cold and damp weekend

on Dartmoor. Two days were spent paddling the fantastic Upper Dart every which way possible (except for, slowly - did we mention, it was cold?). The Dart came into its own... the medium water level proved simply perfect as a training ground for advanced paddling. Those who thought that they 'knew' the river found themselves exploring new routes and river-running strategies at every corner!

The focus of the Five Star training is on 'Leadership' and 'Personal Skills'. 'Leadership' in this case didn't



necessarily mean Taking the Bridge and barking orders at your mates, appealing as that might be. It was interpreted as, simply, whatever works to keep you and your peers paddling and communicating safely in different situations. The group switched the 'lead' regularly on the way downriver, with all manner of styles and approaches tested out.

The 'Personal Skills' aspect saw every paddler being stretched, despite a wide variation in the group's ability. The more difficult rapids were run, and after feedback, carried up and run again. A few games of 'Downriver Follow My Leader' saw everyone chasing the smallest eddies and sketchiest ferry glides, not always successfully! Needless to say, Mr Westgarth's personal skills and experience were not lacking by way of providing a role model; he could (*ahem*) get quite good at this sport if he sticks at it...

Sunday morning saw a late start after a 'Kit Talk'. This started inside the 'AS Watersports' shop at the River Dart Country Park, with a discussion of the gear available. The group then shuffled outside and took a close look at both Simon's and their own 'back of the boat' kit.

Both days finished with private individual feedback with Simon, back in the Dart Park bar. A Development ►

Plan was constructed for each paddler, based on their strengths and weaknesses.

So, everyone who attended made a big step nearer to being able to call themselves 'Five Star' paddlers. Their next 'formal' steps are to attend 'White Water Safety and Rescue' and First Aid courses, and to then turn up for the Big One...the final Assessment. We're sure that they'll achieve this, and they'll all proudly frame their certificate when it finally comes...but everyone realised that they'd already completed the most important part. Five Star Training is a course, which is much more than just the sum of its syllabus. Paddles Magazine recommends that all whitewater paddlers consider the Training, whether or not you intend to go for Assessment. It's an essential tool to help UK paddlers to assess what they do, and why they do it, on the river. Quell your Pognophobia (fear of beards!) and go see what a bit of Coaching can do for your paddling.

Anyway, don't take our word for it. Ask the group...

Mark Quest, 29

- ★ Outdoor Tutor at Bicton College, Devon.
- ★ Has paddled for three years, recreationally and as a Coach

"Last year was a real mission with mates, to paddle every Grade 3 river in the Southwest. We found some gems and some nightmares, but got out and learned loads. This year's been a continuation, moving onto Grade 4; a real awakening, suddenly there is real consequence...similar to the jump in climbing from the easier grades to HVS, E1.

One of my motivations to do the 5 Star training was to become a Level 4 Coach. Another tick, in an endless line of boxes. That changed within about 5 minutes of being on the water...

I became focused and motivated in seeking out smoother, more dynamic lines downriver; looking at rapids in a structured, planned way rather than the usual 'charge!' approach. We were constantly set challenges, by ourselves, each other or Simon. It might have been a certain eddy, a particular boof or a specific line. We ran and re-ran 'Euthanasia Falls' and 'Surprise Surprise'. The usual 'Phew, thank God that's done!' became 'Right, how can I do that better?' We did lots of work on micro-



eddy hopping. Although this was hard and sometimes frustrating, it identified a weakness that I'm now working on! I missed lines, swam so much I grew gills and got soaked to the skin; that didn't stop me from having a huge grin and a mind buzzing with new ideas and ways of thinking. I came off the river having pushed myself harder mentally and physically than countless trips with mates ever did.

The best part was the constant, positive and specific feedback and genuine enthusiasm from Simon. A thumbs-up and a big grin can mean a lot to someone who has just been at the edge of their ability; they kept coming all day. We were praised for all that went well and guided to find what we could improve on.

I left with a clear idea of where I am in my paddling and what I need to do before Assessment. I feel close to the standard (apart from my roll!) and am happy on Grade 3-4 water...but know I need more experience. All these awards are not tickets to ride; only with the miles under our belts can we react instantly with skill, to whatever arises. Doing this course puts you a good way down that road."

Chris Milbank, 21

- ★ Outdoor Education Coach in Cornwall.
- ★ Thirteen years paddling experience, including competition at International level

"I paddle whitewater on Dartmoor and I've competed in most disciplines; marathon, polo, freestyle, surf. In 2001 I represented England as a Junior at the Surf World Championships in Santa Cruz, California.

I joined this course as I want to continue gaining qualifications and head for my Level 4 Coach qualification. It had to be Gene17, Simon is a Southwest paddler with an excellent reputation. In particular, I wanted to develop my river leadership and personal paddling skills.

The whole course was excellent. I really liked paddling with Simon, he's a paddler, not just a Coach. On the weekend, I got loads of experience of different methods, styles and skills. I learned how to paddle a creek boat, loaned to me by Gene17...this was scary and a new experience for me! Learning the correct line on 'Euthanasia Falls' in a big boat was rewarding. Nailing the line through 'Surprise Surprise' was cool too.

At the end of the weekend, the one-to-one feedback with Simon was very good...everything I needed to be told was done in a very professional way. I feel confident and prepared for the 5 Star Assessment weekend,





especially as I've just found myself a creek boat. I'm no longer paddling Grade 4 in my playboat! I'm going to change my buoyancy aid too."

(Stop press - Chris passed his Assessment three weeks later, with flying colours)

Julien Pike, 32 for two more days!

- ★ Managing Director of a Web Development company in Norfolk
- ★ Fifteen years paddling, recreationally and as a Scout Leader

"I was a paper chaser in the early days, wanting every qualification going, but I've grown out of that! I work with Scouts at local and national levels, but still try to get time for personal paddling. After all these years I still can't decide if I prefer river-running or surfing!

I was interested to know what 5 Star 'standard' was and whether I was there. I chose Gene17 as I want someone who will fail me if I am not good enough! I wanted coaching in my weaker areas and this is exactly what happened.

Simon's feedback showed I have a fairly comprehensive set of river leadership skills and was adjusting my leadership style to suit the different sections of river. This is, of course, how it should be; there is no 'one size fits all' approach to river leadership...but until it was pointed out, I was never conscious of what I was doing.

Simon calls me a passive paddler, I call myself lazy! I have a tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen. I was aware that I did this, but never appreciated the benefit of putting in those extra one or two precision strokes. The most useful part for me was running and re-running the same rapid using both my usual 'passive' style and a more 'dynamic' approach;

this showed the obvious advantages of 'driving' the kayak. The timing of that extra stroke was critical! I am a bit of a perfectionist, I had to get it exactly right...I still think I could have done some of the drops better.

We also had great 'follow-the-leader' sessions. I enjoy technical paddling and this challenge forced me to be dynamic. There's great satisfaction in successfully negotiating a course laid out by a peer.

Simon knows his stuff and has a great way of putting it across. I feel confident about Assessment, although I'm not going to rush into it. I haven't got to prove anything to anyone other than myself." ►





Nigel Stanley, 32

- ★ Lecturer and Course Manager for the National Certificate in Outdoor Leisure, Bicton College in Devon
- ★ Nine years' paddling, mostly teaching beginners.

"I paddle around Devon with trips to Grade 3/4 rivers in Wales. I spent two years paddling in North Carolina. The majority of my paddling has been teaching beginners at Outdoor Centres.

Now I'm lecturing in the industry, I felt it necessary to progress with my personal development. It's also about time I pushed myself towards Level 4 Coach

status; this'll let me take learners on harder whitewater. I wanted to focus on my leadership and personal paddling performance, along with my river awareness...reading the water!

Simon was good at assessing my ability on the Saturday morning and then throughout the weekend was able to assist me in developing all aspects of my paddling. I learned...the importance of group positioning when running drops and how important the 'Line of Sight' is; where to position yourself when running drops,

and how to deploy your group to the best of their abilities (e.g. as safety runners). We were always doing something. My personal skills went up an enormous learning curve!

The leadership sections were the most challenging. Not having lead groups for a while, I was a bit rusty and felt on the edge of my comfort zone on the first morning. This soon disappeared!

At the final de-brief, areas for improvement were discussed. Simon allowed time for me to put my opinion across (in a reflective way) and followed it up with his opinion, always in a constructive manner and reinforced with a positive point.

I would not feel happy leading groups on Grade 3/4 right now; I am not ready just yet. Before going for Assessment, I need to run more rivers - especially, 'new' rivers. I'll do more in Wales and try to get abroad to gain a wider range of experiences. I am also rethinking my head and foot wear and what I carry in my boat. I'm looking to take the Assessment in 2006."

The BCU Inland Five Star - Factfile

To achieve the Inland Five Star Award...

- ★ Complete a two-day training weekend in 'Leadership and Personal Skills'.
- ★ Complete at least a day of Whitewater Safety and Rescue Training. The BCU's WWSRT weekends come particularly recommended.
- ★ Complete appropriate First Aid training.
- ★ Log relevant river-running experience on a variety of types of whitewater.
- ★ Attend a two-day Assessment weekend.

Full syllabus from www.bcu.org.uk/coaching/personalperformanceawards.html
Course providers and dates from www.bcu.org.uk/coaching/coachingindex.html

Our thanks to Simon Westgarth and Gene17 - www.gene17.com

