

Transcript – A career as a key influencer in the Highlands and Islands

Host: John McLuckie

Guest Speakers: Calum Maclean

John McLuckie: 0:16

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands careers and employability centre. In this episode, we'll be talking to Calum Maclean, filmmaker, TV presenter, outdoor swimming ambassador, and social media influencer about his career based in the Highlands. I'm John McLuckie and I'm joined today by Calum Maclean. Calum, thanks so much for taking part the podcast.

Calum Maclean: 0:37

No problem, John. Thanks for having me.

John McLuckie: 0:39

Yeah, thank you. I'm sure a lot of our listeners will be familiar with you and your work. But for those who aren't, could you introduce yourself and say a bit about what you do and also what you studied while you were a student at UHI?

Calum Maclean: 0:50

It's interesting. People ask me, so what exactly do you do or what is your job, and I sometimes find it hard to sum up in one word, I would just say broadcasting, because that covers a whole load of things, and then you can get into detail. Basically, I am self-employed and I work in broadcasting. So a few years ago, I started making films about outdoor swimming, I really like outdoor swimming as a thing. And that was for BBC The Social, kind of an online platform. I was actually a journalist before then but that kind of changed my career a wee bit into more presenting. And now I present programmes on BBC Alba, which I was doing a bit of before those videos. I do a bit of social media influencer work, I present videos and output for other companies and get involved in marketing campaigns and bits and pieces like that. I do a little bit of writing too, I make my own films, for companies for organisations. So, a whole host of things all coming together. I studied, it was almost about 10 years ago now, I can't actually remember the exact year I'd have to go look it up. I studied at UHI. I was at Sàbhal Mor Ostaig in the Isle of Skye so I'm a fluent Gàidhlig speaker I grew up speaking Gàidhlig and I took the opportunity to go there to do the Cùrsa TV, they call it, or the diploma anns na Meadhanan Gàidhlig, the diploma in Gàidhlig media, which is a two year course, one year based at the college. And then one year you're still doing student projects, but you're out on placement at various places of work. So that was really good and it's interesting, because when I left school initially, quite a number of years ago now, I went to university in Glasgow and went to the University of Strathclyde to do business. And in hindsight I realised it was too soon, maybe and I should have done something else and I left after a year. And then I did a bit of travelling and a bit of work, so I don't actually have a degree in the end. I think what appealed to me for example about the course at Sàbhal Mor Ostaig was that it was hands-on. So I learned by doing things, I learned through experience better than sitting and reading. Not to say that I don't enjoy that and I do enjoy

academia to some point, but it was the doing things that I really enjoyed and that's what appealed to me about that course, and gave me a huge amount of skills and opportunities as well.

John McLuckie: 2:45

That's fascinating and quite a range of things you've done already throughout your career. Just to look at your journey from when you were at school, was presenting and broadcasting always something that you saw yourself doing in the future?

Calum Maclean: 2:56

I'd never say I particularly aimed for it to be honest. My Dad actually worked in broadcasting when I was growing up, so we'd have occasional opportunities to do bits and pieces with that. I was born in Australia and I grew up in Scotland, so I found out that quite a few periods in my life we'd be going back to Australia for several months at a time, like getting taken out of school, and as part of that I remember us making a radio programme about being in Australia, you know, being these two Scottish kids, myself and my sister. It was like an extended holiday but we were actually learning, I had lots of work to do and making radio programmes as part of that, so I guess those gave me skills early on in life but it was never something I particularly aimed for, I was doing bits and pieces of it. But I think it wasn't until maybe I went to Sàbhal Mor Ostaig and I got that opportunity in front of a camera and to try a bit more of that. I found I enjoyed it and I found I could be quite good at it. At the same time now it's not like I exclusively want to do that, you know I'm interested in lots of aspects of being behind the camera and filming to some extent. Less so on the organising of putting a film together but I like the creative side of things. So when you're getting to be on screen, and usually getting to put things in your own words, you know, whatever subject you're talking about, that's what I really like, and combining that with the outdoors, and Scotland, which is my passion in life rather than what I want to do as a job, particularly. Going up in the hills and going outdoor swimming is something I do anyway, rather than just doing it for work. So if I can combine that with work, like I'm luckily managing to do right now anyway. That's something that I really like and embrace every opportunity that I get.

John McLuckie: 4:19

That's excellent, and you mentioned Sàbhal Mor Ostaig. I'm interested to what extent you think being fluent in Gàidhlig has played a part in your career route so far?

Calum Maclean: 4:26

Yeah, for sure, it's opened a huge amount of opportunities. So I would say, even just the course at Sàbhal Mor Ostaig, the years' study at the college. It's quite different to the rest of the courses at Sàbhal Mor Ostaig because it's like full time hours effectively, and you're with a small group of people, and you're learning lots of new skills, and you're getting people from a high level coming in and teaching you these skills. By the time you leave the college after that one year, you've actually got, skills with the camera, skills with audio, skills with even presenting, skills with writing, that are

quite far beyond lots of degree courses you could do. I remember when I was in Skye, some students from a university in London came up to do a film about outdoor swimming. And I remember I think they were in their third year so they were getting ready to graduate and I was teaching them bits about the cameras as I was doing it so I found that quite interesting. I wasn't actually still a student at the time, I was living in Skye. I guess a lot of people might know me if they know me from BBC The Social videos, which were mostly in English, you know ice swimming and my Scottish water temperature chart which people like to heckle me in Tesco sometimes about it's quite funny. But off the back of that, an opportunity opened up at BBC Alba to do a programme Dhan Uisge, an outdoor swimming series. That opportunity wouldn't have opened up at the same time for BBC Scotland, for example, to do the programme in English, it was BBC Alba being a bit more brave, or would take on a bit of a hit on an unusual programme like that. So yeah, for sure, having Gàidhlig opened up that opportunity. I like working in Gàidhlig and it's effectively my first language, Gàidhlig and English alongside one another. So it just feels natural for me to use it, and to bring other people to it effectively, so even a lot of times when I'm not working in Gàidhlig, so I present the output for the Skyline races in Kinlochleven, a series of mountain races, and even through that having Gàidhlig lets you effectively pronounce a lot of the hill names correctly and gives people an insight into what the outdoors in Scotland means. You know, I think anyone who's interested in hillwalking or the outdoors in Scotland usually has a bit of interest in Gàidhlig, and the more you learn the more it opens up the place for you and the more it opens up just reading maps and stuff like that. So I think having Gàidhlig opened up a whole lot of opportunities, obviously within the Gàidhlig world, but also outwith the Gàidhlig world and in the outdoors in Scotland.

John McLuckie: 6:24

I completely agree with your point about developing more of an understanding for the landscape once you have a bit of Gàidhlig, you can appreciate why mountains and corries have certain names, and I was going to ask you as well about your social media presence, how important has that been to your career development?

Calum Maclean: 6:38

Yeah, it's been really big actually. A huge amount of opportunities now come through social media these days. And it's like a love hate thing with me because a lot of opportunities do come through it and for example, companies will approach you with free products sometimes. Sometimes it's stuff like air freshener for your car and I'm like no you're alright, I'm not interested, but often it's stuff that's relevant you know stuff that I'd use like swimming stuff that I'm like actually yeah, I like that. Often companies will approach you to advertise things effectively, just because you have a big social media following in a certain field of some kind but at the same time you can get sucked into the world and get too engrossed and the problem that people have with social media of comparing yourself to other people. So keep it a bit real as well and not show that it's like I'm living the dream or anything like my car broke down the other week and I was like, telling people about that. In fact, I have to scrap it right now because it's not worth getting the repairs done to it. So having a social media profile I think is great in this day and age. A lot of people who use it, you look at them as quite entrepreneurial, I think. I'm less so, so far, I don't make enough of it, but it gives you a platform and it gives you an opportunity to share your point of view, to share your message, to share whatever it is you want to share, without having to wait for permission from the BBC. Say if you

want to be a writer, you could start a blog instead of having to wait for permission to appear in a newspaper, so I think in that way, it's quite democratising, it gives people a platform to share their view, good or bad. And I think you've just got to be wary when you're following people on social media that are you being sold something, just bear that in mind, and never totally buy into whatever image someone's portraying, if it appears there's like no downsides from it at all, so I try and level it up between that level of creating myself opportunities through companies, through organisations coming to me, whilst also trying not to fool anyone or deceive anyone through social media, which I think is quite an important thing to be thinking about, especially when most people these days are on it in some form or another.

John McLuckie: 8:24

That's excellent advice. You mentioned earlier about the outdoor environment being a key part of what you do. How easy has it been to incorporate areas of interest for you personally into a more professional outlook?

Calum Maclean: 8:35

It's interesting, because broadcasting is what I mainly do, but I also do little bits and pieces of outdoor education. Effectively, that's something I'm interested in as well, being outdoors and getting other people into the outdoors. The job is basically outdoor instruction through Gàidhlig and it just seems that I guess I've been very fortunate in a way that many opportunities just kept presenting themselves, and trying new things is effectively how they've come around. I could point to a few key videos I've made, for example, that really maybe went a bit viral and then they opened up new doors. So for example, the ice swimming in the highest loch in Scotland, I think that opened a lot of opportunities for me, and effectively that was an idea that came around myself, thinking right, I like outdoor swimming, I've made lots of videos about outdoor swimming, some are good, some are bad. Every time I make a video I'm learning something about maybe what works, what doesn't work. So it's just by trying new things because I said right. Where can I swim in Scotland, what's the highest place? Okay, Loch Coire An Lochain, it still had ice on it in April so I was like right, okay, I'm going to go and try and do that. And effectively just by saying to myself I'm going to try something new, make this video, no idea if it's gonna work because I'm self-shooting and luckily it worked out and off the back of that lots of new opportunities presented themselves. Sometimes, maybe I should sit down and plan you know, where I'm going a wee bit better but as opportunities keep presenting themselves, I keep saying yes, and then maybe something else will come off the back of that for the same organisation or a different company will see what I did and like that, and new doors keep opening and I enjoy that. I enjoy just taking on new challenges as long as they're connected somehow to what I'm interested in doing.

John McLuckie: 10:04

That's brilliant, and following on from the ice swimming, some of your other videos have gone viral as well like the midgie challenges which looked quite uncomfortable to film. How did you come up with these ideas and would you film similar challenges in the future?

Calum Maclean: 10:17

Yeah, I think so. I think maybe I enjoy a little bit of pain. When you think about outdoor swimming and particularly in winter you have to enjoy pain to some extent to get through it I think. The swimming under the ice video wasn't so uncomfortable because my body was used to it and it's something that I enjoy doing. I like the whole experience, I like the getting cold, I like the recovery after. The midgie videos for anyone that hasn't seen them it's just me letting midgies eat my face or just my whole body for a minute and trying not to react. They were really uncomfy. And like straight afterwards for the next hour after I made them, I was usually lying down in a tent or in the car scratching myself and thinking why did I do it, I couldn't quite explain it. It was just like a little challenge, could I do that? I'll give it a go and try it because the inspiration for it came around, I was taking photos one evening and the midgies were biting me and I hadn't even taken a midgie net, I didn't have a jumper on I just had a T shirt on, they were biting me and I was suffering. And because I wanted to get a few photos. I was like I'll just tough it out, keep scratching myself. And then it got me thinking, oh, could I do the same but just like not react? Like I don't know, I'll give it a go. So yeah that was the whole idea behind the first minute midgie challenge video and I was really hoping it would become a thing that lots of people would try. A few people have tried it, a few of my friends gave it a go, but it's not really taken off and it's pretty understandable why not, because it's a horrible experience. Yeah, I mean it's not much fun, I did another one this summer, just because this summer was really bad for midgies I found, I just wanted to give it a go, challenge myself. And just the other week some guy recognised me off it, he was like 'Are you the guy that did the midgie video?', and I was like, 'yeah, that's me'. So I guess there's a bit of notoriety from that. I would definitely try the midgie video again. It would be good to try it against other people I think make it a challenge where who can last the longest or something. It's just finding willing victims to come along with you is the issue. And ice swimming, yes, I'm gonna do more ice swimming. So there's swimming in physical ice when there's ice around you and then if you swim in water that's five degrees temperature or less, it's classed as ice swimming, it's recognised worldwide under the people that swim outdoors. And I'm interested this winter in training up to do an ice kilometre. So that's a kilometre in five degrees or less, so there doesn't have to be ice on the water. And then there's people who do ice kilometres and then there's ice miles, which is the longer distance. I'm interested in doing that and training for that this winter, so I think it's more of a personal challenge and I might make a few vlogs about it. When you're trying to swim in cold water, it's hard to film at the same time and make a video out of it, but that's something I'm definitely gonna try this winter anyway. So that's not a minute, you're in the water for about 20 minutes there doing that but you're focused on the swim and, something you do in a much safer environment than the highest loch in Scotland. There's a lot of potential jeopardy involved in doing it up there.

John McLuckie: 12:53

Absolutely, yeah. And I was going to ask you as well about your ambassadorial role for wild swimming and what the benefits are of being an ambassador.

Calum Maclean: 13:01

Yeah, so I'm an ambassador for the Outdoor Swimming Society, which is effectively an organisation that attempts to promote outdoor swimming, encourage it, educate about it, campaign for it too. Scotland's in a great position when it comes to outdoor swimming because of our access laws and

our outdoor access code, which allows us to access within reason, any body of water, as long as you're doing it responsibly. Not canals and not ponds in someone's garden and something like fishing ponds, you wouldn't go and swim in a private fishing pond. But they don't have that in England and Wales, for example, the access laws are just crazy, to my view. And I think I want to do more about helping to explain that and helping to maybe give people in the rest of the UK an opportunity to see what we've got in Scotland and whether it's something that they can benefit from, but I think as well as that being an ambassador for the Outdoor Swimming Society, it's good opportunity to encourage people to do it, educate people on why it's good, the benefits of it, some amazing cool places to go to. But also, I think, as I get older, as I do more of it, I'm thinking more about safety, too, because every year, there's always incidents involving outdoor swimming, whether people plan to be in the water or not is always a question. Often people get in difficulty in cold water, it's because they didn't plan to be in the water in the first place. I think we've got to teach them how to do it safely and how to build up to doing it in much colder water, how to build up to doing their longer distances, how to build up to swimming out to islands in the middle of a loch, and not being worried that something's going to go wrong. I think that is being an ambassador and is effectively what it's about, it's not like a paid role or anything like that and I don't really get free gear or anything from the Outdoor Swimming Society, it's all about just encouraging more people to do it, and to learn about how best to do it. Because for example, winter swimming, compared to summer swimming, it's a whole different sport, almost and there's a lot of people who will right about now, the start of October just hang up their wetsuits for the rest of the year. But since swimming pools at the moment is not so much of an option, you know, the numbers are much reduced, even if pools are open, more people will be swimming outdoors through winter, the more people we can get doing it safely, taking the right precautions and enjoying it, then I think that's all the better and it's a world that keeps growing. And it's gonna keep growing even more next year I think too.

John McLuckie: 15:07

That's great. It's something I've tried myself as well, so maybe this winter I might get back in.

Calum Maclean: 15:11

Good

John McLuckie: 15:12

I was just gonna ask you finally Calum, what's next for Caldamac?

Calum Maclean: 15:16

Yeah, so @caldamac. It's like an old email address I had so when I started with social media it's what I used and then I feel like I should change it to something more adult but you know, whatever, I'm gonna leave it now. What is next? I'd like for a personal project, swimming an ice kilometre over winter. Whether I get that officially ratified, you know there's like governing bodies who can do that is something that I'm not sure about. I'm just gonna do it for myself. In terms of work, more presenting, I'm doing more filming for BBC Alba, kind of as we speak. With the current regulations,

it's very tricky to organise things for the filming. But there'll be a new programme coming out later this year, not involving outdoor swimming, but involving the Scottish outdoors and exploring places. Basically, what I want to do is be outdoors and be creative and if I can keep combining those two things in some way, and particularly through visual stuff, so whether it's filming, whether it's my photography, and whether I can combine that somehow with a bit of writing. That's something that I've thought about the last wee while. I think that's something I'm gonna explore particularly over this winter. So being outdoors, being creative, putting the two together. If I'm doing it in English, if I'm doing it in Gàidhlig, bringing some knowledge or bringing a wider view, so people can just experience a bit of Gàidhlig as part of it. I always try to fit that in as well, because I come from the Highlands and I've grown up speaking Gàidhlig, it's natural to me, but the vast majority of people in Scotland never come across Gàidhlig in their daily lives, don't know anything about it, maybe don't know what it's all about, so the more I can give them a little insight, a little taste of it, find out what it's about, maybe pique a wee bit of knowledge amongst some people. That's part of what I try and do as well.

John McLuckie: 16:41

Fantastic. Well, that's that's been fascinating to talk to you Calum, thanks so much for taking part in the podcast, thank you.

Calum Maclean: 16:47

Thank you. Thanks a lot, John.

John McLuckie: 16:48

We hope you enjoyed this podcast and remember that after you've completed your qualification at UHI you are a graduate for life and that means that you can access careers and employability guidance whenever you need it. Students and graduates can get in touch via the Future Me platform at targetconnect.uhi.ac.uk, or by emailing careers@uhi.ac.uk. For more information please visit the UHI website and search careers.