

QuDoS in MS Recognition Programme Innovation in Practice Winner

Your name, job title, and centre:

Sara McGowan, lead physio at Samson Centre for MS

Project / initiative name:

Samson Kayakers

Project start date:

Initially began in 2019, but expanded in 2021



Samson Kayakers being presented their award by Tania Burge (right), MS Trust.

Challenge

- Exercising can be a difficult task for those living with MS, particularly as common symptoms of MS, such as fatigue, weakness, and poor coordination, may make the prospect of exercise daunting.
- Group exercise is known to encourage regular participation and regular exercise can enhance wellbeing and mental health.
- The Samson Centre and the Wey Kayak Club have shared a building since 2000. Each organisation uses the same facilities at different times of the day and shares running costs. An opportunity existed to explore a collaboration between the two organisations to help people living with MS to improve their fitness and strength.

Solution

The Samson Kayakers vision came about over coffee in a kitchen shared by the Samson Centre and the Wey Kayak club, while discussing how people living with MS could benefit from using a Kayak Ergometer.

Kayak Ergometers (ergos) are indoor kayak machines. The Kayak Ergo allows the user to practice correct paddling technique against resistance to simulate the feeling of pulling the paddle through water. It gives the user an opportunity to have a cardio-vascular workout whilst maintaining good upright posture, so they develop core stability, co-ordination, balance, and strength, as well as improve their cardio-vascular fitness and endurance.

We use High-intensity Interval Training (HIIT) as the foundation of the training. It allows rest, it allows them to get the most out of their exercise whilst they're here with us. People with MS find it a really great way of improving their cardiovascular fitness. They can have quite a hard workout on the machines, but at the end of it, although their legs have had to do some work, they're not so completely exhausted that they can't stand up, get to the coffee area, get to the car, and get on with the rest of their day.

It really is a joint project. There are physiotherapists advising on posture and positioning. We had the gym instructors assisting with warm-up cool-down and being extra pairs of hands during the class, and then we have Paul the kayak coach who advises on the more technical sides of the kayak paddling, stroke, and techniques.

It also allows for those factors of MS, that when they're exercising hard they're not overheating, that we're not overexerting them. We are working them in a safe and appropriate manner so that there's all that physiological side of it, which they really enjoy.

Results

Samson Kayakers now has 15 members attending weekly who have developed into a tight-knit social group of people with MS providing support to each other.

The friendships forged through the Samson Kayakers extend outside of the classes, with team members going for drinks at the pub and organising fancy dress kayaking sessions.

In 2022, team members from Samson Kayakers arranged an on-the-water session to translate the skills they had learned on dry land to piloting wider, more stable kayaks on the water of a local lake. The event was so successful that the members have gone on to organise trips independent from the Samson Centre.

British Canoeing has provided support to the Samson Kayakers, offering advice on drills and warm-up and specialised seating. And Olympic gold medallist, Liam Heath MBE joined a kayak ergo session at the Samson Centre for Multiple Sclerosis.

“When I reached out and asked for some specialist help, I was really thrilled that people felt that they were more than happy to help.”

Sara McGowan
Lead physio, Samson Centre for MS

Next steps

The boats that we have access to here are very narrow and very tippy; they're not ideal for people with MS. My aim would be to have some more accessible kayaks, which are wider and more stable, maybe two-person kayaks. This also means getting people in and out of the water safely from the banks at the river, which might necessitate a different type of jetty and, certainly, a hoist for some of our members.

That would be the icing on the cake, though, to see it all the way through so that people could come here to the centre, learn on land, but also have the opportunity to go out on the water.

What has been the biggest challenge?

As physios and clinicians, we tend to err on the side of caution, whereas the kayakers, on the other hand, are completely opposite. They would just throw someone in a boat and hope for the best.

That's one of the challenges really because the kayakers are very much like: "Let's just get on and give out a go and see what happens and sort out the problems as and when they arise," whereas I always like to try and pre-empt that.

How did you overcome this challenge?

It's definitely a two-way process. We've always looked at the sessions monthly to see how they're going and make sure we've got the right mix of people in each group. Plus, although Paul the kayak coach is a fantastic and experienced kayaker, he hasn't worked with people with MS before. Getting that understanding of how hard you can push people, the importance of keeping the environment cool and well-ventilated, allowing plenty of rest – it's been a learning process.

What would be your advice to others wanting to replicate this project?

I'd say just give it a go and do a risk assessment. Always go back to those movement analysis skills and look at what people need to be able to move effectively and functionally in an effortless way. Then, think about what activities you have available to you, what people with MS could benefit from, and using other people's skills and expertise as well because most people want to help.

Take a break.

Make a cup of something and enjoy an interview with, Sara McGowan for winning the Innovation in Practice category.



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