

# Paul McConkey (1956 - 1986)

Paul “Conk” McConkey was born on 13th January 1956 in Wednesfield near Wolverhampton. He was educated at Ward’s Bridge Secondary School in Wednesfield and it was here that his athletic career was determined. He was keen on all sports becoming house captain for cross country running and also swam competitively for a local swimming club.



Paul was introduced to canoeing during the 3rd year (1969/70) attending regular sessions in the swimming pool, evenings at Ironbridge and several long weekends which also included rock climbing and trekking. Paul joined in with helping make a fleet of canoes for the school and eventually the pupils were allowed to build their own canoes (at a cost of £10 for materials). Using his home-made canoe Paul paddled training sessions on a canal adjacent to the school using makeshift gates hung across the banks. His canoeing took on its competitive edge when he entered the Wolverhampton Schools Championships and his first ranking slalom was a Novice event at Pontrilas, near Abergavenny.

On leaving school Paul went to work at Marston Palmer Ltd. of Wolverhampton as an apprentice sheetmetal worker. On the bottom of his application form he wrote “My sporting ambition is to gain a higher position in the sport of canoe slalom” – dated April 18th, 1974.

At the end of the 1973 season Paul finished 29th in Division 4 and was prompted to Division 3. He remained in this division in 1974 and 1975. In 1976 improvement was evident when he finished 20th in Division 3 and was promoted to Division 2 at the end of the season. In 1977, with the benefit of rough water training at Bala, Paul was prompted to Division 1 during the season. At the end of 1978 he finished 17th, becoming one of the top 52 paddlers constituting the first ever Premier Division.

During 1978, Stone in Staffordshire became home to the West Midlands Centre of Excellence and many top paddlers trained under the wings of Ken Langford and John Court. Paul’s style and technique advanced rapidly as a result and training with Richard Fox made him even sharper. This intensive training and coaching finally paid off for him that year when he won a place in the Europa Cup Team that competed at Spindal Mlyn in Czechoslovakia. The next two seasons saw Paul consolidate his position as one of Britain’s top slalom paddlers. All this while he was travelling about 60 miles every day to train until in 1980 he married Karen (Richard Fox was Best Man) and moved to Stone.

1981 saw Paul return to the international scene when he was selected for the Great Britain B Team that toured the Eastern Block, competing in Czechoslovakia and Poland. The following year he was in the British Team that went to Merano, northern Italy, for the Pre-World Championships. In 1983 Paul gained selection for the team for the World Championships held in Merano. The K1 Men’s class also included

Richard Fox, Jim Dolan and Roger Manwaring. Paul united with Richard and Jim to win the World Team Championship and thus reach the pinnacle of his canoeing career. 1983 also saw Paul along with Richard Fox and Mick Berwick winning the Wilkinson Sword Trophy as National Team Champions, this success repeated in 1984.

In September 1985 Paul partnered Bill Berrisford to paddle C2 and help Stafford and Stone Canoe Club win the National Interclub Championships, this achievement being repeated the following year. After the birth of his daughter Eleanor in 1986 Paul became a coach to the National Men's Team. Having paddled so long at the top he was intent on putting something back into the sport he loved. During his paddling career Paul was "ever-present" at Stafford and Stone Canoe Club, unselfishly giving advice and help to others and always playing his part in running the club. He was a friend and inspiration to all who met him.

Paul's tragic death in a car accident in December 1986 left a void in the lives of his family, friends, Stafford and Stone Canoe Club and the whole canoeing world. His memory will be cherished and brought to mind constantly.

## **The Trophy**

The trophy adopted by Stafford and Stone Canoe Club is awarded perpetually and is in itself a wonderful tribute to the memory of Paul. Friends and colleagues at Marston Palmer Ltd. For whom Paul worked for nearly 14 years created it.

The finished piece constitutes a variety of materials and processes, and the various techniques employed in producing the finished trophy make it a fine work of art, and truly worthy of a champion. It seemed appropriate that the kayak be based on the same lines as the Pyranha Premier II, the design paddled by Paul and Richard Fox to victory in the 1983 World Championships at Merano. The kayak is beaten and formed out of sheet bronze.

The wave effect was initially sculptured to the basic shape required in plasticine, the detailed finalised in plaster-of-paris that was sent to be cast in bronze and polished to a high grade finish.

The paddles are made of 18-8 stainless steel plate joined by a rod also made from stainless steel. The actual blades were ground and shaped by careful sculpting using fine tungsten grinders.

All of the component parts are assembled and mounted on a plinth made from Brazilian mahogany. The final touches are the three engraved brass plates mounted around the periphery of the plinth and to the rear of the bronze waves. The first and foremost plate is the main plate depicting the reference to Paul McConkey with the intertwining Stafford Knot through crossed paddles at each side representing the club for which he paddles. The second is the small verse by F.G.Hallet that was included in the order of service at Paul's funeral. The third plate is the acknowledgement to all the people involved with the completion of the trophy.

Stafford and Stone Canoe Club are deeply indebted to all the friends and colleagues of Paul and especially to Marston Palmer for commissioning the trophy.

The trophy is presented to the winner of the Premier K1 Men's event at the Paul McConkey Slalom.

### **The Paul L. McConkey Memorial Award Winners**

1987 Russ Smith  
1988 Richard Fox  
1989 Melvyn Jones  
1990 Richard Fox  
1991 Melvyn Jones  
1992 Melvyn Jones  
1993 Dave Crosbee  
1994 Kevin Cambell  
1995 Shaun Pearce  
1996 Anthony Brown  
1997 Neil Buckley  
1998 Shaun Pearce  
1999 Andy Raspin  
2000 Paul Ratcliffe  
2001 Paul Ratcliffe  
2002 Huw Swetnam  
2003 James Hounslow  
2004 Campbell Walsh  
2005 Huw Swetnam

Green be the turf above thee,  
Friend of my better days,  
None knew thee, but to love thee,  
Nor named thee, but to praise.

F.G.Hallet