ROWING NOTES for the Coxswain

By Mark Dacombe

THE COX

The Cox is the most important person in the boat – he/she must;

- be responsible / cautious
- have quick reactions
- be in total control of the crew
- be the eyes and ears of the coach
- be dedicated to making the crew perform as a unit
- be assertive
- earn, maintain and have the crew’s respect
- be dedicated to winning

A good Cox is all of the above while a ‘very good’ Cox has a ‘feel’ for the boat as well. Feel is something that takes a lot of ‘on the water’ experience with boats and rowing in general. Certainly by the end of your first season, you should have some feel for the boat.

- Firstly learn how to steer the boat,
- To this you must learn various commands to make things happen in the boat, and;
- Finally you must learn to deliver commands in such a manner that they are quickly obeyed and inspire confidence in the crew.

The Cox should add significant value to the crew. The Cox needs to appreciate that the crew (especially if inexperienced) want and need a leader and without one will flounder. The Cox provides firm guidance to the crew in harmony with the coach’s ambitions for the crew.

Rowers need to think about transferring power efficiently and effectively into the boat to propel the boat forward, so they rely on the Cox to look after everything else. Rowers want a Cox who knows what needs to be done, and who tells them what they have to do to excel.

To be a good Cox you must be trustworthy, never lie. Learn as much as you can about rowing technique, and learn the coach’s methods. Be an extension of the coach and be your own tactician. Analyse all situations, anticipate what may be required and then act! Always apologise when you make a mistake, don’t hide or blame someone else. Learn from your mistakes and remember them for the future - be willing to learn everyday.

As you gain experience and listen to what your coach has to say to the crew, you will gain a ‘rowing vocabulary’ and will learn what to say, when, and why. Always be positive especially when being constructively critical. Look out for the technical points that the coach is emphasising and remind the crew or individuals of those from time to time, where appropriate.

Your decisions and thoughts should begin to match those of your coach. You know what your coach expects and most of all you know how to maintain and develop the coach’s expectations in the crew.

Confidence in yourself creates a confidence in the whole crew. Most of all be calm and always think before you speak. Your voice controls your crews attitude to what they are doing. If your voice changes, that will signal the crew's mental thoughts to change and hence their rowing will change.

Timing and rhythm in your voice can create harmony, or discord in the crew. The Cox can do much for the crew by speaking/emphasising commands with alertness and rhythm which itself suggests life, control, discipline and enthusiasm. All commands must be delivered to suit the rhythm of the boat. Emphasise the catch and finish when speaking to reinforce the rhythm in the boat.

A good Cox can win a race for their crew, so work hard all the time!
STEERING

Always employ caution when leaving the pontoon and even more when coming back in.

Hold the steering cords between thumb and index finger inside the boat, with the remaining 3 fingers outside the gunwales. Moving your right hand forward will move the boat to the right (to bow side), while moving your left hand forward will move the boat to the left (to stroke side).

When maneuvering the boat, stop the boat just before it is pointing in the direction you want to go, its inertia brings it around the rest.

Always stay on the right hand (that's your right hand – not the rowers’) side of the river unless the coach tells you otherwise, and avoid boat washes (waves) where possible. When you approach a boat creating a large wash, stop and turn the boat side-on to the wash. When parallel to a wash/wave you lessen the stresses placed on your boat. This should also keep water out of your boat.

If it is low tide move cautiously, avoid the sandbars, mud-banks and small trees that are stuck in the mud along the bank. If the tide is good then keep it straight. Practice keeping the boat straight as on race day you'll need to instinctively keep your boat straight. Zig-zaging down a racecourse is unacceptable.

Steering In General;
- steer as little as possible
- slowly move the boat with the rudder - never jerk the rudder around
- always stay on the right side of the river
- check the width of the river before turning
- always employ caution (especially when navigating large washes)
- warn crew about side winds and all washes approaching

When you need to make a significant change in your course, warn the crew, and where you need the crews assistance to maneuver the boat, your command would be “lighten/shorten up on stroke side”, “bow side bring her round together” – “keep riggers down on stroke side – lateral pressure”. If you can’t make it STOP! Once you are straight call “Normal rowing/pressure both sides”.

EXERCISES

Once you’ve moved the boat away from the pontoon, your command to move the boat off and begin the warm up would be, “Stern pair (or four if you’re in an Eight), normal warm up, back-chocks rowing, square blades, arms only, (ask the question) are you ready, (look for everyone’s oars to be ready, with blades parallel and buried), then give the command, ‘row’”. Then move to add more and more of the rowing movement to each stroke. 10 strokes arms only, then arms and body swing, then with ¾ slide, then ½ slide, then ¼ slide, then full slide, then with the feather (normal rowing).

During a training session, you often do exercises (a few are listed below FYI). The order and amount can vary depending on the crew's ability and the coaches goals for the training session.

- Paused rowing (pausing at back-chocks with hands away and bodies leaning over, and / or at ½ slide, and / or at the catch)
- Inside hand only (the control hand – feathering)
- Outside hand only (the lever arm – square blades)
- Square blade rowing (both hands - no feather)
- Half Slide rowing (used to encourage speed/sharpness throughout the stroke)

Keep the exercises moving, if you stick to one exercise for too long the crew will loose focus and the goal of the exercise (to focus attention on one part of the stroke) will be lost.
COMMANDS

During exercises maintain concentration and ensure there is good control of boat, if the boat is tipping to one side – tell those not rowing to sit the boat up. This is done by the rowers who are not rowing raising/adjusting their hands slightly to keep the boat level.

When changing pairs/fours inform the pair/four not rowing to get ready, eg “Bow pair / four get ready” - or – “Stem pair / four get ready” (describe the exercise to them) “on the next stroke” – “change”.

When you would like your crew to stop rowing, the command is “Easy Oar” said at the catch to the finish of the stroke. Your crew should finish off the stroke they are on and pause with their hands away. Then your command to them (once the boat has run a little) is “Rest” whereby they lower their oar flat onto the water, and relax.

Your commands for the other exercises are the same, eg; “Crew get ready for (state the exercise, such as, “inside Hand only”) then after say 10 strokes back to “Normal Rowing”.

Or eg; “on the next stroke move to paused rowing at back chocks” (said very quickly but clearly) then at the catch of the following stroke say “CHANGE” (the Cox counts) “Pause-two-three-ROW”. The exercise continues for 10 strokes or so and then command “on the next stroke, Normal Rowing” (said at the catch) “change”.

CONTROL IN THE BOAT

Once in the boat plug in your Cox Box/PA (if you have one), check that it works and then get yourself into the most comfortable position. Make sure your weight is evenly balanced, foam can be placed behind your back (only) for comfort and don’t move around once you are in your position. The crew control the balance of the boat, you should not alter your position in the boat to try and correct the balance.

Controlling the boat is the responsibility of the individuals in it. The thought of “even hands heights” especially during the recovery and “moving off the back together” often helps the crew to sit the boat up. It also helps their rowing technique (skills) and “feel for the boat”.

THE STROKE

The following is what you, your coach and the crew are looking to achieve each stroke. Concentrate on the stroke you are on and preparing the boat for the next perfect stroke.

Listed below are points of the stroke you can focus on. You can also use the below as commands to encourage the crew and hone their focus on technique during a ‘piece of work’ or race.

MOVE OFF THE BACK TOGETHER
HANDS SPINNING AWAY
BODY OVER (hold the knees down)
LET THE KNEES COME UP STRAIGHT AS YOU MOVE DOWN THE SLIDE
CONTROL YOUR HAND HEIGHTS COMING FORWARD
SWING BODIES DOWN THE CENTRE LINE OF THE BOAT
CONTROL THE SLIDE
COMPRESS INTO THE CATCH
FEATHERING ONTO THE SQUARE - EARLY (gradually over the shins)
FEEL YOUR WEIGHT COMING ONTO YOUR FEET/TOES
PIVOTING FROM THE HIPS AROUND THE CATCH
SHOULDERS PARALLEL TO THE OAR
OUTSIDE ARM STRAIGHT/SHOULDER UP
INSIDE ARM SLIGHTLY BENT AT THE CATCH
LEANING SLIGHTLY INTO THE RIGGER (lateral pressure around the pin)
HANDS RAISING UP TO TAKE THE CATCH
PLACE THE BLADE AT THE CATCH (deliberately – take the catch)
NO PAUSE AT THE CATCH (get into the water smartly at the catch)
SQUEEZE THE CATCH
JUST COVER THE BLADE (with water)
DRIVING OF BOTH FEET
OPEN THE SHOULDERS (top of the shoulders behind the bum)
BALANCE AND POWER (outside arm working with the inside leg to drive the boat)
DRIVE WITH THE LEGS
DRAW THROUGH THE WATER (into your ribs)
PRESSING THE LEGS DOWN TOGETHER
ACCELERATING FROM HALF SLIDE (propel the boat from half slide to the finish)
DRAW THE FINISH ALL THE WAY IN (finish off each stroke with power)
SIT SQUARE AT THE FINISH (OR SLIGHTLY INTO THE RIGGER – work around the pin in an arc)
TAP DOWN (OUT) SQUARE TOGETHER (onto your thighs)
ROLL ONTO THE FEATHER
SPIN THE HANDS AWAY (QUICK HANDS AWAY – from the finish)
HANDS LEADING THE OAR HANDLE AWAY,

Remember, rowing is a continuous cycle (no pausing). 2/3rds of the race will be spent on the recovery so the crew must not disturb the path of the boat through the water during the recovery (accurate bladework).
RHYTHM AND LENGTH

Look for a rhythm in your crew that promotes ‘time on the slide’ or ‘time during the recovery’ (swing forward). Look for a recovery that takes up to twice as long to complete than the stroke (the movement of the blade through the water). You can count this to yourself (One Thousand, two thousand – catch to finish) versus, (One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four – finish, recovery to catch). Ask your coach to explain this concept to the whole crew.

When we talk about length we can be referring to an individuals (or crews) length of stroke through the water. Look for each crew member to be rowing a full stroke (oars parallel throughout the stroke) and not shortening up (going in or coming out of the water early) or rushing the slide during the recovery.

The length of the crew refers to how far they can push the bow puddle past you the Cox before taking the next stroke. Ask your coach to explain this to the whole crew.

RACING

Before a race be calm, if the aligner or starter is yelling at you to “touch your boat up” don’t panic, always keep relaxed, and tell your bow pair to touch your boat up in a calm voice. Exaggerate how calm you are – it promotes a calm and controlled feeling throughout the boat. The well being of your crew is in your hands. Only the bow pair should move the boat into position (on your instructions), the rest of the crew should be sitting at 3/4 slide ready to race (blades square and buried in the water).

Your hand should be raised in the air so the starter can see it (indicating to him, you’re not ready to race), until you are in position with a straight line to the finish. Once in position, indicate to your crew to be sitting ready at 3/4 slide, blades square and covered. Lower your hand (so the starter knows), you are ready!

Remember, if you are moving the boat or you are not ready, or you have a problem with the boat or your equipment, raise your hand so that the starter can see it. They should not start the race while you are not ready (indicated by your hand being in the air).

Should the starter not see that you are not ready however, he may start the race. If he starts the race, don’t panic, go with the other crews and focus on rowing your boat technically well to make up any ground that may be lost from a poor start.

If you find during a start practice one side is pulling the other around, don’t move your rudder to compensate before or during you start. Slowly and carefully, edge your crew back after the start.

When the starter and aligner call you up into position, remember to compensate/account for any side winds blowing you around at the start.

The command from the official regatta starter will be something like, ‘All crews, I have a line, ATTENTION, (pause) then a buzzer is usually used to signify the commencement of the race.

Call the crew through your racing start and into 10 quick strokes to get the boat up to maximum speed. Then use the next 10 to lengthen out and get into your race rhythm.

Throughout the race at predetermined intervals (say every 250m) as well as controlling your crew and encouraging them, you need to employ your tactical skills. Analyze where you are in the race, and inform the crew (eg; “we’re at the 250m, or 500m mark, etc). You also need to inform the crew of their length (where the bow puddle is versus where it should be), and inform the crew where they are versus the other crews in the race (eg ½ a length behind, in front etc).

Being a tactician involves taking various pieces of information and processing them so that you can (with experience) put your crew into a scenario where they can attack for the lead or have enough left in the tank to lift for home into the winning position.
Supposedly, this is the easiest course for the Cox. However, it creates the need for an awareness of your surroundings more than any other course. Familiarise yourself with the marks on your way to the start so you can judge the meters traveled yourself better in the race. Always try to make your estimates of distance to go as accurate as possible. Don’t say you have 500m to go and then a minute later say there is still 500m to go. Ensure the “lift home” is not said too early, but if you see another crew lifting, you must go with them/stay in contact.

**DON’T’S**

- don’t muck around
- don’t let other crews push you around at the pontoon or at the start
- don’t go too far away from the start unless you are sure you have plenty of time
- don’t answer back at officials
- don’t disobey orders from your coach or officials
- don’t get flustered
- don’t “stare” at lane ropes, or at the river bank – you’ll steer into them

**COACHING YOUR CREW DURING A ‘PIECE OF WORK’ OR RACE**

Choose only appropriate commands (prompts) to keep the crew thinking about various parts of the rowing cycle/stroke and recovery (swing forward). Too many mean nothing to the crew as does the one command said over and over again. Concentrate on a command or prompt to focus the crew on one part of the stroke for say 4 strokes then choose another.

Choose your commands carefully and annunciate them in time with the catch and/or the finish to emphasise the rhythm of the crew / boat.

Remember what your coach is seeking to achieve and reinforce those concepts into the crew at the appropriate times. Remember what the ‘perfect’ stroke looks like and feels like, and encourage perfect strokes and ‘togetherness’ by coaching or prompting the crew where appropriate.

The following are suggestions of different ways you can give a command to encourage a result. You will note that a lot of the commands are similar, while a lot of the commands that are appropriate at the beginning of a ‘piece of work’ are also appropriate near the end of the piece. Your crew needs to keep the power on at all times, working within their optimal capacity.

During a racing start or getting the boat moving from a standstill, commands like the following may well be appropriate. Think about ‘the train moving out of the station’ concept. The quicker your boat moves the quicker the crew can and should move, to further move the boat up to top speed (your coach will explain this concept to the whole crew).

*Building Race rythm*

**LONG STROKES**

ACCURATE STROKES NOW
MOVE THE BOAT THERE
ACCELERATE THE BOAT
SHARP CATCH’S THERE
DRIVE THE BOAT NOW
PUSH WITH THE LEGS
MOVE TOGETHER
POWER THROUGH THE WATER
SPIN YOUR HANDS AWAY
SPIN ROUND THE FINISH
MOVE FROM THE FINISH
CONTROL THE SLIDE NOW
ACCURATE STROKES NOW
CONTROL THE RECOVERY
LOOKING FOR LENGTH
Once you are into 'a piece of work' or into the first half of a race, commands like the following may be appropriate in order to inspire the crew to concentrate on consolidating the *rhythm* and *length* via:

**Acceleration** (around the back turn),
**Relaxation** (on the swing forward)
**Accuracy** (catch, finish & hand heights on the forward swing)

### Acceleration

- Spin around the back turn
- Move the boat
- Accelerate the boat
- Accelerate from half slide
- Squeeze through the water
- Spin away from the finish
- Spin your hands away
- Squeeze your catch now

### Relaxation

- Control the slide
- Finish together
- Into our rhythm now
- Focus in our boat now
- Come off the back together
- Control coming forward
- Move of the back together
- Moving there
- Look for the float
- Time on the slide
- Recover together
- Relax together
- Don’t pull on the toe straps
- Roll off the feather together
- Loose and easy – lazy and long
- Rate without rush
- Let her sail while you gather
- Let the boat do the work

### Accuracy

- Finish this one off
- Watch your hand heights
- Let the oar lead
- Square up over the feet
- Come out for your catch
- Place your blade there
- Sharp catches now
- Bladework there
- Be accurate with the oar
- Be aggressive with our style
- Perfect strokes
- Technical with our style
Once you're into the middle of a piece (or mid race), and you want to call the crew up for their first lift (increase in power, and often the rate might come up as well). Think about commands that inspire LEG DRIVE / POWER THROUGH THE WATER, SPINNING AROUND THE BACK and CONCENTRATION.

**Power**

- STEP UP TOGETHER
- STEP UP WITH PRESSURE
- POWER THROUGH THE WATER
- DRIVE YOUR STROKES THROUGH
- LEG DRIVE TOGETHER
- OPEN YOUR SHOULDERS AT THE CATCH
- DRIVE WITH THE LEGS
- SQUEEZE THROUGH THE WATER
- KEEP THE SQUEEZE ON HERE
- SQUEEZE THROUGH THE WATER
- ACCELERATE FROM HALF SLIDE
- ACCELERATE THERE
- MOVE THE BOAT
- SQUEEZE THERE
- LOCK ON TOGETHER
- REAL LEG DRIVE
- SWEEP THE BOAT AWAY
- THUD AT THE CATCH
- LIFT THROUGH THE MIDDLE
- PROPEL THE BOAT AT THE FINISH
- ACCELERATE THE BOAT

**Concentration**

- MOVEING TOGETHER
- COME ONTO YOUR TOES
- DRAW UP AT THE FINISH
- PRESS THE LEGS DOWN TOGETHER
- FINISH TOGETHER
- ACCURATE CATCHES NOW
- NO PAUSE AT THE CATCH
- SQUARE UP EARLY
- IN TOGETHER
- THINK ABOUT OUR BLADEWORK NOW
- ACCURATE RECOVERY
- CONCENTRATE ON THIS STROKE
- LIFT INTO THE WATER
- CONTROLL TO THE CATCH
- COME DOWN THE CENTREBOARD
- TIME ON THE SLIDE
- MOVE OFF THE BACK TOGETHER
- HOLD THE RHYTHM NOW
- OVER AND BEHIND TOGETHER
- CATCH IT TOGETHER
- TREAD – SWEEP - FLOAT
Then you WILL need a lift for home, or a final power burst to push your boat in front / to home. Commands that inspire the crew to WORK ON ACCELERATING THE BOAT and LIFTING HOME TOGETHER are appropriate. Remember there is no second chance when racing, you must "EMPTY THE TANK" and give it all you’ve got!

**Lifting**

LIFT FROM HERE  
LIFT TOGETHER  
LET'S MOVE THE BOAT NOW  
MOVE TOGETHER

**Acceleration**

QUICK HANDS ROUND THE FINISH  
SPIN OF THE FINISH  
SPIN AWAY TOGETHER  
FINISH THIS ONE OFF  
FINISH TOGETHER  
ACCELERATE THE BOAT

**Empty the Tank**

FINISH THIS ONE OFF  
MOVE THE BOAT TOGETHER  
SQUEEZE THE BLADE  
DRIVE YOUR FINISHES  
RIP THOSE FINISHES IN  
DRAW THE FINISH THOROUGH  
LEGS DOWN TOGETHER  
ACCELERATE FROM HALF SLIDE  
DRIVE FROM THE CATCH  
AGGRESSIVE THROUGH THE WATER  
POWER IT HOME NOW  
STRONG THROUGH THE WATER  
STAND ON THE FOOT STRETCHER

**REMEMBER - DO NOT STOP UNTIL YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY SURE YOU HAVE FINISHED!**
CREW ATTITUDE

The key to success is to take action!
Focus on the outcome (if action is taken - versus inaction)
Experience and action = outcome
Believe you can do it
Row in the ‘zone’
Success is 90% attitude and 10% skill
The correct/positive attitude will give you the ability to access your skills under pressure
Change the way you perform by changing the way you feel (attitude)
Manage the way you feel and perform by stepping outside your comfort zone and achieve what needs to be achieved.

A winner always works harder than a loser.
A winner keeps their rhythm and length, a looser paddles light and/or short.
A winner paces/rows within themselves, a looser goes flat out and then exhausted, does nothing.

A winner has power/stamina, skill/oarsmanship, and passionate determination.
A winner shows leadership throughout the entire race from the moment its ‘hands on the boat’.