



NOSE DOWN: Hamish Gibson, from St Peter's College, Gore, competes in the Alpha Outdoors Rodeo at the Southland Paddles Up 2004. PETER MEECHAM/Fairfax NZ

On March 9 and 10 the annual Paddles Up school kayaking event will celebrate 25 memorable years. Logan Savory looks back at where the popular event has come from.

In 1989 Bruce Conway had an idea, and little did he know it would stretch to provide thousands of southern youngsters with the highlight of their school year.

The idea was to introduce a school kayaking event where secondary school kids were provided with kayaking instruction and also competed in team and individual competition.

Conway was assisted by Ann Robinson, Terry McNamara and Andy Wood to get the concept off the ground and from there it blossomed.

In the first year, in 1989, 57 kids took part. By year two the word had got out and in 1990 144 took part.

The influx of numbers had meant from there they had to cut the event to Southland schools only and encourage Otago schools to start up their own Paddles Up event. This did happen, but now it (runs in a much changed format).

Since the event's inception it is estimated more than 2000 Southland kids have headed to Mavora and attended Paddles Up, and Conway admits to feeling pretty chuffed as it closes in on the quarter-century mark.

"I didn't think it would go 25 years, that's for sure. It's pretty satisfying," he said.

"It's just got a really nice culture to it and that culture was pretty much thrashed out in the first few years. We had a lot of meetings talking about what type of competition do we want - do we want it to be elitist, do we want it to be for everyone and it was all written down and people have stuck to it over the years."

The fun slalom at Paddles Up is not your normal whitewater slalom. Conway modelled it on the BBC television events run in Britain from 1983 till 1993 where experts attempted a range of novelty tasks as they paddled down a long grade three-plus rapid.

For Paddles Up purposes the difficulty level was toned down, which saw students ducking under a low limbo bar, eskimo rolling, honking a squeeze horn, tossing their paddle over a high rope and whacking a hanging ball, as well as negotiating the regular downstream and upstream slalom gates on grade one and two rapids.

As much as the event is about competition, it is also about teaching the school kids how to kayak and safety elements that are attached to the recreation.

The Saturday morning of the two-day event is dedicated to instruction and Conway said it was nice to see kids develop during their time at Paddles Up.

"Kids can arrive with having not paddled before and enter the competition a day and a half later."

Several Paddles Up contestants over the years have gone on to bigger and better things in the sport of kayaking. One of the more recent success stories is Malcolm Gibson, who learned a lot of his craft at Paddles Up and has gone on to compete at World Cup events.

"He was hanging around when he was a primary kid with his brothers paddling. He wasn't allowed to paddle in the competition so you would see his brothers take him for a paddle outside the competition, and then when he come through the third form he cleaned up the juniors. When he came through the seniors he was representing New Zealand as well."

THE REUNION

To mark 25 years of the Paddles Up event, original organiser Bruce Conway is calling on all people who have competed in the event since year one in 1989 to attend a special reunion event for the 2013 Paddles Up on March 9 and 10.

Conway said for those past competitors interested in attending the reunion they should head to alphaoutdoors.co.nz for more information and to register so they were aware of how many people to expect.

Logan Savory (The Southland Times)