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Coaching the Coxswain

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Introduction

The coxswain is the individual who leads the crew from within the boat and steers the boat. The novice crew's success can depend as much on a well-prepared coxswain as it does on the technical performance of the crew. The coxswain clearly plays an essential role in the psychology of the team, maintenance of the equipment, and effectiveness of the workout session.

This chapter will explore the coach's responsibilities in recruiting, training, and molding a coxswain to work effectively with the crew.

Recruiting the Coxswain

How does one recruit a coxswain? Look for winners. Look for people who are the correct size (generally 100 pounds for women and 110 pounds for men) and who are self-confident and success-oriented. The psychological demands of coxing are powerful. Timid, withdrawn persons might be able to steer the shell and say all the right things, but they will never be able to cox. The ability is inherent, a derivative of the whole personality. Good coxswains are self-starters, they are not easily intimidated, and they know how to learn on their own. Coaches should be as aware of the personality as they are of the size and girth of potential recruits.

Describe coxing in such a way that the recruit catches a glimpse of how exciting and challenging it can be. Coxswains are called to be strategists, decision makers, leaders, and surrogate coaches. If the task is described in these terms, and the recruits have the personalities to see themselves in such roles, then the recruits are hooked. It is probably best to use senior coxswains in the recruiting process; they

can relate to the challenges in a more direct way than the coach, and they serve as role models.

The Psychological Challenges

The coach must understand the psychological challenges of the coxswain. First, coxswains are short people in a sport of tall people. Second, coxes are the only people in the boathouse who are not there to learn to row. The coach's focus is on recruiting and training tall people to row. A boathouse can be a lonely place for a new person, and coaches should be mindful of this, especially in the early weeks of the fall when chaos reigns as schedules and boatings are being resolved.

Many would-be coxswains, with enthusiasm and ability, will not be inclined to come back if the coach seems preoccupied with the rowers. The unfortunate way in which most coxswains are chosen is by natural selection. The recruits who are stable or crusty enough to handle being ignored endure, and they get the seats.

Many coaches complain of shrinking pools of potential coxswains. These complaints may indicate that the coaches did not pay enough personal attention to the potential coxes who appeared in the first week.

The Coxswain and the Equipment

Coxswains have certain duties, and these are usually impressed upon them during the first outing on the water: launching, dealing with wind, landing, and finding their own roles.

Launching

This process involves moving the shell out of the boathouse and into the water. The following steps should be adopted.

1. Have the crew count down, from the bow. This serves to alert them that they are about to handle the shell.

2. Command: "Hands on."

3. Command: "Walk it out, " or some variation appropriate for the rack structure of the given boathouse. Through one means or another, the cox must get each rower opposite his or her rigger.

4. The coxswain should hold the end of the boat that is farthest into the boathouse. As the rowers walk toward the dock they will have the tendency to swing the shell to one side. If the boat has not yet cleared the doorway, severe damage could result. The crew should be told to walk straight until the coxswain orders them to "swing the bow" (or stern).

5. Command: "Set it in." When the shell is being placed in the water, the coxswain should stand at the stern to prevent the rudder and fin from hitting the dock.

6. When the shell is in the water and rowers are fetching oars, the coxswain should stay with the boat. This prevents the shell from being rubbed against or thrown upon the dock by wind or passing wake.

7. When the oars are in the locks and the gates secured, then the coxswain must get the crew in the shell, either by directing alternate sides to be seated or by having the whole crew kick away from the dock. In either case, the crew should shove away only on the coxswain's command, given only when the coxswain has checked for other boat traffic or surprise wakes.

8. The coxswain should have the stern pair ("stern pair to row, ready, row") or stern four lightly paddle the shell away from the dock. Then the crew can put on socks, tie in, and go through the other preparatory rituals. When the crew is fully tied in and ready ("tie in and count down when ready"), the practice can begin.

Commands should be as brief and direct as possible. For instance, "Over the heads, ready, up!" is preferable to "Okay now, we're going to take it up over the heads, do it together, over the heads in two, ready, one, two." When it comes to the number of syllables and/or words, fewer is better.

Coxswains and Safety

Coxswains are in charge of the safety of perhaps nine lives and up to $20,000 in equipment while the crew is on the water. They must be vigilant against the unseen dangers that will undoubtedly befall every crew. Let there be no understatement here. The sport of rowing has

claimed lives. It is very easy for the coxswain to concentrate too much on the crew and not see a log, buoy, or another crew dead ahead. Also, if the crew is stopped and the coach is talking, the coxswain must be mindful of the shore or bridge or any other surrounding danger. Coaches should instruct new coxswains to interrupt **any** oration by any coach if they perceive some danger. This understanding can only be provided by the coach, publicly, in front of all the athletes.

Wind is usually a factor. A coxswain has to deal with it daily. The shell should always be turned around **into** the headwind. If two crews are practicing together, they should turn in the **same** direction, simultaneously, to prevent a collision. Unfortunately, dealing with wind is a learned skill. Often coaches want flat water for a practice, but only windy conditions will allow the coxswain to learn. The coxswain can hardly be blamed on a windy race day if windy conditions have been consistently avoided during practice.

The **landing** of a shell by a novice coxswain is often needlessly stressful. When possible, the shell should be landed **into** the wind or current. The crew should be slowly paddled to the dock by the stern four and the coxswain should presume that something will often go wrong. A rower will not sit still and the boat will fall over to one side possibly smashing the oars on that side against the dock, or the shell will not steer quickly enough to avoid landing on the dock. The list of landing mishaps is endless. The damage can be serious and is completely unnecessary.

The coxswain must be told that speed in approaching a dock is dangerous. Dockside blades should be placed "tip down" after landing to spare the paint on the back side of the oar.

The Coxswain and the Coach

The desire to "do something," rather than just sit, is symptomatic of the overall psychological challenge of coxing. Coxswains need to find, and work at, a role. The handling of the equipment is the first role they discover. Many coxswains never advance beyond that level, and the fault may well lie with the coach.

If the coach does not personally supervise the coxswains' initial attempts to get the boats in and out of the water, then the role is perceived as being unimportant and taken for granted. Yet, coxswains want to do more than merely guard equipment from damage. It is at this point, perhaps after the second or third outing, that the coach's handling of the coxswains is crucial.

Presumably, most coaches want coxswains who will be more than custodians of equipment. Coaches who complain that their coxswains are little more than custodians, however, reveal the presumption that "good" coxswains just appear, with talent and abilities already formed. This is naive. If coaches spent as much time and devoted as much attention to their coxswains as they do to the rowers, the results would be very different. The key to producing outstanding coxswains lies in the attitude of the coaches toward the coxswains. Here are four suggestions.

Future Role of the Coxswain

Early in coxswains' careers, coaches should tell them that they are later going to be expected to do much more than get the crew away from the dock, or avoid logs, or steer straight. The coxswains should be told by the coaches that they can later fill the unique combined role of motivator and technician. Analytical skills and decision making will be required. The coxswains should be patient, because they will lose the respect of the crew if they attempt a skill or strategy prematurely. We are talking here about a relationship that takes years to develop.

Coxing the Rowing Technique

The first area of instruction, after boat handling and steering, is the rowing style itself. It is best to have coxswains row in a barge or training shell for a few sessions at the start of training so that they develop a manual familiarity with the basic motions of rowing.

More importantly, the coach must remember that the coxswain will learn primarily by watching and listening. The coxswain must be constantly alert to everything that the coach says. The coxswain can only see one rower, several heads, and lots of oars. Therefore, until the coxswain learns what the various movements of the oars represent, the cox will have to memorize the coach's comments to the various rowers. Most coaches never talk to the coxswains, and consequently many coxswains never pay attention. They sit there, looking at the scenery, thinking private thoughts, disconnected from the very system they are so able to help.

Coaches always like to assume that they are being listened to. They should always resist that assumption when it comes to the coxswains. The coach should have the coxswains memorize the main comments which the coach makes to each rower on a given day. The coach could spend 10 minutes with the coxswain after practice going over each person in the crew and reviewing the main problem each rower had that day. The reminders should be written down by the

coxswain. After a week of this the coxswain will be able to make specific comments rather than the general sort of comments ("set it up") that frustrate so many rowers.

While on the water, the coach might tell the coxswain to keep an eye on a given rower's technique. It is important to let the crew see the coach delegating the eventual coaching role of the coxswain. If the rower hears the coach instructing the coxswain to mention several points about the rower's technique, then the coxswain's right to offer comments is given legitimacy. It also forces the coxswain to see and think about what is being said by the coach. The coach should occasionally speak to oarsmen through the coxswain.

Asking Questions

The coxswain must be encouraged to ask questions. One of the most beneficial learning experiences for the coxswain is to see a practice from the launch. Novice coxswains should spend several days in the launch before being given a shell to command. Where possible, coxswains might be rotated through the coaching launch during practices.

The coach should spend a minute or so before practice explaining the nature and purpose of the practice session. Then the coach might spend several minutes after practice hearing the coxswain's perceptions of what took place. The actual value of what the coxswain sees may be minimal at first. However, a prudent coach invests time and attention in a future coxswain who will later offer a second pair of experienced eyes to the coaching task.

MVP

Coxswains are not managers or valets. Coaches should come to realize that the coxswain has the potential to be one of the most valuable members of the crew. For coaches who were former rowers this represents a significant psychological challenge. Coxswains should not be asked to paint oars, fetch towels or coffee, or do other tasks that coaches would not do themselves. If coaches want coxswains who are happy members of a cohesive crew, then they must demonstrate as much respect for the tasks and needs of the coxswain as for the stroke or five seat. If the coxswains perceive that they are viewed as mindless slaves or lower forms of life in the athletic ecosystem, then they will not grow to the enormous capabilities that they could have. They will often quit to find more satisfying roles elsewhere.

Steering and Boat Handling

The coach should expect good steering to develop over time, as the coxswain gains experience and the crew increases in cohesiveness.

Hull Response

In eights, depending on the manufacturer, the time lag between rudder application and hull response is from three-fourths of a stroke to one and a half full strokes. Fours are more responsive, making them more difficult to keep straight. Most new coxswains overcompensate in their steering. When they do not see immediate responses, they steer again. The result of the first application appears, but the continued use of the rudder causes the shell to yaw too far so the coxswains do the same thing in the other direction. The result is the familiar serpentine course of graceful parabolic curves.

To prevent this, the steering mechanism itself should be **quite taut**. The coxswains' bodies must remain stationary while remarkable forces flow around and through them. The physical demands of coxing (*i.e.*, being part of a fixed system that is accelerating and decelerating approximately 35 times a minute), would surprise anyone who has never had the experience. The check in the run of the boat created by the rowers' body weights reversing direction is acutely felt in the coxswain's seat. If the rudder mechanism is even slightly loose, coxswains can unintentionally move the rudder in trying to stabilize their own bodies. Therefore, the steering arrangement should be of rack-and-pinion sensitivity.

Anything that prevents coxswains from having a tactile appreciation of just where the rudder is, and how much it has been moved, introduces a dangerous variable. Coaches spend hours dealing with rigging so as to make rowers comfortable and to enhance their performance, but the ninth seat in the boat never gets rigged. A coach should make sure that the steering mechanism is precisely positioned for the individual coxswain.

Keeping Still

The coxswain's body movements in the boat represent another variable which needs to be considered. Movement in the stern not only influences a crew's balance, but it also forces the rowers to adjust continually to variables they cannot control. The coxswain must keep his or her body stationary, and avoid the temptation to act as the *great balancer* by throwing his or her legs or shoulders from side to side. In effect, the coxswain must resist his or her own natural sense of balance. If the coxswain grips the gunwale and the steering line simulta-

neously, then his or her stability can be enhanced. This is accomplished by placing the little and ring fingers on the outside of the gunwale, and the middle and index fingers on the inside where they can hold the steering line along with the thumb.

By both tightening the steering line and limiting the coxswain's movements, the coach can demand that the coxswain be quite deliberate in his or her attempts to steer. All steering should be that: deliberate, intended movement of the rudder and not involuntary physical response to the forces operating upon the coxswain's body.

Steering Practice

In explaining steering, coaches usually advise coxswains to steer directly toward a distant target, failing to realize that the target disappears behind the head of the stroke. It is more helpful to explain that the target will not be seen when the boat is on course. The coxswain can see the items that appear on either side of the target and maintain a median course between them. Also, the stroke should assist the coxswain by noting the target that falls in line with the coxswain's head and the stern post and mentioning, in a helpful manner, any deviations in the course.

As a steering exercise, the coxswain can refrain from using the rudder for a given piece. If the crew naturally pulls straight, then it will show the coxswain just how straight a boat will steer over a long stretch, illustrating how little steering is actually necessary. If a boat tends to pull in one direction, particularly with a novice crew, the coach and coxswain can identify a rower who is being outpulled. A good coxswain may unintentionally hide what is really happening.

Unfortunately, self-appointed authorities in the crew often hurl insults at the coxswain because of his or her steering, wrongly presuming that it is the simplest of tasks. A coach should immediately respond when someone from a crew yells at a coxswain in a derisive tone of voice. If a coach permits disrespect it will only grow. If the coach publicly acknowledges the difficulties of steering, the task will be regarded as an athletic skill. In the same spirit that coxswains should be taught to row, making a rower sit in the coxswain's seat and cope with steering the boat can be quite an instructive experience.

A coach who has not offered any comments or help on the steering during practice probably has little right to criticize the coxswain when the steering falters on race day. The coach should note the coxswain's performance in steering during practice, and give that performance the same attention given to the technical performance of any rower.

The Coxswains in Practice

Coxswains are the measures of time and space. They control the parameters of work that are prescribed by the coach.

Counting

One of the most important and most overlooked aspects of coxing is the simple ability to count. There are few things a crew hates more than rowing 45 strokes when members were asked by the coach to row 40 strokes, particularly at full intensity. In such an error the crew correctly perceives that the coxswain is somewhat indifferent to the pain involved.

Coxswains should count in sets of 10, and they should get into the habit of constantly counting to themselves, over and over, until they get a feel for the rhythm of 10-stroke cycles. A 20-stroke piece should be counted as two 10-stroke sets. One should never hear "14."

Measuring

An important parallel skill is the ability to accurately estimate distances. The coxswain who estimates "20 more" and then requires 30, has again earned the fury of the crew and lost credibility. These skills of counting and estimating distances are basic skills which require **constant** checking. One coach suggests making coxswains row a race piece on an erg and then letting them experience a "revision" of the number of strokes remaining at the end of the piece, so that they can appreciate the importance of these skills.

The coach should challenge the coxswain to pick a point and guess the number of strokes it will take to reach it. Only when coxswains can measure distances accurately should they be permitted to say "20 more." If a race is close and the coxswain has a reputation for miscalculating distances, the crew might distrust anything he says about the number of strokes to go. This very doubt might deter the rowers from spending every last ounce of energy.

Summary

The coxswain will be as good as the coach expects, when the proper investments of time, energy, and concern are made. When a crew loses a close one, the coxswain's performance invariably comes under close scrutiny and criticism; when the crew wins, it is usually easy to pretend that the coxswain had nothing to do with it. The coach should do better than that; scrutiny and criticism should take place

during the practice and not after the race, and credit should be given where credit is due. The habits and patterns of the first year of coxing show up with consistency as the coxswain matures; therefore, the coach's job should be done correctly from day one.