

Coxswain's Perspective: Drills to Warm Up Your Skills

With the sprint season just underway and water time still a novelty for many of us, it can feel like there are suddenly a lot of things to keep track of at once: steering, feeling the boat, paying attention to bladework -- not to mention calling 10s and rating shifts. But the racing season is on and that means if you're not up to speed, you'll need to be -- and fast!

So ... which race day skills are the most challenging for coxswains at the beginning of the season? I asked USRowing referee Bob Appleyard to consult the officiating ranks. Here's his "Top 3": a list of stake boat tasks for coxswains that will help the races go off smoothly and on time. To help you get up to speed, I've added a few tips on how you can prepare.

Backing into the Stake Boats

The most common mistake Appleyard sees: Coxswains who turn around hundreds of meters away from the starting area and then have to back it down several boatlengths to get into the stake boat.

Here's a good rule of thumb: If you're one of the first boats into the stake boats, you can literally turn around five strokes away from the dock. However, if some boats are already in the blocks, pull into your lane about 1.5 boatlengths from the starter's platform. You should have plenty of room to turn around and will only have to back for about 10 strokes in your lane to lock on.

Remember that it's much more difficult to steer when you're backing, so the closer to the dock that you can turn around, the better.

Here's a little drill you can do with your coach to make getting into the stake boats an automatic process. When your daily routine is done but before you land the boats, have your coach park the launch and walk out to the end of your dock: This is you practice "stakeboat" and your coach is the "stake boat person."

If you're truly a novice, this gives your coach a chance to instruct you as you back up to the dock. He can also give you feedback on the direction and speed. I advise using your rowers in the stern for backing into the stake boat. They have the best view and can help redirect the stern immediately. The further away you are from the stake boat, the more rowers you can use, but as you get closer, drop out rowers from the bow-end (so if backing with the stern six, drop to stern four, then stern pair).

Remember that you can have some rowers drag their oars to help direct the boat into the stake boat as well. After a few

perfect practice “back-ins,” dock the boat and you’re done for the day. The nice thing about doing it at the end of practice is that if your coach needs to talk with you more afterwards, the discussion is one-on-one and outside of practice time.

Keeping Your Point After the Stakeholder has the Stern

It must be maddening for those referees to ask a crew to “scull” the bow around only to see the bow or two-seat take a full slide stroke and pull the boat out of the hands of the stake boat person.

Here’s what they’re asking for, and again, every team should do this several times in practice so that rowers and cox are comfortable with the procedure on race day. If the wind is blowing your bow to port (and assuming you are a port-stroked boat): Cox says, “3-seat, take 2-seat’s oar and scull.” The 3-seat turns around to the right and takes 2-seat’s oar with his or her right hand (keeping hold of his/her own oar with the left hand); then takes one-handed “arms only strokes” with the 2-seat’s oar with just enough pressure to keep the boat on point. The blade is parallel to the boat when “sculling” and allows for greater side-to-side movement without pulling the stern away from the stake boat person.

If the boat is blowing to starboard, the 2-seat would turn around to the left and scull with the bow-seat’s oar with the left hand. This really needs to be practiced so that the rowers have a sense of how much pressure to use given the amount of wind.

Another alternative, if done VERY GENTLY, would be to have your 2-seat or bow-seat take “just arms” strokes for subtle adjustments. Using “just arms” can be extra valuable in a count-down start scenario, as it enables you to make quick adjustments without having to have a rower hand his or her oar to someone else.

Hand in the Air for Pre-Start Adjustments

Appleyard’s description of this classic -- and incorrect -- scenario is so priceless I had to include it: “Timid, nervous arm at half-mast: the bow seat’s arm is horizontal, parallel to the water, elbow is bent 90 degrees so forearm is pointing upwards -- at the same time, all rowers are in the ready position, boat is pointed, and coxswain is saying nothing, just staring straight ahead.”

Personally, I get a good laugh out of the “limp wristed, rather indifferent” arm in the air. Bottom line: referee Mike Sicinolfi points out that one of the reasons it is the bow person’s hand that is recognized is to ensure that if a hand is in the air, the boat is truly making an adjustment.

So, make sure that bow person’s hand is up -- straight up! It doesn’t hurt to have that bow person’s hand waving around to make sure that the ref’s are sure to see it. And again, definitely

make sure that you are making an adjustment. A helpful hint: When I tell the bow person to put their hand up, I put my hand up, too. That way it's impossible for me to forget that their hand is in the air. A standard example of how this might sound on the water: "Bow-seat, hand up! 2-seat, very lightly, touch it just arms. We're straight. Good. Bow-seat, hand down!"

"If coxswains can be drilled with just these three skills, I believe their crews would leave the start line with greater confidence, and the start officials would be very appreciative, as well!" -- Referee Bob Appleyard

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