

WADHAM COLLEGE BOAT CLUB SOCIETY

HINTS FOR PART TIME COACHES

FIRST EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

This document is intended to be of use to everyone kind enough to give a bit of their time to coaching Wadham crews. Since the majority of volunteer coaches do not normally coach regularly, many find it hard to recall what to look for, how to manage an outing and how best to communicate with a crew. For many, of course, it will be their first coaching outing, and the expectant faces of a crew who have been promised an "expert from the Society" can be pretty daunting!

This brief guide has been put together by Julian Fox, Peter Dann and Gavin Stewart in an attempt to provide the novice coach with some basic guidelines and tips on how to make your first outings as coach enjoyable for you and informative for your crews. What it does **not** attempt to do is teach anyone how to row or coach : both skills can only be learned by experience. We assume, therefore, that you have (or once had!) a basic understanding of the principles of rowing, most probably learned at college 1st VIII level or thereabouts, and can remember a few of the basic exercises that you used to do. —

A few key principles are worth mentioning before starting on the hints proper.

- Don't feel you have to coach any crew thrown at you. If, for example, you only rowed in the 2nd VIII you'll probably not feel up to coaching a 1st VIII. Don't be afraid to state a level at which you'd prefer to coach.
- The converse is that if you're really brilliant we'll always try and give you the more advanced crews, but please don't forget that you were a novice once, and novices can always benefit from an experienced teacher. You will sometimes be asked to coach beginners and lower VIIIs - don't be snotty and refuse!
- No matter how good you are, it really isn't a good idea to coach a crew with people in it who you've rowed with. The chances are they'll have heard it all before, and may subconsciously resent your criticism.
- If you've never coached before and aren't sure where to start, don't be afraid to ask to accompany someone experienced for an outing or two.
- It sounds obvious, but if for any reason you can't make it or are running late, please phone someone. Even a note in the lodge can save a crew wasting time waiting for you when they could be training.
- Don't forget it's meant to be fun for you and the crew. If you're not enjoying the outing, the crew probably aren't either.

Finally, please bear in mind that this is very much a first draft. If there are any points made here that you don't agree with, **please** let us know. Similarly, if you have some tips of your own to add, or you feel we've left out something important, please do tell us. That way we can all improve our coaching, and hopefully improve both our enjoyment and the Boat Club's performance.

Happy coaching!

2. THE TECHNIQUE OF COACHING

2.1 Before the outing

Always try to arrive in time to meet the crew and discuss the outing before they boat. Although if time is tight you can ask the crew to warm up before you arrive, you will miss out on the opportunity to observe how they act together.

If at all possible, speak to their last coach to get an idea of what has been done before. If not, you must at least check with the cox or the crew captain before planning the outing. Establish

1. The level of experience of the crew.
2. A brief history of the training so far.
3. The work plan for the outing. (For higher crews this will have been planned in advance. Lower crews will need advice from you).
4. Any specific issues that the crew want you to look at, or areas that previous coaches have concentrated on.

In consultation with the cox or crew captain, establish the objective of the outing. In most cases a crew will wish to concentrate on technique with a WCBCS coach on hand, but do not forget the workload if planned. Explain a rough plan of the outing, and note any time constraints any members of the crew may have.

2.2 On the water - talking to the cox

Establish at the outset that the cox is in charge of the boat at all times. All commands relating to rowing should be addressed to the cox, who then relays them to the crew in his/her own style. Navigational requests (eg keep to this bank, easy just round the bend) should of course be directed to the cox. Make sure that your commands have been understood - consider asking the cox to acknowledge your commands by raising a hand.

Be very sensitive to the cox's steering and safety constraints, particularly on the Isis. Don't ask them to hug the left bank going upstream or to easy in the Gut or you'll be had up for manslaughter. Be careful not to shout over the cox's instructions, and keep all your commands simple and few while the boat is moving. Always explain exactly what you want from each piece, and wherever possible get the cox to issue all the commands. There may be times (eg single stroke paddling) when you want to issue a command : make this quite clear in advance.

Include the cox in your discussions, and try to give him/her a few key points in each session to remember for future outings. This should help some coxes' tendency to over-coach their crews by shouting a combination of everything that they can remember any coach ever having said.

Finally, don't forget the importance of good coxing. Make sure you watch and listen to the cox's performance, and include them in your coaching.

2.3 On the water - talking to the crew

An eight is a team, and even the lowest crews have all manner of fascinating personality clashes in them, so wherever possible try to address the crew as a unit and avoid picking on individuals. If you do have to talk to one or two people, be positive and try to demonstrate that most faults are present in the whole crew to a degree. Whatever you do, don't become personally abusive or desperate, and don't make jokes at individuals' expense unless (A) you know them very well, (B) the joke is unrelated to rowing and relieves tension or (C) they're cocky little bastards who were patently asking for it.

Try to establish a theme for the outing based on what you observe during the early stages. Aim for a maximum of two key things to communicate in an outing -college crews have very little time together and can easily become confused by the number of different aspects of technique to concentrate on. As far as possible, relate all your comments to the theme of the outing, and at all times emphasise the cause and effect of each point. The aim is to encourage an understanding of why the crew are being asked to row in a certain way.

Break the outing into periods where you explain what is required, followed by a piece consisting of exercises or work where the crew can master the technique, with a follow-up chat on how it worked, with some specific comments. Make sure the crew understand what is required before they set off, and encourage them to query any of your advice if it does not square with their experience or ability. But keep an eye on the time - don't let them get cold or bored while stationary.

One of the most important aspects of coaching is feedback. Any change to rowing technique feels odd to begin with, and the crew will not usually know whether they're improving or not. Be very specific and do not be afraid to tell them if they haven't got it right yet. Above all, point out what has improved and when so that they know what actions to aim for.

Be specific in your comments, and remember to treat the cause, not the symptom. No crew will be impressed by a coach that tells them to "balance the boat" or "draw the finish" - they will either not know what you mean or not know how to correct an obvious fault. Concentrate on the basic skills and explain how they affect the boat and its speed.

Occasionally you will come across a stubborn pupil who either can't or won't adapt their style. Don't be afraid to get a little mean with them : stop the boat and make them get the action right, perhaps rowing as a pair. Point out to the rest of the crew what is going on - everyone can learn from one individual and it helps bond the crew. If you do single someone out for treatment, be unequivocal in your praise when they get it right, or they will suffer acute lack of confidence. Remember - **don't get personal!**

2.4 The warm-up

Ask the cox to take the crew off for their normal warm-up. This should usually include starting in fours, then going to all eight building up the slide. Check that this is what they normally do, explain it to them if not.

Allow plenty of time for the warm-up. This is your best opportunity to gauge your overall impression of the crew. Study them from every angle and make a note of general strengths and weaknesses. Make a mental list of any really obvious individual faults.

Keep silent during the warm-up, and make sure the crew do the same. Use this period to work out which areas you think need attention, and if you're not sure, don't be afraid to make them carry on to let you have a closer look.

2.5 After the outing

As the outing ends, it is always a good idea if time allows to give the crew a chance to blow away the cobwebs with a short piece of work if it has been a light technique-orientated outing. Always try to allow them a final piece of light pressure coming back to the raft without any coaching from you or the cox. Make them use this to think back over what they have learned, and to enjoy the hopefully improved feel of the boat.

Allow them to come ashore and stow the boat and blades quickly before assembling them for a quick debrief. Briefly reiterate the key themes, and outline the areas of improvement you saw and any areas which need further attention. Try to give them (the cox especially) a few memorable tips to bear in mind over the next few outings to consolidate their learning.

Now is also a good opportunity to catch up on any feedback (at this stage it should only be positive) you may have forgotten, and to praise anyone who you singled out earlier. You also have a chance to explain any details they may have found tricky, and to invite comments from the crew on how the outing felt and on any areas that appear not to make sense to them.

Always leave the crew feeling good about themselves and the outing. Remember that it may be another week before they have an experienced coach again.

3. THE TECHNIQUE OF ROWING

3.1 General

This is, of course, far too big a topic to attempt to deal with here. We felt that it would be far more useful to try to identify a few key pointers that will help in identifying causes of obvious symptoms, and to describe the critical parts of the rowing stroke.

One of the most rewarding aspects of having a WCBCS coach is that the crew gets a fresh turn of phrase which may help them understand the requirements. It is not important that you know the details inside out, or that you are able to row perfectly yourself, but if in doubt, stick to these brief basics and you won't go too far wrong.

You will also find it necessary to tailor your message to the specific conditions. *If* the crew is racing in two days' time, don't ask them to change the way they row; if it's blowing a full gale, don't spend the outing doing single strokes to improve the balance. (Talk about stating the bleeding obvious...)

As a general point, many college rowers fail to appreciate the necessity of treating the rowing cycle as a continuous action : because they have been taught each stage individually, they tend to break each stroke into constituent parts while rowing. Aim at all times to communicate the dynamic nature of the stroke, and work on achieving a fluidity of movement. Emphasise how one stage leads onto the next, and hammer home an understanding of how each part of the stroke affects the boat, and how each movement of the body affects the blades. Look out for and draw attention to what each blade is doing, and explain how body movements affect it.

Unfortunately, for the sake of clarity, this section has to break the stroke down into manageable chunks. It begins with the finish, which is where you should begin with a novice crew as it sets up the entire stroke.

3.2 The finish

"The finish is not the finish. That is all ye know, and all ye need to know" that famous oarsman John Keats once said. Stress to all crews that the finish is a dynamic process and not a time to stop and prepare for the next stroke. The key thing for lower crews to learn is to keep the hands moving : accelerating the hands into the finish ensures this (fast in - fast out) and is an important piece of learning.

In order to achieve this, the crew must understand the principle of creating the hole in the water behind the blade, enabling a simple extraction by dropping the hands vertically. You will be astonished at how few really understand this. Only once the blade is clear of the water should the inside hand be used to feather it. Square blade paddling is a good exercise to drum this home, because without fast hands throughout the finish the crew will get very wet. Once this exercise has been mastered, it can form a useful part of the warm-up. While the crew is still learning, it should be practised in fours.

Try to explain what the finish should feel like : keeping weight on the fingers and toes, squeezing the finish can help give an idea of what to aim for. Keeping the forearms level and the outside elbow into the body and up will encourage keeping the shoulders strong and help keep the finish in. The outside shoulder should feel as if it's moving throughout the finish, and the outside elbow as if it's about to poke the person behind in the eye.

Insist that the outside hand only is used to apply pressure : inside hands down the loom can be employed to demonstrate this but beware encouraging an inside arm bent at the catch. Remember that it is the fingers that should be applying the pressure, and pressure should be felt on them throughout the finish.

The finish can usefully be described as the big wheel of a bicycle chain where the little wheel (very little!) is the catch. This is a whole lot more useful than nonsense such as "pull up into your chest" - don't be afraid to correct misapprehensions such as this.

The finish should always be taught as one with:

3.3 The recovery

"Hands - body - slide 1" (Julian Fox; great coach but minor poet). It is here that the stability created by a strong finish is really demonstrated to the crew. The importance (and benefit) of getting to the safe and stable 'hands away/bodies over'¹ position cannot be over-emphasised. For many crews it can be a revelation to discover the relative security of this position.

Encourage the crew to swing in a smooth movement from the hips rather than curling the trunk. This can be helped by keeping the head up, sitting tall and straightening both arms as quickly as possible. Single strokes to hands away/bodies over encourages the crew to treat the recovery as an integral part of the finish and trains them to slow down the slide, but beware the tendency to slow the hands down prematurely and delay the swinging over.

Although you should aim for the crew to gain maximum reach at about 1/4 slide, there is no harm as a coaching technique in asking them to think of gaining all their reach at backstops : they will naturally tend to add a bit more at 1/4 slide.

From the hands away/bodies over position with the boat running you can encourage a controlled slide movement by getting the crew to 'break' their knees and letting momentum do the rest. Never allow them to get to the catch early : it is better to let them get to the catch on time but slightly short, then to encourage additional length from backstops. A useful variation (and one preferred by all of Wadham's recent Olympic oarsmen) is to do single strokes to hands away/bodies over without actually quite stopping. This encourages attention to slide control and the rhythm of swinging off backstops together.

Watch carefully to ensure that both arms remain straight throughout, and that the knees do not rise until the hands are at least past the ankles. A common fault is to bend the inside arm at the catch; aim to keep the shoulders parallel to the handle and watch for outside shoulders dropping to take the catch - this also causes skying. As a rough guide the chin should be above the inside knee at the catch.

If the boat is stable enough, encourage the crew to learn how to feel their way down to the water on the way forward by squaring the blade and allowing the handle to rise. Encourage the lightest of touches on the handle - playing the piano on the handle of the oar is a good demonstration.

3.4 The catch

Try not to over-emphasise the catch as a distinct moment in the rowing cycle as crews will tend to pause to make the most of it - beware exhortations to "coil up like a spring", "give the water a good smack", "fxxxking cop "old" etc for the same reason. The catch should be thought of as quick rather than hard, and should be taken with the legs rather than the body. The risk of bum-shoving is minimal, and insignificant in comparison to the loss of distance in the water caused by excessive use of the shoulders and back. The shoulders and the seat should move at the same speed, and the crew should spring off both feet equally.

Encourage the crew to adopt a natural, comfortable posture at the catch that they can hold throughout the stroke. An over-tense, contorted posture will just absorb effort while the body

adjusts to a natural position rather than transmitting the power to the water. This can be demonstrated with a few simple standing starts.

If the recovery has been executed properly, the hands should have no more than a couple of centimetres to rise to bury the blade. Watch out for excessive movements at the catch; they destabilise the boat and lose valuable length in the water : moreover, they are usually the result of a poor recovery.

Encourage the crew to think in terms of speed rather than power by doing specific pieces concentrating on fast hands at catch and finish with an exaggerated amount of time on the slide. This encourages the crew to concentrate on the timing and precision of the catch. Once achieved, ensure that it is continued in other pieces of work. A good catch should feel effortless; the apparently satisfying "explosive" catch is not only wasteful of energy, it is also very inelegant to watch.

3.5 The draw

This should look after itself if you've paid attention to the first three. Watch the blades for any inconsistencies during the stroke, and encourage the crew think in terms of horizontal lines. In particular, heads should be kept up and still and the hands should move in a straight line. You can help but watching out for horizontal hand movements.

The arms should be kept straight as long as possible, and only used once the body is well opened. This makes it much easier to sustain acceleration. Encourage the crew to think of their hands as hooks that transmit rather than generate power.

Although it is hard to sense from outside the boat, it is important for the success of the finish to keep the power on throughout the stroke. A useful metaphor is to step right through the stroke - ie to keep the weight on the stretcher at all times; the seat should feel superfluous. A good exercise is to encourage firm finishes in a piece of half pressure : the effect will be to demonstrate to the crew how much easier it is to execute a finish with accelerating hands, and they should aim to achieve 'firm finishes' at all times.

3.6. Blades

It is very easy for coach and crew to concentrate on body movements and boat balance and forget about the blades. Don't forget that all technique is for is to maximise the efficiency of the blade through the water and to minimise its resistance through the air. Watch the crew from every angle to ensure that blades have no vertical movement in the water, that the loom doesn't regularly get wet, and that there is no waste of power or excess windage created while the blade is out of the water. Video is really useful here, but more often than not your photographic memory will have to suffice.

3.7. A quick word about balance

Think back to your own rowing days. Now ask yourself, is this crew enjoying dragging their oars forwards through the water? Would they not do something to improve the balance if only they knew how?

Yes, you're there already. There's no point in banging on about balance as it's a symptom not a cause - and make certain that the cox understands this too. No crew can begin to tweak the balance of the boat until they have mastered the finish and recovery and have understood the principles of how they affect the balance of the boat.

When the crew have sorted their finishes out they will be amazed at the improvement in balance. Then, and only then, you may if you insist choose to introduce balance as a concept in its own right. Demonstrate the principle of the tightrope walker by getting the whole crew to strike away (bodies over, of course) to about 5cm off the saxboard. Take time to ensure that the hand heights are all the same, then demonstrate the effect of each side in turn raising and lowering hands. Using **single strokes at a low rating** you can encourage them to raise their hands together as they come forward until the blades are about 2cm from the water at the catch, feeling for the balance all the while.

Whatever else you do, destroy ruthlessly any temptation to balance the boat by leaning or by applying unequal weight through the feet. If the crew have been taught this by a previous coach, take down his or her name and address and firebomb their house.

In short, balance only comes to those who wait. Encourage the crew to concentrate on the basics of the stroke and to relax, and the balance will come naturally. Allowing them or encouraging them to worry about it will only make matters worse. Remember that an eight is inherently unstable, even at speed. Even the fastest crews don't balance the boat perfectly. If in doubt, don't try to correct it.