Let’s speak frankly. Paddling has been and remains a male-dominated sport—at least in numbers. Until recent years, whitewater gear, instruction, and attitudes did little to show women to the sport and keep them there. Anna began thinking about this while training for freestyle with other women paddlers in 2002. Several years later, she decided to launch teaching programs and DVDs exclusively dedicated to women. And it’s worked! Ladies are coming from the world’s four corners to attend the clinics organized around the US and Canada, and also in Mexico. Many whitewater kayaking, yoga, and spiritually. Anna Levesque helps ladies to find self-confidence on the river and in their life.

KS: For those who don’t know, can you tell us about what you do through Girls at Play?

Anna Levesque: My job requires that I do a lot of different things. Teaching and guiding kayaking is the easy part! When I’m producing a DVD for instance, I have to write the script, make up the budget, find sponsorship, hire the videographer/editor, recruit female paddlers to participate, direct the shooting, assist with the editing, market and promote the DVD, oversee the art for the cover and inserts, find the music for the background, hire a photographer for photos or find photos, and work with the distribution to get it out. Since I’m a one-woman show, I also do my own recording of accounts, answering emails, marketing, updating my website, product development, filing orders, strategic planning, writing of articles for magazines, blogs and newsletters, scheduling, logistics for classes, retreats and trips, and the list goes on. After answering this question I think I need an assistant! Anyone interested?

KS: Why and when did you decide to work with ladies?

Anna Levesque: I didn’t one day decide that I wanted to work with women; my desire to work with women evolved naturally from my own search for resources and support within the industry. I remember being up on the Ottawa touring freestyle back in 2001 or 2002 and doing video review with some female peers. It seemed to me that we were all struggling with the same technical aspects of freestyle. I thought that maybe because we’re shaped differently than men that we also learn differently or may need to develop different aspects of technique and strength. I also felt that the needs of women were being ignored by most leaders in the industry at the time. For instance, I remember looking at an instructional book that had only 3 photos of a female paddler in it, and it was a pretty thick book. Gear for women was just starting to surface. This last thing I would say is that I also noticed that my female peers would tell stories of getting emotional on the river or being sexual and trying to hide it from their male peers in fear that they would think less of them for being emotional. Many of them felt that their confidence had taken a beating in these situations. I heard several stories like this and experienced them myself. What I realized is that most women needed more support from their male peers and each other. When women are allowed to express and be themselves in the river their skills and confidence soar. At this time I felt that I could fill these needs by making an instructional DVD for women that dealt with some of the technical aspects of how women learn and paddle differently as well as address the emotional needs of women. So, I produced Girls at Play and started teaching women’s clinics. Both the DVD and the clinics were overwhelmingly popular with women. I felt inspired by the women I was meeting and by the fact that my work was helping them improve, feel good and pursue something they loved to do. So it has easy to continue down this path.

KS: Did you have a specific plan for how your life and your business have developed or has it all just happened?

Anna Levesque: I definitely had a specific plan for my life and it’s not that stuff has just happened either. I’ve followed my passions and I don’t try doing and as time goes on I get better at listening to and following my own intuition and inner guidance. A lot of people told me that it wasn’t worth creating an instructional DVD or an instruction program in whitewater specifically for women. Luckily I chose to listen to my own inner guidance instead of listening to everyone else’s opinions.

KS: Ladies are pretty rare on European rivers. What is like in North America?

Anna Levesque: Here in North America women aren’t rare on the rivers. I feel like there are a lot of female paddlers on the rivers here and the numbers seem to be growing. I don’t have numerical proof of that, but I see more women paddling all the time. There are more kayak schools offering women’s classes and there’s a festival in the Southeast US called Boaterchick Festival that attracts hundreds of female boaters to one area to paddle together.

KS: Is kayaking a macho sport?

Anna Levesque: I looked up the word macho so I could properly answer this question and the definition I found was: “Showing aggressive pride in one’s masculinity.” In my opinion, kayaking has traditionally been a sport practiced mostly by men. And the owners of the companies, the designers, the editors of magazines and so on in the industry have also traditionally been men. So I do feel that there has been an element of machismo present in kayaking over the years because, in my experience, when you get a bunch of men together doing adrenaline pumping stuff there tends to be some machismo present. But now that there are more women paddling, more female role models and more women in higher positions in companies within the industry. I think there is less machismo in the sport and a more balanced approach is evolving.

KS: If machismo is something quite “national” in a men’s world, have you noticed some specific behaviors in the ladies’ paddling world?

Anna Levesque: I don’t think that women in general tend to doubt themselves, worry about being “weakend link” in the group and are more likely to push themselves out of possible consequences, real or imagined. Women are also very positive and get great satisfaction out of supporting one another and celebrating every accomplishment. I think that the social aspect of kayaking is just as important for most women as...
the challenges that the sport provides. So, when women paddle together they are generally very supportive of each other, which puts them at ease which, in turn, builds their confidence and helps them to work through their fears. If women feel like they’re being judged, humiliated or pushed too hard on the river they tend to get very nervous and lose confidence in their abilities.

KS: Do you think some women also lack humor sometimes when they get shit from the boys, or do you think men do not realize that they are pushing too far with their thick jokes?

AL: I think it depends on the intention behind the shit giving. Personally, I enjoy giving and getting shit if the intention is fun, playful and non-humming. And I think it’s awesome how men can harass each other in a way in a good way that inspires them to paddle better. I’ve also seen men give women grief with the intention of building down their confidence and making fun of them because they don’t agree with how they’re acting or doing things. In these cases the men are just being mean and there’s no playground about it. When women know that they are supported and accepted by the men they’re paddling with, then getting shit isn’t a big deal. I think that women can work on not taking things too personally and men can work on being more supportive.

KS: On a similar note, how do your female peers in the industry use you? It seems that some are not necessarily like your approach and feel that being too feminine. What do you have to say to that?

AL: I have a good relationship with other “famous female paddlers” and I appreciate opportunities to work with them. Tammy Pace and I had an opportunity to teach together on a Women’s Paddling Retreat last summer and we worked really well together. In fact, we both agreed that the combination of both of our teaching approaches made for an awesome curriculum. But if some do not like or understand what I try to do, then everyone is entitled to their opinion.

KS: Spirituality and philosophy are very present in your approach. It’s an unique way of working. Why did you decide to work this way?

AL: I’ve always been drawn to spiritual practice. I started meditating when I was in high school, but didn’t have a teacher at the time and so I stopped for a number of years. I came back to it about thirteen years ago when I discovered yoga. Along with my yoga and meditation practice, I also belong to a community of women in Asheville who support each other’s personal development. My spiritual practice is a very important part of my life because it helps me to do my best to know, live and speak my truth in a compassionate, loving way. My practice continually allows me to let go of old labels, behaviors and patterns that no longer serve me in living a fun, happy, successful life. So, it’s natural that I want to share that happiness and fun with others.

In the book “The Heart of Yoga” by T.K. Desikachar, he beautifully describes what it means to have the idea that something changes. To have that change must bring us to a point where we have never been before. That is to say, that which was impossible becomes possible; that which was unattainable becomes attainable, that which was invisible can be seen. To me, you can change the word “joy” out for “paddling” in this paragraph and it still rings true. For me, one of the greatest gifts of paddling is that it takes us out of our heads and allows us to connect with the present moment. What I’ve come to realize is that a lot of the principles of paddling are also aspects of spiritual practice like: pay attention, look where you want to go, and learn to face challenges and fears in constructive ways. To me, paddling is part of my spiritual practice. I also feel like it’s important to promote opportunities for people to connect with nature and with other people and cultures. When we realize that we are connected to everything around us we have more compassion for people and more respect for the environment. This leads not only to personal transformation, but also to healthier rivers and communities.

KS: Has your approach evolved since you started teaching with Girls at Play?

AL: I feel like my approach has softened over the years. In the beginning I was very surreal and defensive about my work because my perception was that I was being judged from within the industry and had to prove myself in some way. Now I have a lot more confidence in myself and in my work, and I realize that it’s not about me being right or other people liking what I do. What’s important to me is that I always do my best to create an environment for learning, like it shouldn’t bother us. Fear on the river doesn’t recognize that we all get scared and to learn how to work through it instead of repressing it or acting like it shouldn’t bother us. Fear on the river doesn’t ever go away if you keep challenging yourself, but everyone can learn strategies for working through it. And, some paddlers choose to not continually push themselves at their edge and they have a great time on the river. Paddling hard whitewater doesn’t have to be the deathknell ultimate goal in whitewater kayaking.

Some who is challenged in class III can get just as much fun, thrill and challenge as someone who is able to paddle class V. In my opinion, the idea that you’re not cool if you paddle level 5 is what keeps our sport inaccessible to a wider audience. Kayaking is about having fun, being outside and hanging out with awesome people. If you do that in class IV or V, awesome! If you do it in class III, that’s awesome too.
KS: Do you still paddle hard whitewater and how does that fit into your world? If so, do you see yourself paddling on big rivers like the New, the Gauley and the Ottawa so I've always felt very at ease on big water. I think you're a wuss for enjoying class III or you? We're ultimately who's living your life? The people who may think you're a wuss for enjoying class III or you? We're ultimately who's living your life? The people who may think they're awesome. Asheville has a great community of paddlers who are really fun to paddle with and that's one of the major motivations for my paddling now. As long as I'm having fun and have awesome people to paddle with I think I'll push myself for a long time to come. I'm very grateful for the media exposure that my work gets. I actually feel that I could do a better job at seeking out media exposure and I would love to be able to afford a PR person. It is rewarding to get media exposure because it validates that what I'm doing is interesting and helps people. It does feel like an accomplishment to get recognized by the media and it can be just as exciting as winning an event. KS: What are your plans for the future? The Nantahala Outdoor Center* was created by Andrew’s grandfather, Poppie Kennedy. Today, Poppie is more involved in retreats and community-driven projects. Do you see Andrew and yourself taking over some day and bringing your own to it? KS: Why did you decide to make another whitewater DVD? AL: This is an interesting question. Andrew and I both currently work with the NOC’s Paddling School. Andrew is one of the head instructors and I see my women’s paddling retreats and Mexico trips out of the NOC and teach their women’s clinics. It’s a great relationship and NOC is a great company. We’ve both been invited to be more involved in the Paddling School, but for now we’re both very happy with what we’re doing. We’ll just have to see what opportunities arise in the future. KS: Do you still paddle hard whitewater and how does that fit into your world? If so, do you see yourself doing it for a while? How has your perspective on that aspect of kayaking shifted over the years? KS: The specificity of your work seems to bring you more fun on the water. That's why I decided to produce Whitewater Kayaking with Anna Levesque. I feel like my clients and all women paddlers deserve to have the most up-to-date information. Of course, instructional DVDs and books are snapshots in time and after each row I realize that I left something out or could have done something a little different. That's just part of the process. Whitewater may be a small industry, but it’s a community of people who feel passionate about the sport. And as long as there are women paddling, I’ll continue to invest in the sport. KS: How do you position yourself in the paddling community? KS: “It is ok to cry.” This sentence made you famous. AL: This has evolved for me over time and it’s not something I’d set out and think and strategize about, until you asked me this question. When I was first competing I was trying to position myself as one of the top female freestyle boaters. When I started working on Girls at Play, and for the first four years, I positioned myself as an instructor who provided a safe, friendly and fun atmosphere for women to gain confidence and improve their skills on the water. And I continue to position myself that way with the addition of being an instructor/guide and yoga instructor who combines kayaking with yoga and travel to assist women in discovering, empowering and connecting with their passions, inner strength and confidence. KS: “It’s ok to cry.” This sentence made you famous in the paddling community among women’s circles, though more on the inside. Does that make you laugh, or give you aghast? KS: The Nantahala is a community of people who feel passionate about their sport and themselves and their community. Do you see Andrew and yourself taking over some day and bringing your own to it? KS: Do you still paddle hard whitewater and how does that fit into your world? If so, do you see yourself doing it for a while? How has your perspective on that aspect of kayaking shifted over the years? KS: “It is ok to cry.” This sentence made you famous. AL: This has evolved for me over time and it’s not something I’d set out and think and strategize about, until you asked me this question. When I was first competing I was trying to position myself as one of the top female freestyle boaters. When I started working on Girls at Play, and for the first four years, I positioned myself as an instructor who provided a safe, friendly and fun atmosphere for women to gain confidence and improve their skills on the water. 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