

Some Musings about Coxing!

Well this started off as a few ideas, but then they needed a bit of explanation and suddenly it's become quite a long document, sorry!! Most of this has a bumps-slant to it, although almost all of it can be applied to outings as well, and it's always best to practice things before using them in a race!

Race plans

A race plan is an essential tool for a good race. It needs to be structured enough to keep everyone on-board, but flexible enough for you to address what's going on around you and within your boat. I always race with a race-plan written out on a piece of paper, protected inside a plastic envelope, pinned to my trouser-leg, so it's easy to glance down and see what you're doing next.

Ask your crew for ideas and suggestions, either at the end of an outing or ask them to email you—things that they feel makes the boat go well, specific things that they find helpful individually, or calls that they find motivational. Try and use at least one suggestion from each person who contributes, as rowers aren't always very forthcoming!

Go through the plan with the crew beforehand; this so everyone knows what to expect—which then gives you more confidence and authority to demand it from them during the race, because they've agreed to it! It can be done just before you get in the boat, but it's sometimes better done a bit in advance such as at the crew meal, so if there are any last-minute suggestions I have a chance to write it into the final plan! It can either be just a discussion, or as a kind of "visualisation" where they close their eyes and you talk them through the story of how the race is going to go.

Here's an example of one of my bumps race-plans (Mays '05, a bit fuller than the version I had in the boat):

Start	Squeeze 2, Leg press 3, Power-through 2, Backs in 2, Sit-Back
	Commit to Impulse, In/Sting, Breathe
1 st Min	Settle onto strong rhythm, Push 5/Backs 5
	Working legs, stay loose
Motorway	Sharp catches in dirty water. Push off bridge 10, Match it for 10
	Rhythm, length-through. KILL CHRISTS
	{work through pairs}
1 st post	Bow 4 sharp, Stern 4 accelerate 10. B/3 sharp, 2/4 long
	All-8 Squeeze-out, set up rhythm
Grassy	Sharpen, lift in. B/3 bring round, ATTACK 2 nd apex, straighten
	STRONGEST MINUTE, Lift, Push cover out
	Show crowds what we can do, MAKE OR BREAK
Ditton	Accelerate in, sit up, BACKS-through, breathe
	New race, Stronger and fitter than Christs,
	Poise, Impulse, Backs.
	{build through the stroke}
	Break them, get angry, absorb their push then match it
Railway Bridge	Final push, Middle-4-move

Corners:

It's good to have a set routine for corners, so your crew know exactly how they're going to be, and you know exactly what you're going to get from the crew! The routine I always use involves Stern 4 giving a full 10-stroke lift into the corner, to get the boat-speed up before the rudder comes on and acts as a brake; Bow 4 should be sharp with their catches and clean with their finishes during this push. We then have a call like "Sitting up on the rudder" (or support the finishes on the rudder), 2 and 4 are asked to row long-and-strong to bring us round this corner, bow and 3 sharp and clean with early catches; then a bit of encouragement for 2 and 4 (that they're better than their opposite seat in the boat we're chasing, that they're giving me a better line on this corner than the people in front etc), then when we're almost straight I call for even pressure and an all-8 lift to push the corner away and get the boat moving again. Remember with the corners, to get a nice tight line and DON'T follow the boat in front! You can gain up to half a length by taking the corner better than them.

Work through the pairs:

Starting at one end of the boat, spend 5-10 strokes working with each pair and moving through the boat to add each extra pair's work to the ones before. Can be done just with catches (best started in the bows), or finishes (start in the stern), or a subtle building through the stroke by focussing on fractionally different parts of the "catch" process:

Bow pair:	Most important catches in the boat, set the balance for the whole stroke; strong backs, catch position, sharp and quick.
3+4:	Feel bow pair's catches, add yours to them; lock-on, toes, strong backs
5+6:	Feel bow 4's catches, add yours to them; spring off the catch, spring-back
Stern pair:	Feel for the catch, add yours to it; adding suspension through the stroke, squeeze-through, all the way to the finish

Build through the stroke:

Similar to the point just made, but using the whole crew: spend 5-10 strokes focussing on catches, then a set on legs, then a set on backs-through, then a set on sending the finishes, then a set on separation. Keeps their attention, gives you time to assess what's going on around, and will take up at least half the Reach (which otherwise can seem never-ending, especially if there are no other crews around you!).

Middle 4 move:

This can be really effective but needs to be practiced first to check how your crew responds!! The theory is that Middle 4, being the power-house of the boat, should be able to put down a LOT of power and bring the rate up a bit (usually up 2) to help finish a race. Stern pair need to focus on rowing long and loose, bow pair sharpening their catches, then call the Middle 4 push; after 5 strokes, ask outside 4 to back them up, and call for a whole-crew legs-10.

Motorway Bridge:

Obviously, where you're starting for the first day is far enough in front of the motorway bridge for it not to be a problem for you, but if you change divisions you may find yourself racing through it before the week is out! Under the motorway bridge becomes like a washing machine once half a dozen crews have raced through it, so you need to prepare your crew for this, get them to focus on clean catches as you pass through the bridge, and then use the bridge to push off as soon as possible. There's also the water-outflow a couple of lengths past the bridge, which can be quite alarming as the current catches your bows and pushes them towards the opposite bank—there's an instinctive tendency to try and steer yourself straight at this stage, but actually if you just leave alone for a minute, the current then does the same to your stern as you move past it, and straightens you up... so delay any steering until your whole boat has completely passed the outflow!

Making a difference

In feedback from rowers after races, even in the most responsive crews I've ever coxed, the overwhelming theme is that it's really hard for the brain to process what it's hearing while the body is working hard—and that if you say something once, only about two of your crew will register it. If you want to make your calls effective in a race (or even in a piece in an outing), you need everyone to respond to them together, which means you need a really structured approach!

Sets of 10 are a lifeline in all but the most elite of crews—they are a manageable length, everyone knows what they're supposed to be doing because you keep repeating it to them, and if you tell them the plan and then give them a "Go!", they should feel the change from the first stroke, which is quite rewarding! Some coxes say they don't like calling sets of 10 because they feel stupid calling out the same word each time or saying the numbers each stroke; while this may be true, most rowers would rather be sure there are exactly 10 strokes when you've promised 10! An alternative would be to call the focus on each stroke and pointing out "That's 5" at the half-way point and "That's 10" on the last one; works very nicely in outings, although again, in a race I would be worried half my crew might not hear the half-way point and stop putting the effort in by the time we get to stroke 7! Always count upwards, so it's like you're building up towards something, rather than a countdown which makes people want to stop afterwards.

Power-tens have their place, but in bumps it's all too easy for the adrenaline-fuelled power to be lost through the deterioration of technique, so pick the thing that seems to be the most problematic at the time, and take 10 strokes to try and improve it.

It's sometimes quite effective to use the first 5 to focus on fixing the problem, and then the second 5 to subtly bring the focus back to power. So you might say "Let's sort out the balance guys, and find our platform again; ten to focus on the finish; ready-Go!... Finish 1/Finish 2/3/4/5... looking good, Send 6/7/8/9/10".

Reading puddles like tea-leaves...

Even in a well-structured race, the minute-to-minute calls will need to address what's going on in the boat at the time. As a cox, we're a bit limited in what we can see of our rowers, so we have to decide what's wrong based on the feel of the boat and what we can see of their blades.

Here are a few examples of what you might see or feel, and what it might be a symptom of:

- Blades don't seem to have clearance from the water in early part of recovery, or the set is rubbish even straight after the finish: likely loss of tap-down so the blade is feathered out of the water at the finish rather than released square and then feathered. Often quite hard to spot the culprit at first, as it brings the boat down to that side and then all the blades are on the water! Calls for finishes, clean tap-downs, blade-work around the finish. Quick hands can help, if this is something you've worked on with your crew.
- Blades moving up and down during the recovery. Try and pinpoint which part of the recovery it's happening on (by watching what your stroke-man is doing when the wobble happens!) so you can say something like "we've got a bit of a wobble as the knees break,

focus on keeping your hands level while you separate”; even if you can’t spot exactly where it is, tell them it’s happening and how to fix it eg thinking about moving the blade in a line parallel to the edge of the boat or the water.

- Blades moving up in the air towards the catch (skying): usually because the rower’s using some extra back curvage to try and get more lean for more length, or is staring at his toes and his blade handle is heading that way as well. Calls for sitting up, heads up, heads level; then blades coming down to the water for the catch, blades square and ready for the catch, find the water.
- Not squaring up (can lead to crabbage!): the cox seat is by far the easiest place to judge this from, so you’re in the best position to spot this as it develops and remind them about early squaring before it becomes a problem. Again, “Square and ready for the catch” can be a useful phrase.

Staying Calm

Coxing can be really stressful, especially in races like bumps but also in outings where dozens of boats are fighting for space on the crowded Cam! Obviously safety is the top priority, and it’s very difficult to concentrate effectively on two things at once, so there’s a natural tendency for calls to stop while we try and figure out how to steer through a narrow gap between crews, where the other boats around us are, or exactly what’s going wrong with the crew’s bladework!

It’s useful to have a technique to give yourself a bit of time to think without leaving your rowers listening to silence and worrying what you might have been distracted by! An easy way of doing this is by calling something like a “finishes-10”, where you can let your voice go on auto-pilot giving the calls, while your head can concentrate on what you have to do next. Whether finishes is the biggest problem going on in the boat at the time is somewhat irrelevant—in an 8 there is bound to be someone who could do with thinking about it (!), and it keeps their minds in the boat.

You can get a lot of respect from a crew if you appear to be calmly coxing them along and calling them through a focus, and as you move along the river they gradually get a view of the carnage you’ve managed to navigate them through while they were completely oblivious!

Coxing vernacular

If you don’t already, it’s really useful to make a list of calls that you find work well for different problems in the boat—so you can read through it during your race preparation and have a variety of calls in your head when you need them. Here are a few examples, although obviously ones that you’ve been able to use in outings to reinforce a coaching point will be more effective in a race:

- Catches: quick-on, sharp, lock-on, sting
- Power: squeeze-through, suspend, long and strong, build-through, connect-through
- Finishes: sit up, send, clean, backs-through, support the finishes
- Separation: separate-away, move through the reference points together
- Timing/rhythm: Lock-through, lock/send, squeeze-smooth