

Winter Training: Time to Hone Your Skills

For the committed coxswain, winter training is an excellent time to fine-tune your technical eye and ensure your calls are consistent and clean. Plus, since you're likely off the water, you don't have to pay attention to steering and working off of other boats. Think of this as a time where you can really focus on technique and your calling style. Here are a few quick tips to help you stay on top of both:

Running a practice: First off, a note to coaches: This is a serious opportunity for you to actually hear and give your coxswains feedback on their calls, so I hope you're having them run indoor workouts and make the same kinds of calls as when you've got them in the boat.

Now, back to my compatriots, the coxes:

- This is a great time to ensure you're doing a solid job of calling "transitions" efficiently. When changing ratings and intensities, make sure you're consistent in your building calls and lengthening calls. Are the transition calls you're using ones that can easily be used during racing? Keep these simple and clean.
- Make sure your calls support the technical direction of the coach. Reinforce those calls with "Rhythmspeak." If the coach tells the team s/he wants quicker leg drive for example, make sure you call "legs!" right when the legs go down. Also, take this time to get creative with your calls. Look for themes and mental imagery that the crew can use and that specifically support what your coach is teaching. "Knees down," "Press," "Jump," "Push," and "Blast off!" are some other leg drive calls that come to mind. Rhythmspeak calls should also reflect the intensity and stroke rate that you're using at the time.
- Goalsetting for race season: Make a mental note of fitness, strength and erg testing goals that the coach lays out for the team, and implement calls that support achieving those goals in winter workouts. Focus on the rewards you'll reap in the spring when you pull these motivational gems out in the middle of a killer workout. For those goals that are achieved (like erg PR's, team runs, improvements in the weight room, etc.), you've now got some great motivational calls to use later in spring racing season!

Evaluating Technique

Whether you're on ergs this winter, or in the rowing tanks, winter training lends you the benefit of a consistent "profile" view of your rowers—a view we can't get while in the coxswain seat. First off, make sure you know what your coach is looking for regarding team technique and changes. For ergs, watch for elementary things like leg drive, body opening, and arm bend timing. Keep a notebook on individual changes and improvements over the winter.

If you have the benefit of training in a rowing tank, try watching the rowers from the side, then go to the front of the tank (coxswain's view), and make a mental note of how that profile view translates to your coxswain's view of the blade. If you've noticed, for example, that on the water that 6-seat rows his/her catch in, the side view tells you immediately if it's because s/he's opening the body early, or shooting his/her slide. If you memorize how the person's blade looks when s/he is off, and you know what the problem looks like from the side and the cox seat view, you're a step ahead in calling for the right correction in the boat.

Last thing: I'm a big fan of audio recording, and I often have coxes that I coach email me audio of coxed erg and tank pieces. Listening to yourself cox erg tests and team workouts is an excellent way to evaluate yourself, especially if there is a fair amount of multi-tasking involved.

Winter training is an opportunity for even the best coxes to shift gears and fine-tune. Take this time and make the most of it. Running clean, clear and efficient workouts helps solidify the rowers' confidence in your organizational skills. Further developing that technical eye by watching from different angles will pay dividends back in the boat. And, if you're really paying attention, you may discover your best motivational calls find their roots in tough winter workouts.