

Michael Toon's Advanced Coxswain Racing Tips



On Race Day

In this series of discussions I hope to outline my approach to racing, both in terms of practical considerations and a broader philosophy behind coxing on these occasions, starting with arriving at the Regatta.

The end goal for competitive coxing, like most team endeavours, is to impact positively on the outcome of your race. This starts from the minute you arrive and is a useful thought to consider during all your activities at a regatta venue.

This positive impact will manifest itself in one of two ways. Either something you say or do, an active initiative on your behalf, can prove a decisive factor in the outcome. More commonly however, the inconspicuous and unheralded performance of your tasks meticulously can allow your crew to row to their potential and succeed in a way that may have been inhibited but for your presence.

Thinking about this latter point and consistently facilitating your crew's finest abilities is vital to long-term success as an elite coxswain.

I often tell other coxes, and I learnt this from my own failed attempts to impose myself in situations, that you should think of yourself as the roadie at a band performance and let the rowers be the rock stars, even though you are the one with the microphone. Far from being an unsung hero, your consistent attention to more mundane tasks and pride in details will, in the long run, be recognized for the indispensable role it plays and in no small way earn you the most vital of all coxing attributes, respect and authority.

Preparation

Your preparation actually begins the night before, especially with the common occurrence of early starts on a Saturday in the dark drive to far away courses. Check your bag, that your [Coxmate](#) is on charge (I charge it IN the bag so I don't grab the bag and leave the Coxmate) and you have your racing uniform, hat, tools, wet weather gear, and a change of clothes. Lastly, set 2 alarms, away from the bedside.

Always try to arrive at a Regatta venue first, or better yet, arrange a lift with your coach so you can't be late and can have some uninterrupted time to discuss the race. Make your first task to ensure that the boat and other equipment has arrived safely and that a plan is in place to rig and ready the ship. The next thing I do is to take a walk around the judge's tower and see if the regatta is on time (or expected to start on time) and to check the conditions. Check the traffic pattern, especially in unfamiliar venues. A glance down the course and a check of any flags will alert you early to any prevailing winds that may influence your approach and preparation for the day. Adjusting the inboard on the oars to suit the conditions is better done before the early warm-up row as you are putting the boat on the water to race. I usually say Hi to the judges at the tower and ask them nicely if there are any concerns or delays for the day. Apart from the information you may receive they may recognize you later as a sensible, polite and diligent coxswain that deserves a break in the event of a ruling they have to make against your crew in unforeseen circumstances...

Report back to the coach at this stage and advise them of the conditions and check the plan for the day. Rounding up the athletes is next and reiterating with them the plan from the coach.

Approaching Race Time

As the race time approaches, touching base with key members of the crew provides you with an opportunity to ascertain their thoughts and feelings. Often I am asked how to motivate the crew and I find asking explicitly to a crewmember what they like to hear to get them rowing hard helps. These moments are ideal for fleshing out words, phrases and approaches that will motivate your crewmate for the upcoming effort. Discussing other crews with the rowers now is useful as on the water attention towards your competitors is obviously discouraged and counterproductive. Allow the rowers time to relax and once again ask them if there is anything you can do to facilitate this such as checking their rig or cleaning their oar handle.

You need downtime of your own, so I usually take these required moments to myself during my weigh-in. Usually this is an accepted requirement for you between 1-2 hours prior to a race. I usually have to get down to weight so like to weigh in as soon as I am able and allow a bit of food and drink afterwards. After informing the coach, I keep my date with the scales and then grab a few moments by myself to eat and relax and go over the warm-up plan and race plan and any other issues on my mind. During the latter stages of my career I warmed up my voice as well using techniques learnt from an acting coach, a routine best performed away from eye and earshot.

An hour before race time I would complete one last housekeeping check, ensuring that we had a bownumber (secured with tape or a small nut and bolt), the oars were adjusted and at the waterside that all the nuts on the riggers and footstretchers were tight. Make sure you check your rudder wire is secure and not frayed as well and that the speakers and ratemeter work. It is embarrassing and costly to overlook your own equipment having checked everyone else's.

I then reconvene with the crew and give them a regular timing countdown and gentle reminders to get themselves ready (toilet, sunscreen, water bottles) at this stage. As the crew has ample time for thoughts and reflection and usually a formal meeting with the coach before boating I keep quiet from here until launch so later discussions have more impact and not too much emotional energy is spent.

What you say between launching and the starters gun is often the most important, so using your words and dispensing your thoughts carefully and sparingly is vital now.

The Warm-up

I value the moment when the boat is launched, pushing away from the shore or dock and you, as coxswain, assume control of the crew for the upcoming race. The challenge for the next 30 minutes or so before the starting sequence is to optimally prepare the crew to race to their potential.

There are three components to the cox's role over this warm-up period. These involve preparing the crew physically, preparing the crew mentally and the more mundane, yet essential, necessity to operate within the laws governing racing, such as arriving to the start on time.

What is said in the warm-up is often more important than during the race itself. Certainly during the first 100m or so it is very difficult for you to intervene to correct a slow start and ensuring the fastest start possible all comes down to what you say and do before you take off. Think ahead to how you want the crew to be thinking and moving as they race and prepare accordingly. You want their attitude and movements to be a destination at the start line that you guide them towards during the warm-up. When preparing the crew physically there are many different variations to the usual patterns and there are no firm rules except to do what works for your crew best. I never like to spend too much time at short slide lengths or in fours warming up so the crew gets used to moving fast, but certainly some time to ease into things and establish familiar patterns is essential. I find it important to make all directives to the crew during this stage simple and direct to communicate that you mean business and it is race-time. A couple of exercises are always good. Crews of mine usually identify drills that have a particular positive effect on our racing, but if in doubt or with a scratch crew, I usually find some quarter-slide rowing to be useful to get the crew moving fast and together in rhythm, especially when executed with the rate building up, up, up.

Physically Preparing Your Crew

After this, the norm is to do some building pieces followed by work at race pace followed by starts. My only firm recommendations for this is to perform one longer piece of about a minute in the mid-20s, around 26 is good, in the warm-up so the crew can get used to operating at a higher level for a sustained period before the race-pace stuff. Tuning the concentration is important and settling breathing patterns so a longer burst than just 10-15 strokes helps in my experience.

The other specific point is to always, always; unless it is absolutely not possible, perform your race-pace work and starts with the conditions. Having a look at traffic patterns before you go out to race and giving yourself extra time for turnarounds is essential to facilitate this when there is a strong head or tailwind. Similarly in a cross-wind, if you warm-up with the wind hitting port and swing around and race with a wind hitting starboard your crew, and your steering, will need to make adjustments on the fly that you could have prepared for with better warm-up management.

Whilst you are manoeuvring the boat around the warm-up area it is important to inform the crew of where you are going, how much time is available and where the other crews are in relation to you. The rowers are usually familiar with coxless boats and managing getting to the start on time and without violating traffic rules on their own. To prevent them looking around and growing concerned and suspicious I constantly update them on how much time to the start, where I intend to go and where the other crews are. This alleviates any concerns and assures the crew you are in control and things are going to plan.

Mentally Preparing Your Crew

After the crew has rehearsed a few starts and is physically prepared to race the mental aspect of the preparation becomes more focused. Before proceeding to the start and preparing the crew's minds optimally I perform a quick house keeping check whereby I ask everyone to get into racing attire (take off undershirts, secure water-bottles) and for everyone to check their rig ensuring everything is secure. Everyone has a horror story of a breakage during a big occasion and your crew will quietly thank you for ensuring that everyone was reminded to systematically check their gate, rigger nuts, slides, seats and foot-stretchers to make sure nothing preventable has been overlooked (this is where you may need your small toolkit that you have thoughtfully stowed at your feet containing the '[essentials](#)').

Now is the time for a final opportunity to brief the crew regarding the requirements of the upcoming contest. I briefly run through the race plan now with some succinct words of motivation. Whilst in the starter's hands and surrounded by the other crews it is not a time to be airing your race tactics, and any motivational phrases are often a source of motivation for the other teams. Also, circumstances in the start can be unpredictable with false starts, weather conditions and regatta officials trying to make up lost time, so never assume you'll have time in the starter's hands to do anything but line up and be told to '**GO**'.

An in-depth summary of the race plan just before you race may actually detract from the effectiveness of the discussion as the crew will remember little and when under pressure during racing won't recall details, therefore broad themes are more important. Consequently, my final race plan reiteration is brief with specific focus only on the most important aspects, with special emphasis on the start and first 500m as these are hard to change whilst in the fray. Try to make it just a few sentences or phrases that you can repeat for emphasis and clarification. A simple framework would be to tell the crew the focus for each 500m, when important calls will come and what these calls are and finish with a, hopefully, rhetorical question of 'Are we clear?' or 'Everyone understand?' This allows for an implicit resolve from the crew to execute the plan, gives everyone ownership of the plan and outcome, and also provides an obvious opportunity for anyone to speak up and clarify queries and concerns.

My final undertaking before delivering the crew to the starting area is to recognise with the crew that it is time to race. Time to enter the optimal frame of mind and level of arousal for the best performance. Time to cast aside all distractions and find that space to work inside that maximises their racing potential. I have come across this technique in various manifestations in other elite crews and first became aware of it at the school level when we worked with a sports psychologist. The method he outlined and we adopted was quite formal with a small 30 second drill whereby the crew, under my direction, takes 10 seconds to look about their surroundings to acknowledge the place and time, then 10 seconds to look down and concentrate on their breathing and rid themselves of distractions and finally 10 seconds to visualize themselves racing as they intend.

Mentally Preparing Your Crew

Simpler approaches designed to encourage the same concept I have heard in other crews. Particularly the Australian Olympic Eight in 2000 that used to use the word '**Showtime**' before racing to acknowledge that it was time to focus and deliver, much like a seasoned performer would, and the 3-time World Champion USA Eight of 1997-1999 whose cox [Pete Cipollone](#) would say '**No one's going to get their hot-dog now**' before racing, referring to the fact that they were the main event whereby all the spectators take their seats and await the action.

Being in the starter's hands 5 minutes before the advertised starting time is a rule to be followed without compromise. Attempting to be the first crew to arrive is a safe and shrewd option, subtly signalling that you are ready to race and setting your crew apart from the pack. It also allows the rowers to listen to the starting procedure so they are familiar with the commands (whether it be a flag, audible tone or something else) and the length of pause between the 'Attention' and 'Go', which is often long and unnerving.

My last task after backing into the stake boat holder's hands or positioning the crew in the lane for a running start is to actually summarize the preparation and settle the crew. If everything has gone to plan let them know, 'Everything has gone well, time to be relaxed and confident and looking forward to racing', or similarly, if some mishap has occurred let the rower's know 'time to focus and put everything behind us and concentrate on the next few minutes, everyone is even now', since you are still level with the competitors, until the starter gives the command to '**Go**'.

The Start

The few minutes spent in the starter's hands can be crucial in any contest and demand a great deal of concentration from the cox whilst ensuring the crew remains relaxed. This is a challenging balance to strike. The biggest impact a cox can have on a crew during the start procedure is, unfortunately, a negative one if the crew is poorly prepared to begin the race shooting straight, focused and together. The start is a high-risk period with lots of variables to be negotiated and managing a successful start is never an easy task, while it is often taken for granted. The crew here is relying on you to be in control. Maintaining control is a lot easier than trying to recover it in an adverse situation. So with this in mind, regular reinforcement, even when there is little action to be taken is important so the rowers know you are alert and looking out for them.

Recall that many rowers are used to racing in coxless boats so they like to check things out for themselves. Communication is paramount to avoid members of the crew being unnecessarily distracted by checking your alignment, taking touches to correct course on their own initiative and just thinking to themselves about how things are progressing. I like to prevent this with lots of quiet, confident communication, letting the crew know they are pointing straight, or adequately into the wind in a cross-breeze, to breathe and stay relaxed and that things are in control. If they are not of course, you need to get their attention and address the problem. This will happen more effectively if you acknowledge the problem first so the crew knows they have to act. Ensure that when you call on the crew to act to correct your course or touch up to level the boat in a non-held start you precede your command by naming the crew members you intend to undertake this action, and be specific about the magnitude of correction needed. 'We are slightly off course to port (stroke-side), Two-Seat, take ONE light touch, Now..' or, 'We need to straighten 30 degrees, Two-seat, take firm touches until I say stop, Go'... I always add a 'now' or a 'go' when making commands in such circumstances. It delivers an urgency required under pressure. Of course, judgment is required at the start and techniques such as passing oars forward to make significant corrections to your alignment without pulling the boat out of the stakeholder's hands and keeping your boat pointing into the wind with small touches from the opposite side are very handy in managing this.

During the anticipation of the roll-call, I communicate using hushed tones except for commands given to correct the alignment of the boat, which need to be clear. Using whispered, simple words of reinforcement helps to internalize everyone's thoughts and keep the focus within the crew. **'Relaxed and ready to go'** or, **'calm and confident'** are good mantras to say to break the otherwise uncomfortable silence leading into the roll-call. Sometimes, simple cues regarding the race plan are also useful here, without advertising your intentions to the other crews. Once the roll-call commences, strict silence is necessary except in the most dire of circumstances. Rather than do nothing here, I check that my [Coxmate](#) is 'zeroed' and ready to start and then everything in my seat such as tools and water bottles are secure. I often dip my hand in the water and wet my lips and tongue also, depending on the water quality!

The Start

After the command of '**Go**' there is not much to offer by way of calls that will change a well-drilled crew. I find it is best usually to keep mostly quiet and concentrate on steering as the crew's concentration is at a peak. There is an explosion of sound and movement at the start and your voice usually just adds noise rather than value here. Many coxes use rehearsed cue words here just to keep the rowers in rhythm or to reinforce key concepts for the first few strokes, they are also useful just to ease your own use of voice into the race so you don't explode over the microphone and startle the rowers later in.

I myself like to use long drawn-out words in the first few strokes to ensure the guys focus on moving the boat and not the water. Fundamental laws of motion tell us that the force required to move the boat to race speed is greatest during this start sequence as the boat's inertia needs to be overcome ($\text{Force} = \text{Mass} \times \text{Acceleration}$, with a constant mass and acceleration being the change in velocity over time. When acceleration is greatest, in getting the boat from zero to race speed, the force must proportionally be greatest). With this force comes the propensity for the blade to wash out or bury deep in the water if the pitch on the blade or the rower's handle control is not ideal. Calls such as '**Hold**' and '**Flat**' or '**Sit-Back**' encourage the rowers to concentrate on this concept.

As mentioned, I concentrate on steering for the first ten strokes, when the pressures exerted are maximal and there is a high risk of losing your course. Using any rudder here to correct your course not only cuts drag on the boat but prevents it from reaching full speed, the objective of a the start routine, so veering off course is doubly punished. Concentrate, look forward and hold the boat straight during this time so you don't dig any steering holes.

I have a look out after about ten strokes and let the crew know briefly what is transpiring. Simple feedback such as '**Good Start**' is all that is needed for the crew to remain focused on the task and to continue to perform. If things could be improved at this point, you should not watch a bad situation become worse, so decisive instruction is needed to correct anything that is inhibiting your maximum speed. More power, faster hands/catches and cleaner blade work are the main things I find myself identifying as areas for correction on the fly in the melee of the start, and these can be corrected with simple, clear repeated commands spoken in rhythm.

Once the boat is up to speed efforts to maintain it while the energy levels are high and the rowers have not needed to transition to mid-race pace should be made. This period of 30 or so strokes before the crew settles at about 400m is **usually about breathing, concentration and repetition**. I always tell the crew to breathe and keep moving with the speed of the boat in this section.

The Start

Strategies to settle the crew into their midrace rhythm vary from crew to crew and, like everything there is no simple recipe. Many crew naturally just find their mid-race rhythm, while some need a definite call with some sort of focus of sitting back, or increasing the length and power. Whatever your crew does, it is necessary for you assess the situation and ensure during the crucial period between 400-500m that the crew has indeed found a suitable, sustainable pace.

Feedback, as always, is paramount, telling the crew whether the rhythm and speed they have found is adequate or needs further adjustment. Assessing your speed against the other crews and giving the rowers a 'status report' at this stage before they embark on the middle stage of the race is useful.

To summarize, your responsibilities in the first 500m follow the sequence of –steering and rehearsed execution in the first 10 strokes; re-enforcement and maintenance of top speed, breathing and focus in the following 30 strokes; establishing mid-race pattern and rhythm over 5 strokes; status update to the crew of position, rhythm and speed.

The Middle 1000

Guiding a crew under pressure and at maximal effort over the 1000m that comprises the middle of a race requires concentration, discipline and variety from the coxswain. For the Cox, it is a rewarding experience. Unlike the start or finish, where largely rehearsed patterns are executed, much of the middle of the race requires instruction, observation, initiative and motivation.

The objective of this section of the race, rather than attaining the absolute top-speed that can be achieved as in the start and last 500m, is to reach the maximum speed that can be maintained for around or under three minutes at a sustainable rate and rhythm, which is to say, leaving energy to again reach top speed at the finish. Fulfilling this objective requires from the crew collectively a level of effort, technical ability and tactical execution that is best directed and reinforced from the Cox's seat.

The first aspect mentioned above, is concentration. For the coxswain, this is necessary during the middle thousand as many facets of the race need to be monitored, almost simultaneously, requiring a level of multi-tasking. Initially, this can be quite intimidating and in an effort to do everything, little is achieved. As with most things, it is better to do one thing well, than many things poorly, so when starting out I would recommend sticking to the essentials, such as steering, calling the race plan and giving the crew basic feedback. With practice, like all complex tasks, juggling these responsibilities becomes second nature and things that took some effort initially occur automatically. Eventually, what seemed like an overwhelming checklist is distilled into a more natural, comfortable routine and your concentration can be directed in a more focused way to the crew and the race.

I find once the 500m marker is passed and the crews have really settled into a mid-race pattern that I need to tell myself that it is 'game-on' for the Cox and to re-focus and have a good look at everything that is transpiring. This focus needs to be directed towards your steering, the level of technique and effort that the crew is delivering and your speed compared to the other boats. It is useful to mentally scroll through these things every few strokes in your head.

Little else matters if your steering is inaccurate, so this should be assessed first and foremost. Then see where the other boats are and consider if the crew is rowing to their potential. This feedback and subsequent adjustments made, forms the essentials of tactical control of the race. If you are positioned well and travelling well then your focus moves to discipline and patience and working on maintaining the same speed with increased efficiency and ongoing concentration. This does not necessarily mean that you are in front, but you may identify that you are moving faster than the other boats and what is required is patience from yourself and the crew and the confidence to let time take care of your eventual position. The crew needs to know this and draw confidence from your feedback and accurate assessment.

The Middle 1000

Your position may, of course, be less than ideal and you will need to take the initiative in making positive adjustments to the speed of the boat. Once again, it needs to be communicated to the crew that they must improve their speed and what they should focus on, as a unit, to achieve this. Decisive action at this point is best communicated succinctly and should focus on what the crew can adjust to add speed to the boat, whether it be additional power or a technical focus. Again, feedback to the crew is imperative and should make reference to the adjustment made, the speed of the boat and the position of the crew in the race.

This is performed more easily in a well-drilled crew. Having the luxury of some hours training where you have been able to reveal aspects of the stroke that add speed to your boat when focused on, and are able to communicate it to the crew succinctly using cues that you have used previously, makes this task more straightforward. In a crew that is less well prepared, keeping instructions simple and calls universal increases the chances that each rower will be able to understand, embrace and deliver your concepts to enhance the speed and efficiency of the boat.

The other aspect to consider in what you say through this long section of the race is variety in your communication. What can amount to longer than 3 minutes is a significant period of time with the rowers progressively becoming more fatigued as the race unfolds. As discussed, while the crew is moving fast through the first 500m, shorter, sharper words and phrases can implicitly assist the movements of the crew. When it is time to stretch out in the middle part of the race, more control and calm in your voice serves to settle the crew and ensures your voice retains relevance in both the current and ensuing situation. Just as a good musical composition or film captures and sustains attention and induces a particular reaction in the audience as it unfolds, effective communication from the coxswain will use effective variation in pace, tone and content.

Periods of quiet, in the second 500m in particular, are very useful. This ensures that when you use your voice later in the race the crew is more likely to register the importance of the message and has not consigned your efforts to background noise. Anyone who has trained for significant periods of time with a coach's launch (speedboat) following closely also understands that periods of silence are valuable to be able to better sense the movement, balance and rhythm of the boat. The most important time for the crew to focus on these things is usually in establishing the fast, efficient and sustainable run in the second 500m, so allowing the crew to focus and feel without distraction is invaluable.

The Middle 1000

As you move in to the third 500m and the crew is exhausting their energy, the Cox is able to use more colour and contrast that has been held in reserve in their intonation and allow the communication to become more primitive. This helps to break through the growing condensation of fatigue that the rowers are experiencing and communicates the gathering urgency of the impending sprint.

Finally, exercising control in the early stages of the middle 1000m requires discipline. This is a feature that is necessary not only in a measured approach to your use of voice, but also in delivering the race-plan. Thorough knowledge and accurate execution of the predetermined approach to the race can rarely, if ever, be faulted and the Cox is charged with the responsibility of ensuring the plan is delivered with precision and conviction. Depending on the experience of the crew and the coxswain, and the situation at hand, nuances in the implementation and departures from the plan can be taken as the situation demands. Commonly, the temptation to gain extra advantage or catch-up lost ground earlier in the race can lead to failure to adhere to the assignment and frustration at not settling into the race appropriately at the start of the middle thousand. This is where the Cox needs to be disciplined, take control and dictate the terms of the task to the crew. Demanding commitment and execution from the oarsmen commands little gravity if comparable faith and diligence has not been invested by the coxswain. Discipline and a meticulous performance will be rewarded with a corresponding response from your athletes, an outcome of the mutual respect and earned authority that distinguishes an accomplished Cox.

The Finish

Completing the closing quarter of a 2000m rowing race is as demanding a physical challenge as any in the world of sport. Coxswains directing and encouraging a crew over this ninety-odd seconds do well to understand the peculiar extremity of endurance that is encountered when driving a boat over the finish line at maximum speed having already invested untold energy in positioning the boat for this flourish. The nature of the communication made by the cox must reflect the state of rowers' awareness at this stage, considering the turmoil they are often experiencing. In order to understand the approach to the final 500m from the coxswain's perspective it is best to consider the varying scenarios crews will encounter approaching the finish line.

There are essentially 3 situations that a crew can find themselves in when approaching the final sprint of a race. Either they can be in front and looking to maintain their advantage to the line; behind and needing to catch a crew or crews to improve their place; or they can be approximately level and bracing themselves for a ding-dong tussle to the line. Simply put, the aim of getting your boat to the finish line as fast as it will possibly go implies that the approach to this final 500m would be the same regardless of which position you are in, and this could well be the case if the format of boat racing is routinely a time-trial, however we all know that it is not. The psychological perception, as anyone who has approached the finish of a contest in close proximity to an equally motivated rival knows, is quite different to if you were propelling your craft on your own and influences the physical reality of an athlete or team's performance. How this perception influences the crew, their reaction to the competition pressure and whether it is dealt with as an incentive, detraction or distraction is largely dependent on the coxswain and a good, if not excellent one will react to each situation and vary their approach in order to gift their athletes the best chance of delivering their best result in each situation.

If you're ahead:

For the crew that is in front, the need to maintain speed, or improve their speed to see off a faster finishing crew is the foremost challenge. The risk is that they will become distracted and lose focus, either by the oncoming opponent or their own fatigue. This crew, having propelled themselves to the lead initially, obviously has the ability to move the boat effectively and the cox can be integral in ensuring that their potential to maintain their position in the lead is realized. The big risk for a crew in this position is the worst enemy of the leading crew, the element of panic.

If the rowers do not have an awareness of the situation, as informed by the cox, they will look for answers themselves and try to make changes independently. Rowers may look out of the boat at the approaching threat, try to ascertain the distance to the finish and take their own initiative to improve the speed of the boat, often with the opposite effect. It is in these situations that leading crews are vulnerable. A cox in this situation must ensure that the crew keeps a cool head and they act together.

This is best achieved by identifying and acknowledging the threat of the oncoming crew and exactly quantifying the task at hand, then focusing the crew's attention internally. When delivering commands in this scenario, so as not to evoke tension and dramatic disruptive reactions, the facts are best presented calmly and in a cool detached tone. Tell the crew that pressure is coming, or an effort is being made by another boat and that there is 'x' amount of distance to the line. All the rowers are then reading from the same hymnbook, and to ensure they are all singing in tune the cox should then say what they must do to hold their speed and how they will do it.

Common pitfalls when being chased by a crew to the line is to repeat the threat in ever increasing shrill tones which has the distinct resemblance to an alarm or siren, and usually evokes the conditioned response of panic at worst and annoyance at best, as anyone who has heard a fire alarm or ambulance siren can attest. Announcing the threat of another crew runs the risk of shifting the focus to the other boat at a time when it is most important to be within your own crew. Communicating the challenge succinctly and dispassionately and building your own crew's confidence and concentration within a distinct set of parameters (such as number of strokes remaining or distance to the line) ensures that your crew has the best chance of staying on track to hold their advantage until the finish.

If you're behind:

When your crew is behind, the task is quite different. In this situation speed must be improved to mount pressure on the leading crew, so rather than maintaining speed and keeping cool to stave off a challenge, active efforts should be made to improve the speed and build momentum. While the boat will not increase in speed sustainably if great compromises are made in technique, form and timing, often this occurs depending on how well drilled and executed any shift in gear is by the crew. It is the task of the cox in this situation to quantify the challenge at hand, motivate the crew to change speed, unify them in delivering this change and capitalizing on momentum achieved during this effort. The crew needs to initially know exactly how much distance they are in arrears for the reasons mentioned earlier as well as to communicate the urgency of any potential chase. In motivating the crew it is best to remember 2 things.

Firstly, time is not on your side, as with every passing second the finish line, and your opponent's victory, approaches and secondly, the athletes you are communicating to are at the extremes of exhaustion and their brain's higher processing centres are appreciably compromised. With these in mind, words of motivation to generate a celebrated effort should be succinct, relevant and somewhat primal. Long speeches serve to make avid oarsmen impatient and frustrated for the opportunity to initiate a sprint as well as subtly de-emphasizing the urgency of required action. The crew will also not be in a position to register much of what is said as the distraction and interference of fatigue and the instincts of survival in this state compete with your message. For this reason, simple, guttural calls are effective at these times. Keeping calls clear and brusque, not deviating from the proposition at hand and using repetition, rhythm and even rhyme in your calls is effective (such as Pedal to Metal, Foot to the Floor, Be Brave, Teeth-gnashing, Fighting for it). This last point abets your words of motivation, as athletes that are clouded by fatigue are still able to receive the message if not the actual words verbatim.

Once the crew is informed and galvanized for their effort the anticipated change must be made together to maximize change in speed, ignite momentum and pressure the opponent. In cueing the crew to push, instructing them to sit tall, focus internally and breathe up prepares them for your call. Then deliver the command to move using one focus, with total commitment, and if possible some flair, such as 'Launching for the line using legs... this one Now'. Simple rhythmical repetition of the focus of the push here assists the crew in building a new rate and rhythm. If your move is successful in achieving greater velocity towards the finish and you close the gap on a leading crew, momentum is important and excitement, praise and reinforcement from the cox is vital. Announcing your presence on the scene to your opponent, however, should be deferred as long as possible to delay the opportunity for a response from them and to pressure them and their cox into an attitude of hysteria, much the same as you are trying to avoid when you're the leading crew.

If you're behind:

For this reason, more hushed, deep and determined tones to maintain focus and to keep your crew approaching in stealth mode works well initially after moving in speed to close down a lead. This allows you to raise the volume, tone and become far more vocal as the crews draw increasingly level. This will serve to rev your crew after being initially more subdued and somewhat ambush your opponent's attention. In any case, the importance of re-enforcing the task ahead to your crew, the work already done and the internal focus on your own boat speed is imperative. Once momentum is on your side, forceful repetition with rhythm and encouragement from the cox maximizes the chance of an able crew edging themselves ahead in a final sprint scenario.

When you're level with other crews:

For crews that are level, with the realization that only one can win, cool heads will usually prevail, however this assertion is qualified with the point that one crew must do something decisive to prove the difference and be the first to cross the line. A balance between the approaches mentioned needs to be struck, and these situations are often the most challenging as each crew usually has the capacity to prevail. Wholesale changes in technique and pressure have the potential to be counter-productive here, so I like to talk about turning up dials rather than flicking switches. When you are 'bow-ball to bow-ball' with an opponent with the finish approaching you obviously have been doing something right in terms of speed, so strive to make improvements on your existing form rather than straying too far from the current playbook. Asking the crew to add more arm draw, more speed of the bodies, or more power from the hips off the catch is helpful, or more speed of the hands around the turns... Regardless of what you focus on, 'More' of what is working is usually better than adding in a new concept with the capacity for disruption of a potentially winning formula. Another consideration is that often the crew that prevails in a tight contest is the one that falls apart the least. Fatigue, distraction, even despair, can impact on each crew. Disregarding dramatic calls for effort and power and focusing on keeping your rowers alert and upbeat with good form may be the decisive factor in maintaining your speed above the downward-spiralling speed of your opponents.

A good, simple approach to adopt in most occasions when completing the final 500m is to remember 5 things to communicate to your crew. The situation; the required action; any essential preparation; the appropriate reaction and; finally, and importantly, to minimize distraction. In all your communication you must remember that momentum and change can be elicited, encouraged and re-enforced using good tone and tempo. Calls should also be clear, simple and succinct. And remember, when things are going well, change is unnecessary, even risky, so silence is satisfactory, especially when the finish is so close. Your attention at this time is often best kept on steering, calculating distances and strokes and monitoring the other crew.

Finally, I usually call the race over after a good stroke or two over the line. Never rely on a beep in a close race, or when you think your bow has crossed the line. I will preferably cross the line myself just to be sure, but your crew will never complain about you calling easy or row light one stroke too late, but one stroke too early can be disastrous. Be in a hurry to get to the line, but don't be in a hurry to finish.

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