

Keys to Steering in Every Situation

As the coxswain, your physical role in helping your team cross the line first is to steer the most direct course possible. Your second responsibility is for your steering to have as little effect on the balance of the boat as possible. Key factors in your success are: how you hold the tiller ropes, and how you execute making adjustments. Good steering really requires finesse. You can achieve this by steering subtly on straight stretches, and by communicating clearly with your team when you must make major turns in practice and head racing.

Holding the Tiller Ropes

Set your palms on the gunwales of the boat, and grasp the tiller knobs using your thumb and first two fingers. The gunwale should be in between your third and fourth fingers. This allows you to use your fourth and pinky fingers to press against the gunwales, and enables you to hold yourself in the boat



effectively. (Depending on the boat, you may have the gunwale between your second and third fingers). You can simultaneously steer with your fingers, and push against the gunwales with your arms to hold your body against the back of the seat and better brace yourself at race pace. Also, steering with your fingers, instead of your hands ensures that your steering is smooth and subtle, which in turn helps keep the boat balanced.

You should make sure that the actual motion of steering involves **pushing** the tiller knobs, and not pulling them. To go to starboard, gently push the right tiller knob forward. To go port, gently push the left tiller knob forward. Steering where you pull on the opposite knobs often results in delayed boat response (especially if there is slack in the tiller rope), and is much more jerky. It almost always upsets the balance of the boat.

Steering Techniques

The most important thing to remember about steering is that if you are in a situation where you need to steer immediately, do it! If your steering will affect the balance of the boat, communicate this to your crew. That said, the following techniques will outline optimal ways of steering for different scenarios. If you pay attention to *feeling how your steering affects the boat* you can master each of these techniques effectively.

Technique #1: Steering on the recovery.

Whenever possible, you want to steer by gently nudging the tiller **ON THE RECOVERY**. The boat responds more quickly on the recovery than if you steer during the drive, and you don't work against the propulsion of the blades in the water. The key here is **SUBTLE**. It takes much less of an effort to get the boat to change direction. The right time to use this kind of steering is if you need to adjust your point slightly and you **can do it on the recovery of one stroke**. This technique is most effective when you're at rate 30 or above and trying to go in a straight line. **If you have a major adjustment** to make, do not steer on the recovery, as it will throw off the balance of the boat. Steering on the recovery can work at lower stroke rates if the point adjustment is minimal.

Technique #2: Steering over several strokes.

On gradual corners, it will be least upsetting to the boat to slowly and smoothly initiate the turn on the DRIVE, all the while communicating this to your team. A comment: “I’m gently easing the boat to port,” or “I’m straightening out” lets the crew know they may need to adjust their handle heights somewhat. Do not “Pulse” steer—where you steer only when the blades are in the water. This only makes the boat rock. The motion should be smooth and steady, and may take place during both drive and recovery. The key is for the motion to be smooth, not “on and off.” In a stiff quartering or cross headwind, you may need to move the tiller and hold it in place over several strokes to keep your point. Moving the tiller on the drive will probably upset the boat the least in this case. The key here is to not be moving the tiller back and forth every stroke.

Hold it in position until the desired point is achieved, then ease back—again beginning the motion when the blades are in the water. When you do this, let your team know, so that they can accommodate with a handle-height adjustment.

Similarly, in a crosswind, a comment like, “I’ve got the tiller set slightly to port to keep us going straight in this crosswind” keeps your team in tune with why the boat feels the way it does.

Technique #3: Full tiller with possible assistance from your team

In head racing you often have to navigate some serious curves. For starters, your coach should review the course with the team and prepare everyone for strategizing for these turns. You will have to steer smoothly over several strokes, and may even need to “set the tiller” full port or full starboard. As you approach a major corner, let your team know it’s coming up. Tell them when you begin to steer: “I’m starting the Weeks Bridge corner to port...I’m at full tiller,” Tell them if you plan to use their power: “Starboards get ready to hit it...NOW”). If you need your other side to row with less pressure to make the turn, let them know. As the turn is completed, tell the team when to return to “even pressure” and that you are straightening the boat out.

Steering a Bowloader

With bowloaders, and today’s typical steering technology, the steering lever needs to be moved quite a bit to get a response from the tiller. That, combined with the fact that you’re probably in a four, a less stable boat than an 8+, means that you most likely have to steer using Technique #2, on the DRIVE. You may have to hold the tiller in place until the change of direction is achieved, and then steer carefully back to center, again initiating on the drive. A sternloaded four can be steered as 8+’s. Again, when in a situation where you suddenly need to respond immediately, the bottom line is to steer however you have to, as soon as possible. Let your team know if you have time.

Bowloader Steering Set-up

Coaches: Please set-up the steering so that when the lever is moved towards starboard, the boat actually turns to starboard (same set-up as an eight). This is safer for everybody on the water. This typically means the cable is NOT crisscrossed before connecting to the actual tiller. Imagine if someone changed your launch steering wheel so that your boat went to the right every time you turned to the left. Last, a crossed tiller rope increases the range of the tiller, heightening the chances of ‘stalling’ the tiller if it’s cranked too far. A stalled tiller will serve as an instantaneous brake, and will pull your boat immediately sideways, and possibly perpendicular to your original point.