

Five Keys to Competitive Coxing

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(Originally published in American Rowing Magazine, July/August 1992)

I walked into the University of Wisconsin boathouse in the fall of 1984 as a very green freshman. Like many other now successful rowers and coxswains, I knew nothing about rowing. Still, I smiled and nodded as Jane Ludwig, the novice women's coach, gave me and 16 others a stack of handouts on coxing. A few weeks later, seated high on the seat of a wooden Pocock eight, I coxed my first competitive piece. With the standard battered megaphone held together by athletic tape and strapped to my head, I gripped the gunwales with white knuckles and called the building strokes for our first race. I can't remember if we battled it out 20 strokes or 100 (it was hard to tell with all that white water flying around) but from that day on I was hooked.

Since then, I've coxed my share of great and not-so-great races in collegiate and international competitions. At one point, my crews went two years without losing a race, but looking back, I realize that my most valuable lessons were learned in defeat—those situations where my crew and I could have handled situations better, but didn't. As my experience grew, I understood that the best way to perform consistently was to master the major elements of coxing and then perfect implementing them in pressure situations. Six years, nine coaches and thousands of hours on the water later, I've developed those elements into what I call "the five keys of competitive coxing." These keys have broadened my coxing horizons and enhanced my creativity—they're universal guidelines that improve basic skills as well as the more difficult, finer points of coxing.

Key 1. Steering

After safety, steering is a coxswain's number one priority. Steering is worth reviewing because most coaches don't teach it in enough detail. Before moving on to the other elements of peak-performance coxing, you must master steering.

First, it's a common misconception that steering should take place only on the drive. Coaches often teach moving the tiller when the blades go in the water and straightening it at the release. However, for subtle adjustments, this motion has far too many repercussions. Not only is the boat's balance somewhat effected when the tiller moves back and forth each stroke, but even if you try to steer very smoothly during the drive, excess drag is felt because the tiller is at an angle while the blades are in the water.

Instead, for subtle adjustments, steer with a very gentle hand on the recovery. With the oars out of the water, the boat will adjust faster and your tiller won't work against your oar propulsion. In a straight-shot 2,000 meter race, this method of steering it almost

always most effective.

For longer turns during practice or head racing, steering should occur during the recovery, and drives of several strokes. You should initiate steering gently on the drive, continue to ease the tiller into the turn over the next one or two strokes, hold the tiller in that position until past the center point of your corner, and then ease it gently back when coming out of the turn. For these larger turns where tiller drag is unavoidable, always tell your crew you are steering. A statement like, “I’m easing gently to port” tells them the corner is sharp enough that they will probably feel it. Steering in smooth, longer motions also lets your team adjust their handle heights for the corner to avoid rocking from side to side.

For a really big turn (like the 90 degree Weeks Bridge turn in the Head-of-the-Charles-Regatta), you need to set the tiller, which means you ease it all the way to one side and hold it there for the core of the turn. In this situation I would say, “I’m going to ease onto the tiller and set it full port. Starboards be ready to lower your hands a little (on the recovery) to keep the balance through the corner.”

Steering and Coxswain Overload

All coxswains experience periods where they don’t steer exceptionally well. This almost always happens when you have too much to think about or communicate to your team. The best strategy for improving bad steering is to back off on coaching and motivation and streamline your comments. In longer pieces, give your team a little quiet time to think and feel their rowing and to let you focus on seeing and feeling your steering.

Key 2. Technical Coaching/Serving as Liaison Between Coach and Crew

Learn to Row

Step one in being a good technician is to know how to row. Every excellent technical coxswain I know can sit on an erg or in the tank and demonstrate what a rower is doing right or wrong. Ask your coach to evaluate your rowing and your ability to identify technical flaws. If you support your coach’s technical style, you will gain your coach’s trust and the confidence of your rowers.

Unifying the team

The coxswain’s primary technical goal is to make calls that unify the team. One way is to supplement the coach’s comments to individual rowers. For example, if the coach tells a rower to clean up her release, you could say, “Everyone, we’re going to take a ten to pull in high enough and cleanly push the puddles off of the blades.” While it’s important for the coxswain to identify individual flaws, the cox who can apply those corrections to

whole boat improvements is a step ahead of the game.

For longer pieces, try giving the boat one focal point “for the next minute” or “for this piece.” However, if you name a theme for a time frame or piece, stick to related comments. Giving the rowers a moment of silence is also a good long piece tactic. A helpful focal point for a quiet time is to have your rowers close their eyes and feel their legs draw their seats into the catch, lock their blades in and reverse without checking the boat.

Talk how it is supposed to feel

Varying the tone and pace of your voice sets the rhythms for your pieces. If the catches are slow or heavy, I will say “quick” or “sharp” when the blades hit the water. If I’m trying to unify the team’s body swing, I’ll say “swing” or “shoulders” at the point of the body swing during the drive. To get more send or acceleration with the finishes, I’ll say “sending, celerating,” or “bending the arms,” in time with the swing and arm being of each stroke, emphasizing the syllable that falls on that part of the stroke. Higher cadence pieces require a crisp tone and strong rhythm. The tone for steady state should be relaxed and flowing, but still alert.

Many international coaches actually encourage dictating the rhythm. My coach, Hartmut Buschbacher, often yells, “Jump!” or “Hop!” in time with our finishes or leg drive. U.S. men’s coach Kris Korzeniowski is renowned for yelling, “Cha...shahh” or “Chaack... Chaack” in time with catches and finishes. Videotapes of the 1988 U.S. men’s eight reveal coxswain Seth Bauer calling, “Push...swing” in time with the leg drive and body swing of each stroke. If you listen in on videotapes of World Championship and Olympic races, you’ll hear rhythms dictated by coxswains in a multitude of languages.

Improving Your Technical Eye

Resources for improving your technical knowledge may be right at your fingertips. Most boathouses have a copy of the USRowing Coaching Education Level I Manual, which has chapters on basic rowing technique, teaching and improving technique and other subjects. Discuss technical material with our coach to see how it fits into his or her style before you implement it.

Rigging

Learning to rig (a requirement for women’s National Team coxswain candidates) also fine tunes a coxswain’s eye. Learning to adjust spreads, heights, and forward and outward pitches develops an eye capable of picking out subtleties in blade depth during the drive, height of the blade off the water during the recovery, a rower’s ability to handle the load on the blade, and how cleanly the rower catches and releases.

Weight Training

Learning weight training exercises teaches a coxswain to coach rowers on proper weight training technique and imparts a better understanding of the exercises' relationship to the rowing stroke. The coxswain learns firsthand where muscles gain strength and can apply that knowledge to improving the rowers' technique on the water.

Key 3. Flow of Practice

Coxswains are almost solely responsible for how well a practice flows. Get used to this idea, because it's almost always true. A well-organized, cool-thinking coxswain can make a practice work out even it seems everything is going wrong. The following pointers should help you:

1. Know the workout in advance. If the workout is complicated, write it down and take your notes in the boat with you. Always find out the goal of the practice, and make sure you understand the drills or pieces before going out on the water.
2. If you have problems making difficult transitions in pieces or remembering why the practice jumps from one drill into another, think about why the coach has structured the practice that way. Often it's easier to remember something if you know the reason you're doing it.
3. Keep your focus and your rowers' focus within the boat. In practice settings, when two or more boats are often side by side, it's easy to be distracted by other coxswains, especially if your competition with one another is fierce. Remember your overall goal is to create a fast team, and the best way to attain that goal is by running smooth, focused practices. Rowers and coaches are constantly aware of how well the coxswains work together. They also remember which ones keep their cool and focus under pressure. If you have a disagreement with another coxswain, save it until you're off the water. Coaches who look out for fairness and require excellent teamwork among coxswains make all the difference.

Key 4. Motivation and Teamwork

After years coxing, I still find the motivational aspect of the job to be most satisfying because it encourages so much creativity. Yet, I've spoken with many coxswains who feel pressured to take on a racing personality they feel uncomfortable with or who just have difficulty finding creative things to say.

Often in coxswain clinics I get a sense that coxswains are looking to me to give them some key motivational phrases. I know this is true because for laughs I often tell the story about Harvard's Devin Mahoney taking a "See you later, assholes," power ten in a race, and I'll see 90 percent of the coxswains scribbling it down in their notebooks. I tell the story because it illustrates a point in a race where the coxswain (Devin) realized her boat should be pulling away, and yet 1,000 meter had gone by the boats were still even. "See you later, assholes," was a completely spontaneous, yet smart, call by her. Knowing Harvard had to move, she overcame the pressure of the tight situation and communicated

an aggressive, confident move instead of panicking. Devin convinced her crew there was no reason the boats should be even, and they ran with it.

When you know the story behind a call like Devin's, it's easy to understand how she made it work. In another situation, however, it could have failed miserably. The point is, the "no-fail" call does not exist. To make the right call at the right time, ask yourself these questions: "What initially attracted you to the sport? What are your personal motivations?"

For me, it was and still is the race: The thought of how the boat feels when we are moving fast, the momentum we generate when we move through another boat and the reward of take the hard work from practice out onto the race, determined to put 110 percent of it on the line and doing everything imaginable to get my team down the course the fastest. Knowing your own motivations is the first step in helping other realize theirs.

How well do you understand your teammates' motivations and goals?

On every team, there are a multitude of personalities. By mentally noting the strengths and positive attributes of your teammates, you can plan for ways to call upon and maximize both. An easy example is the rower with the big erg score. In the boat, you could call on her or him to lead a "ten for aggressive body swing, just like you had all winter on the erg." Look for the other not so obvious qualities, too. How about the quiet person who is always there and working hard, but keeps to himself— "Bill, we're gonna tackle this middle thousand with the same consistency and intensity you've shown since day one." Or the person who puts in extra workouts each week in the stadium – "Anna, we're taking ten to blast off the footboards the way you blast up the stadium stairs."

The coxswain's motivation should always be positive and constructive, even if the coach's is not. Remember, you may be the link between the coach and the team, but the rowers are your teammates. If the coach is furiously yelling at your stroke because her catch is late, you can keep the team cool by saying, "OK, we're gong to take ten for quicker catches. Relax the shoulders, and let's feel the blades go in before the legs go down. Let's go." This corrects the problem and keeps the team relaxed and together. It also treats the coxswain and crew as one unit. Calls like, "We're taking ten to double our margin," and "We need to match the body swing better to push out the run," always make a team more cohesive than "I want..." or "You need to..."

How well do you understand the pain of the race and what you are pushing your rowers through?

It's not the job of the coxswain to sympathize with the rowers when they hit the wall in practice or in the race, but the coxswain who knows what it feels like has a better idea of how to get through that wall. I think every cox should experience at least one good erg race. The coxswain who understands pushing through the pain threshold possesses a valuable insight and is respected by rowers as a fellow athlete.

Key 5. Racing and Strategy

The bottom line of racing is performance under pressure — that's why I saved Key 5 for last. If you've done your homework and perfected your steering, technical points, flow of practice and motivational keys, you're 85 percent of the way to acquiring what I call "Total Focus." The next step is developing your race strategy.

Use your arsenal of motivational and technical tactics to determine a few key points you want to take moves for in the race. For our team, depending on the importance of the race, we might make these decisions two weeks or two days in advance. Most major moves are discussed by the team and coach. Together, we determine the technical focus for each move, and sometimes the motivational focus as well. Otherwise the motivational calls are up to me. Aside from start and finish, we rarely plan more than two moves for a race. That leaves me flexibility for smaller technical moves.

Sometimes, when a motivational idea comes to me in advance, I may mention related incidences in practices prior to the race, just to jog the rowers' memories. Then, when I drop it into a race move, they are subconsciously ready for it. Every motivational call in a race should be positive — no matter what. Of course, it's easy to be positive when you're winning and the boat feels great, but the cox that can keep it positive when the race is tight or the team is behind can create momentum and get a crew together and moving again.

The coxswains number one goal during the race should be to establish a controlled flow of information to the team. Using "pacing" skills makes the crew feel very aware of all that is happening in the race, but not overwhelmed or hectic. The rowers feel they have time to digest all the information coming in and have control over their situation. An excellent pacer can help the team establish a rhythm that feels lower than what they are actually rowing.

The key to a coxswain's action and reaction in the race is to keep the situation simple. Instead of thinking that I have eight rowers, five other crews and my course to keep track of, I tell myself there are only three things: our team, distance traveled, and the competition. Let's break it down:

Because I have prepared for the race, I know where to execute my major moves, what to focus on, and for the most part, what we are capable of. As soon as the race begins, I

focus on how our boat feels and on establishing the rhythm we have practiced. Spacing (the distance between the two seat's puddle and the stroke's catch) is a primary theme from stroke one to stroke 240 because it shows how far we are sending the boat each stroke. The more spacing the better. So, even if I am calling off another boat, I will say "We're up two seats on the Soviets, and we've got three feet of space. We're taking two seats in the next seven strokes by pushing the space out another foot using body swing. Let's go!" That way, although I refer to the Soviet's position, the focus stays on how we're moving out boat — the control remains with us.

My focus for distance covered simply involves telling my team when we are approaching our moves and when to take them. Before each race I map out our strategy, as well as backup in case we are not where we want to be at a certain time. Everyone knows the backup beforehand.

In tracking the competition down the course, I look for who is within striking distance and who we are moving on. In the first 20-30 strokes of the race, if it's tight all the way across, I'll say, "It's a pack," and then go back to the focus for our starting sequence. If someone is way up, I'll say so, and we'll focus for more efficiency in the high strokes. Once we settle, I give all the locations of the crews once. After that I talk only about who we're racing closely with, or if someone comes suddenly from behind. But even then our moves are focused for improving our own boat speed.

The following are a few strategies from the past that have worked well for my teams:

Technical Checkpoint

In practice, the cox gives each person a technical checkpoint — a focus for a specific technical problem she or he working on that usually comes out in racing. If and when the problem surfaces in the race, the cox says, "Mary, checkpoint," This works nicely when there isn't time to communicate in detail. We use team checkpoints as well — they're especially helpful during head races when technical work really has to go the distance.

The Ratio Call

We use "the ratio call" when we are rowing at the correct stroke rate but our spacing is bad. When I first started using it, I would say, "Slide comes down one beat, power with leg drive (or body swing) goes up one beat... get set... on this one." It's different from your standard ratio call because it requires a conscious shift in power immediately. However, all that took too long to say so we changed it to, "Ratio Call...get set... on this one."

The Flex

We created “the flex” just before the 1990 World Championships in Australia. Flex stands for flexible and for flexing a little muscle. It was our secret racing move. Our plan was that at some point in the race, when I decided it was most needed, I would call, “Flex! On this one!” Regardless of what was happening or where we were, the flex had to be the best ten of the race. To practice the flex, for one month before racing, our eight exercised the flex once and only once each day. If we were doing steady state and flex was called, everyone had to shoot up to stroke rate 36 on the next stroke and execute a perfect ten. The flex locked us into a silver medal in Australia, and moved us to within four seats of gold.

Many races have come and gone since my coxing beginnings in 1984, and many hours have been spent in search of ways to improve so that I in turn could help my teams be better, faster and stronger. These five keys are for you to use to do the same: to help you communicate more effectively, develop greater sensitivity for steering and for the feel of the boat, to enhance your motivational skills and ultimately, to fine tune your racing skills into winning strategies.