

# Coaching Coxes

## What are the attributes of a good cox?

- Willing to turn up and cox and get cold in the winter
- Confident
- Able to use a range of tones of voice
- Competitive
- Able to multi-task
- Fairly intelligent with a good vocabulary
- Ideally smallish (but this is the least important attribute in a cox, especially for novices, particularly if you consider how many rowers are carrying excess weight, and NEVER even SUGGEST to a cox that they should diet). The majority of coxes, even at Henley Royal, are not racing on minimum weight.

## What is the cox's role? SMUT

- **Steering** (training and racing)
- Getting the most out of the crew work-wise i.e. **motivating** (training and racing)
- Getting the best out of the crew technically i.e. **uniting** (training and racing)
- In racing: **tactics** (delivery of the race plan and mid-race adaptation of it based on the environment)

## What constitutes successful coaching of a cox?

- Making the coach's role redundant: ultimately, you want the crew to row as well in the race situation when they can't hear you as they do when you're alongside them. The cox can play a key role in this. The coach is an external facilitator; the cox is a leader on the ground.
- Developing the cox's ability to steer, motivate unite, and be tactical
- Developing the key attributes of good coxes listed above

## Coaching steering

- Ensure they know that the rudder only goes on when the blades are in the water, and how to hold the strings in stern loaders. Little movements.
- Safety first.
- Teach the PRINCIPLES of how to deal with corners through teaching how to deal with the SPECIFIC challenges of your own river. In York these include things like the line between Lendal and Ouse bridges, the corner at the top of the uni straight, the corner at the bottom of the uni straight (both directions), the blue bridge bend.
- If a cox gets the line wrong, turn the crew round straight away, and go back and practice – you don't expect rowers to get it right without repeated practice. If they have had difficulty with a corner in the past, forewarn them in the outing about thinking about it in advance, and ensure you give them feedback on how they dealt with it once you have got past that place.
- For races in York, practice the relevant bit of course even if it means turning round more often in the outing.

## Coaching Motivating

- This is where you need to evaluate their tone of voice usage, but asking them to self-evaluate, and asking the rowers to evaluate them. Ultimately, it doesn't matter if the way they speak drives you up the wall, if it works for the crew.
- Ensure they understand the power of praise
- As they get to know the crews better, reminders of past successes and failures can be hugely motivating

- Goal-setting in racing and training can be hugely motivating, and should stick roughly to the SMART principles for good goals of being Specific, Measurable, Agreed (this one doesn't apply so much – coxing is a benign dictatorship not a democracy), Realistic, Timely e.g. rather than just “Harder, Go”, (in a head race) “Let's take half a length of the crew in front on the next 10 strokes with the leg drive, Go”, and even things like doing 10 strokes square blades without hitting the water rather than “let's improve the balance this outing”.
- If you have the luxury of more than one coxed crew, it can be very helpful for the coxes to do competitive side by side (for matched crews)/processional (for unmatched crews work) to get them used to dealing with having other boats nearby. This kind of atmosphere also generally encourages coxes to rise to the challenge of “looking after” their crew – ensuring they get the best start position, push on for the best line on bends etc. You can't expect them to think about these things in a head race if they don't do it in training. This kind of situation can be daunting for the inexperienced, and it needs to be firmly managed to ensure that it remains safe (e.g. round corners), but it also develops their multi-tasking skills.

### **Coaching Uniting**

- This is all about turning your cox into an on-board coach. The contribution a cox can make to how a boat is going technically, is pretty much the same as that a coach can make, with the possible exception of some body angle areas for improvement.
- Deliver the personal and crew technical changes you want the rowers to make through the cox – it is at least as essential that they understand what is needed as the rowers – and ensure that the cox can identify the fault, and identify when it is better. As them if they can feel the difference once it is made? If not, get the rowers to revert (even exaggerate) and then improve again.
- If you spot an area for improvement, ask the cox what they think about how the rowers are doing it e.g. how well do you think the blades are coming down to the catch/the hands are going away together at the moment? You can also ask them to evaluate things that are going well, as this develops their ability to deliver informed compliments. In front loaders, make sure that you are asking them what specific points FEEL like e.g. are the rowers opening up their body angles together/leaving backstops together/lurch their weight over into the catch?

### **Coaching tactical awareness**

- All good crews use race plans
- All very good crews can adapt them to the circumstances
- Inexperienced coxes need to PRACTICE the plan in advance (as well as write it down) so don't keep it under wraps till the day.
- Good coxes need to be constantly evaluating whether the circumstances mean that the plan should be altered (e.g. a push put in a little earlier, or delayed to deal with a technical problem first) or changed (a push abandoned or inserted)
- Get your cox used to using a “piece plan” in training, and they will learn a) to get used to memorizing them and b) how you are constructing the plan and will therefore be better able to adapt the plans sensibly and construct them themselves. Ask your cox to confirm to you before the piece starts what the plan is.
- When evaluating side-by-side races or pieces, either successful or unsuccessful, after the event, ask the cox how aware they were of the other crew's pushes. Explain to them the benefits of containing the opposition's push and then unleashing their own 10 strokes later, or as planned in the race plan. Generally, it is better to row your own race than react to someone else's.
- Every race brings up its own scenarios – the more your cox can race (whether formally or informally) – the better.

### **Why do rowing clubs rarely have enough coxes?**

- Coxing is an activity which requires someone who does not want to do an active sport to join a sports club.
- But clubs do get people who are willing but don't inspire them to stay. Coxes are often ignored by coaches until it is too late to make the improvements that will let them contribute positively to their crew, or even verbally abused for not being good at their job, despite the fact that they are rarely coached
- One reason for this is that the majority of coaches are (understandably) ex-rowers and often know very little about coxing
- Actually, investing time in coaching a cox may have more effect on your crew than spending the same time in the rowers

### **So where do you find these people?**

- Goodness knows - if it were that easy, clubs wouldn't have problems finding them.
- Children of older club members can be a good source – no problems with their parents wanting to drive them around, but they tend to grow too large after a few years (having rower-sized genes). Still I know one adult world gold medalist rower who was also a junior international cox at the age of 14, having first got in a boat at the age of a few months. Don't expect children under the age of about 12 to be able to concentrate long enough to cox a four or 8 safely, but take them out in the launch (can be considered fun in itself), and if you can get them out in a tub or dinghy earlier, all the better.
- Impress on your rowers that they need to consider if any of their friends would like to learn to cox.

### **Rowers' responsibilities towards their cox**

- Stroke (in stern loaders) or bow (in front loaders) is responsible for telling their cox IN GOOD TIME if a crew (or other boat) is coming up behind them, though coxes are responsible for checking behind them before easying. People who row at bow a lot tend to know this, but even quite experienced rowers have to be reminded that they need to do so.
- Thank them for coxing after AFTER outing. It doesn't matter how well or badly they coxed, the rowers would not have done the outing without them.
- When doing pieces in a pack, rowers should remember that coxes in front loaders have NO visibility behind them and so shouldn't be expected to know that small boats are there just because they're coxed
- NEVER throw your cox in after a race.
- Coxes are people not equipment, so a club's lower crews do not have the right to request that the top crew's cox should cox them for one or more outings just so that they can learn, although a cox may look generously on a POLITE request for this. That is the job of the coach. Equally, coxes and crews have to learn together: a club's novices might well train and race better with their Elite crew's cox, but then they'd probably do so if they had the elite crew's stroke.... And 3 and 2 and bow etc...., where does it stop?

### **What are coxes NOT responsible for?**

- Rigging the boat
- Carrying blades
- Gearing blades
- Washing the boat

They are not “equipment” like boats to be used whenever the rowers want. And should never be expected to pay much in membership – I know of several instances of crews (mostly veterans) and clubs who pay their coxes – competent ones are the scarecest resource.

Having said that, it’s not difficult as a cox to make yourself “invaluable” without becoming a skivvy. E.g. I always carry:

- A bum bag with tools (more than just one rigger jigger – a single spanner isn’t a massive help when rigging an 8) including a large adjustable for backstays/bottom nuts (again, the rigger jigger carried by rowers is useless), measuring tape and Phillips AND flathead screwdrivers, electrical tape (a rower with blisters will love you forever), a swiss army penknife ( innumerable uses), an electrical flathead and phillips screwdriver (lots of uses), pliers (for loosening over tightened stretchers), and a hand-held ratemeter/stopwatch. Heavy, but worth it.
- At races, I also carry painkillers for headaches, antacid tablets, things to tie back hair with (women’s crews), a couple of extra water bottles.
- Bringing a packet of chocolate biscuits to head races for eating while de-rigging is also often popular.
- Lights for winter outings (yes, the batteries cost money, but it’s not as if we pay entry fees for races even though we still get pots).
- I always have a copy of the draw: it’s my job to know the station at a regatta, or clubs of crews round about us in head races. If you are the person who has all of the answers outside the race, rowers will expect to look to you for the answers in a race – and you’ll have them eating out of the palm of your hand.
- For the same reason, remind your cox that while they are rarely too hot while coxing, and won’t tend to change temperature during an outing, rowers do warm up and need to take tops off. If the cox controls how this happens, it underlines their total control of the whole boat, so the cox should ask the stroke/the whole crew while rowing if anyone wants to take tops off, and if there is a “yes”, stop for them, they will be grateful that you are focused on them. But if you just easy for other reasons, they will start taking their tops off of their own free will, and the implication is they can do what they want not what the cox wants.

### **Coaching more experienced coxes**

As it is often hard to hear what a cox is saying during pieces, seek information from the rowers after pieces or at the end of the outing. Specifically, ask about:

- **CONTENT:** What did the cox say that helped you/you liked (NB focus on the positive first)
- Anything they said that you would really rather they didn’t say?
- Anything they didn’t say that you would have liked them to?
- **QUANTITY:** Were they saying about the right amount/too much/too little?
- **DELIVERY:** Was the tone of voice sufficiently encouraging? And did it vary?

As with all coaching, try to give the cox a **POSITIVE OBJECTIVE** to do in their next piece/outing rather than just telling them what they did wrong. Ensure you then gain feedback from the rowers (unless you can tell yourself) after the piece/outing as to whether the cox did it better (e.g. use more varied tones of voice, remember all elements of the race plan, do enough warm up, tell them where the other crew was if staring ahead of them in apiece, take a particular bend more correctly etc)

When you are working with a cox who is familiar with the full range of commands, and has done some racing and can steer reasonably well, the area of improvement they will probably need to focus on most is FEEL i.e. feeling where the greatest area for improvement will be in the stroke, and calling for that to be changed. This is hard to learn, but focus on it will help a lot so when a coach identifies what needs to be changed, ask the cox if they can feel what

should be improved, and if they can't, tell them what it is and then ask if they can feel it. Make sure you and the cox are having a dialogue about WHY you're asking the crew to do such and such – so they understand and can become an in-boat coach.

### **Coaching very experienced coxes**

As with many activities, one of the things that makes you very good is your ability to self-analyse, reducing the coach's need for involvement. However, the cox will be taking in the coach's suggestions about how the crew should row, so the coach shouldn't feel that they therefore aren't coaching the cox. In addition, when working with a very experienced cox (no matter what the level of the crew), coaches should seek to deliver their coaching through the cox wherever possible. This has 2 benefits:

- The cox's authority is as high as possible
- The crew doesn't feel it is missing anyone when they go to out to race (and they therefore can't hear the coach)

Some coaches and coxes work with 2 way, voice-activated radios so the coach delivers his request to the cox who then gives the appropriate command to the crew. The crew therefore never knows whether a particular command was of the coach's or cox's invention, further increasing their confidence in the cox.

Very experienced coxes working with fixed crews will improve the quality of their coxing by finding out as much as they can about the particular psychological approaches of each crew member in order to tailor their coxing to best meet those needs. The coach can facilitate this happening, or check that their fairly experienced cox is doing this consciously.

### **Selecting coxes**

It is unusual to find 2 coxes vying for the same crew, as most clubs have so few coxes that they are inevitably of different standards and so the pecking order is pretty obvious. Consequently, on the rare occasions that there are 2 coxes competing in a club, the situation needs to be handled carefully, as coxes don't expect to find themselves competing for a seat (in the way that rowers do).

While clearly only one cox can cox a crew for a "big" event such as a Tideway Head or Henley, it may also be possible to share out the opportunities, and this can benefit both the crews and the coxes.

In addition, if a squad finds itself blessed with a very good cox, the coach should take the cox's existence into consideration when choosing the main boat classes to compete in i.e. aiming to do coxed boats for the top events – otherwise, you are giving the cox the message that they are not a valuable member of the squad and they're likely to go off to a club which appreciates them.

Particularly in areas where several alternative clubs exist, clubs generally get the coxes they deserve, and effectively need to compete for coxes' membership.

The view of the crew should almost always take precedence when choosing a cox – coxing can be quite personal, and a good cox will have adapted their style to the psychological needs of the crew, which may be different from those of the coach when they rowed.

The coach is there to manage the process, and should always announce the timetable for the process is e.g. A will cox on Monday and Tuesday, B will cox on Weds and Thursday, I will gather the rowers' views on Friday by phone/email and will let the coxes know on Saturday morning.

### **Same sex and opposite sex?**

I.e. men coxing women, men coxing men etc. In general, it doesn't matter, and depends more on the individual's personality, the relative abilities of the men's and women's squads and the coxes concerned.

- Larger coxes may be better suited to coxing men as the minimum weight for coxing men is 5kg heavier (having a heavy cox is a bit of an issue in fours of small women, but doesn't make a huge difference at most levels in other boat sizes).
- Some coxes prefer coxing women because they tend to listen more to technical and motivational calls
- Some coxes prefer coxing men because at least they are generally always keen to work hard
- It is up to the cox (not their coach) to choose which gender squad they want to belong to at their club.

### **Racing**

- One of the hardest things about racing is marshalling beforehand, when the cox is responsible for getting the crew warmed up, in a melee of boats, often on an unknown river. Therefore, ensure that they are given the instructions to study BEFORE race day. Assimilation time is valuable.
- Equally, introduce the race plan BEFORE the final briefing. The warm up plan should also be familiar.
- Pieces are practice races for all members of the crew, not just the cox. Inexperienced rowers get nervous when they race. So do coxes. This is mitigated by practice.

### **Coxing the Tideway**

- This is incredibly hard
- The hardest bit is marshalling before the start, especially if you are boating from any of the clubs above St Paul's as the warm up area is very crowded.
- Give coxes who need it them material IN ADVANCE to study
- Do not expect a cox to be able to start making a good job of the Head course until they have been over it at least 8-10 times
- Even quite inexperienced coxes can realize that they have made substantial mistakes and can be downheartened by this. It is only reasonable to expect your cox to perform at the same level as their crew. If you have a moderate S3 crew, is it reasonable that your cox performs as well as those in the top 3 crews? Give them specific objectives which can allow them to feel they have succeeded on the day. The more experienced the cox, the more demanding the objectives. For a first trip to the Tideway, getting the crew to the correct marshalling position, properly warmed up, steering roughly down the middle of the river, and getting them all back again is a major achievement.
- In stern loaders, the cox may wish to tape an A6 sheet (in a plastic covering) to one knee with notes about where to steer (e.g. move to Middlesex after Barnes), and the race plan on to the other as aides-memoire in the heat of the moment – can be done for other races too. This shows that the cox has prepared for the race, and rowers will like this (as they have prepared too). Getting pieces of paper out of pockets while racing does NOT fill a crew with confidence, though.

### **Life Jackets**

- Always wear one
- Don't wear padded or auto inflate (on getting wet) ones in front loaders
- Tell the cox that they should always check that their life jacket strap isn't trailing in the water when they get in the boat. I would say that about 25% of coxes trail straps, and this certainly doesn't make the boat go faster. Make it a habit in training and you'll get it right in racing.

## **Clothing for coxes**

Inexperienced coxes may benefit from advice from their coaches about appropriate ways of dressing, especially if they are not sporty people

- Avoid absorbent, cotton fabric like jeans, and fashionable trousers which trail on the ground, getting wet and wicking up water.
- A baseball cap is excellent for keeping the rain off you face, reducing glare, and tucking your hair and microphone into (if it has no headband)
- Avoid wearing a hood up in a stern loading boat as when you turn round to look behind you, you tend to finish up looking into your own hood
- In Winter, as I still need these benefits, I tend to wear a woolly hat OVER a baseball cap
- Long hair should always be tied back. Really long hair should be hitched up so as not to obscure the race number.
- Wear waterproof trousers both when raining and when dry and windy
- Wear ski trousers in winter
- NEVER wear wellies
- If it is REALLY wet, wear plastic bags over your socks inside your shoes.
- If your feet are cold in winter despite wearing ski socks, try loosening the laces of your shoes – normally laced trainers can seem tight if wearing extra thick socks, and this can be enough to reduce circulation when it's cold.
- You can wear really thick gloves when coxing a front loader, but you need fairly thin ones to be able to control the rudder wires sufficiently delicately in a stern loader. This means your hands often get cold, sadly.
- You can get handwarmers which are activated by flexing a disk in the corner of the packet (some are rechargeable by boiling, others are 1-use only disposables). These have been real life-savers!

## **Care of the cox box**

- 98% of cox boxes in use have the Nielsen-Kellerman (NK) fittings. NEVER even consider buying another kind of fitting – it would be like buying a Betamax video.
- When buying an actual cox box unit, I would still go for the original NK brand – they are not cheap, but they are VERY good and withstand the worst weather.
- However, I have found that Rowdata provide a good, and better priced service, for having batteries replaced (and other cox box repairs). A heavily- used cox box needs its battery replaced every 2 years or so (cost about £46).
- If possible, only charge a box every 2<sup>nd</sup> outing (but this can be tricky to organise for club boxes used by many people) as it makes the batteries last longer.
- The worst nightmare with cox boxes is a crackly microphone – this is caused by the end of the mic lead (where it is plugged into the box) being bent. To avoid bending it, only EVER plug the mic into the box once you are already sitting in the boat and the box is in its “pot” holder. At the end of an outing, unplug it BEFORE you remove the box from the holder. ALWAYS.
- I bought my own coxbox about 10 years ago (in America where the dollar price is the same as the pound price i.e. \$450 instead of £450 at home) and it has been worth it every penny. I always have it, I always know if it's charged, and it is a lot less expensive than a sculling boat, which most good rowers “have to” own.

## **Further reading**

“Coxing: Surviving the wilderness years” by Tom Hooper (available, I believe by mail order from Richard Way rowing books in Henley - 01491 576663).

“A seat with a view” by Steve Segaloff – a personal view from the cox of the US 8 at a time of ups and downs in their fortune. Also available from RW Books as above.