

Technique and coaching

Having seen the great results by the crews at the Henley some of you may be wondering just what it was that made them so much better than the competition. Was it they were fitter than the rest of the field? Possibly but doubtful! Were they stronger than the other crews? They could have been but that is by no means certain. Were they more motivated? Now we are starting to get there. Did they have better technique? Probably! Was it a combination of these factors? What do you think? Is there a chance that the coaches had something to do with it?

Let's have a look at how coaching can turn an average crew in to a great one. We can leave aside the strength and fitness side of things at the moment because they go without saying. If you haven't done the miles then you can never really succeed. This leaves the technique. Very rarely will someone have sufficient natural ability to do without external input so coaching is the only way to improve.

First of all, let's make a few assumptions. The boat is set up right, the riggers are the correct height, the span has been correctly set and the inboards are the right gearing. Then let's assume, the crew are in the correct seats to make the most of their size, ability to follow or keep time or steer. Now all we have to do is think about the technique. Easy! There are only the catch, the drive, the finish and the recovery to think about. Four things and most of us can focus on two things when rowing or if you are good at multi-tasking maybe three. So three out of four during an outing is not bad is it?

If only it were that simple.

Let's have a look at the stroke and see the things that need to be right. At the catch are you thinking are your arms straight, blades square, hand levels right, are you fully extended, not over reaching, at front stops and back straight, head up, are you gripping too tight? That's nine things to think about and the blade hasn't even got wet yet.

Let's look at the drive. Are you thinking about locking on, getting your catch in quick and smooth, ensuring you are not bum shoving, drawing the blade through level, automatically adjusting hand levels to correct balance, arcing your back through the drive to get the maximum blade speed, not digging too deep. That's another seven things.

Then you have the finish. Are you focussing on accelerating the stroke at the end of the drive, are you ensuring that the finish becomes a smooth transition from the drive, thinking about drawing the finish up high, remembering to not let your elbows go low or wide, not washing out, are you dropping your hands down smoothly, making sure the blade is still square on the release, not leaning back too far? That's another eight things!

Then we have the recovery. Are you remembering to get your hands away fast, checking your hand levels, remembering to keep both feet firmly pressed down to maintain the boat's balance, making sure your arms are straight and your hands are over your shins and the blade is starting to square in a smooth motion before you start to slide, is your back straight, are you thinking about controlling the slide speed, decelerating as you reach front stops, making sure that you are extended ready to take the stroke when you reach front stops? That's another ten things to be thinking about.

So in total, you have at least 30 things to get right during the stroke and that is before you have thought about keeping in time with the rest of the crew, what rate you are doing or how hard you are rowing. If you are racing, you also have to keep an eye on the other crew(s) and react to them without losing your focus.

Still think multi-tasking and being able to think of three things sounds good enough?

This is where coaching starts to show its worth. You cannot possibly think about all of those things and row at the same time. You need someone to provide objective input,, motivate you to improve, encourages you to get better, give reminders when you forget things, create a program for you to follow and set the right exercises to cure faults.

Although a coach can't focus on all of those things for the entire crew for the entire outing they can do a lot more than you. They can actually see what is going on in the boat. By instructing, watching and sometimes nagging a coach can get you to the stage where all of those things become second nature and you no longer have to think about them because they are happening automatically. When this happens the boat runs better, the crew look good, your technique does not break down when you are tired, you go faster and you can get on with rowing.

Go to regatta and you will soon notice that the crews that look good invariably are the ones that win. They won't be ergo monsters, gym junkies or weight lifters. They will be rowers who have got the right combination of fitness, strength, motivation and TECHNIQUE!

Find someone to coach you, hang on to them and remember that although they are volunteers, they are the only one who can help you. It doesn't matter if you are aiming to win at Henley, win your first "pot", beat the crew you lost to at a previous regatta or just want to make your rowing more enjoyable. Good coaching and good technique will help you achieve that goal.

Happy rowing

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