Coaching the Coxswain:

A Guide for the Rowing Coach who Never Coxed

Special extract for Rowperfect Newsletter subscribers.

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Rowperfect

For Coach B
whose thoughtful and disciplined approach to coaching
Inspired this book.

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Introduction

This book is not a coxswain manual.

This book is for coaches. Specifically, it is for coaches who row – and who never coxed in a competitive capacity.

If you are a seasoned rowing coach with years, or even decades, of rowing and coaching experience under your belt, then you may wonder why anyone would expect you to read this book. I certainly don't – I expect that most coaches who hear of it won't even pick it up.

I do expect this book to help rower-coaches, though, because rowing does not, ever, teach someone to cox. No amount of rowing experience alone can adequately prepare a coach to coach a coxswain.[1]

How could it, after all? If you were a rower, no one ever showed you how to steer a boat or execute drills or "motivate" (we'll get to why this is in quotation marks later). All your experience with coxswains comes from remembering what your coxswains did during your competitive career. You use what you remember, combined with how you think it *should* work, to instruct your coxswain as best you can. Then, by God, she [2] isn't doing her job the way you just told her to do it! What is wrong with her?!

In this text, we will start with some communication strategies to put you back in control of what's happening on the water. Next, we're going to profile the worst coxswains you've ever had and talk about how they got that way.

Then I'm going to walk you through how to train a coxswain starting from her very first day inside the boathouse. First, we'll go over what to do with her before she gets on the water. Once she is on the water, I'll give you a series of lessons to teach your coxswain. The lessons are divided into three separate levels, which I'll explain later. We'll also talk about how to prepare your coxswain for races in the fall and spring. The levels go in order, but you should skip right to the chapter on racing as your crew approaches its first big race. Come back to the Three Levels after you have readied your coxswain to race.

I should reiterate that this book is not a coxswain manual. Please do not hand it to your coxswain and expect her to read it. That's not how you teach someone to cox. It doesn't work.

Why doesn't it work? Here's why. Coxing is not a knowledge-based ability; it's based on skills. Unlike memorized knowledge, skills require demonstration and practice. A few coxswains can figure stuff out on their own. Those are the two good ones you have right now. Then you have a handful who you're pretty sure won't crash. Let's be honest, though. Most of your coxswain prospects quit.

What if you could decrease the number of coxswains who quit, and increase the number of good ones, by teaching all your coxswains the most crucial skills of coxing?

This book shows you exactly which lessons to teach. There's no pussyfooting around either – you're getting examples of exactly what to do and say.

[1] If you need more reasons to read this book, I recommend the following article on this book's companion website: http://coachingthecox.wordpress.com/2011/07/22/why-you-definitely-want-to-spend-time-coaching-your-coxswains

[2] Throughout this book I will refer to coxswains using female pronouns because "he/she" is awkward and the majority of coxswains are female.

After Level Three, your coxswain by no means knows everything about coxing. Rather, she has reached a solid level of ability so you can rely on her help as you make the rowers faster. Also, if you follow all the instructions, the coxswain should never make a mistake that costs you a race. Admit it, it's happened. Remember how frustrated you were? Let's just eliminate those frustrations from your life,
shall we?

If you coxswain is not a beginner, start her at the first lesson she has not already mastered. Reality check: your coxswain has not mastered all of the stuff in here. I wrote this book, and I have not mastered every single lesson in it. I've made a lot of mistakes as a coxswain. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have known what to put in here.[3]

Although coaching a coxswain differs significantly from coaching a rower, an ex-rower with the right knowledge can become extremely effective at coaching his coxswains. That's you.

Now have a look, and then go coach some coxswains to awesomeness.

A Note on Terminology:

I'm American. I have used American terminology in this book. I know that many readers of this book will have coxed, rowed and coached in other countries. Usually I'll list the non-American term along with the American one the first time I use it. Also, here's a little translation manual:

Crew = the sport of rowing as well as the individuals you row with

Dock = pontoon

House = boat house = shed = boat shed

Port = stroke side

Practice = outing / training session

Set = balance

Shell = boat

Skeg = fin

Starboard = bow side

Weigh enough = easy oars = stop rowing

Wrench = spanner

[3] **Pro Tip**: if your coxswain claims to know everything in here, start with Level Two, Lesson One: The Point. I don't care if she has been coxing for nine years and knows exactly what a point is; I guarantee you she has not made a habit of constant vigilance about her points.

Why Your Cox Isn't Doing What You Want Her to Do

Nothing frustrates you more than telling someone perfectly clearly what to do and then watching the person flounder around and not do it. You told your third-year coxswain to take the second full arch from the left under Columbia Bridge and then watched helplessly as the boat went through the third arch. You asked your novice coxswain to start rowing with stern six, watched the boat sit there for forty seconds, and then, in the interest of time, just made the call yourself. Can't these people count? If they could only learn to pay attention to your instructions, they could become much better coxswains, so what seems to be the problem?

You can use two communication strategies to make coxswains follow instructions:

Communication Strategy #1:

Tell the coxswains in plain English what you want them to do.

I know, I know. This sounds super obvious. Bear with me, though. Sometimes it's easy to overestimate how clear your instructions really are.

Let's look at our first example, where the experienced coxswain went through the wrong arch of the bridge. Here is a picture of Columbia Bridge on the Schuylkill River so non-Schuylkillers will understand what I'm talking about.

[4]

We are looking at the bridge from downstream. The traffic pattern on the Schuylkill is clockwise, so boats always proceed on the left side of the river. Thus, arches 1,2, and 3 are upstream arches and 4,5, and 6 are downstream arches.

Do you see how arch 1 goes into the trees on shore? Its leftmost abutment rests onshore, so some coaches do not consider this a full arch – they consider arch 2 the first full arch from shore and arch 3 the second full arch from shore. Other coaches regard arch 1 as a full arch, so for these coaches the "third full arch" means arch 3. For the first coach, there is no "third full arch" within the traffic pattern, only two going upstream and three going downstream.

Now, suppose that two coaches with different worldviews on the arch situation both coach for the same team. Suppose, also, that the coxswain in question has worked largely with the first coach but is working today with the second coach. The second coach assumes that the coxswain will interpret the term "second full arch" one way, but the coxswain interprets it a different way – the way the first coach would have wanted. She confidently points through arch number 3, only to have her coach stop the boats upstream of the bridge and yell at her

[4] Photo courtesy of Michael Murphy, posted to Flickr in 2006.

about following simple instructions. A bold coxswain becomes enraged by the speech and loses a respect for the coach. A more timid one becomes traumatized and loses confidence.

The example illustrates a crucial point. **Unless you tell the coxswain exactly, one hundred percent, in no uncertain terms, what it is you want her to do, she might not do exactly, one hundred percent, whatever you had in mind.**

My novice coach compares coaching to teaching a child how to make a peanut butter sandwich. You cannot forget to explain how to open the peanut butter jar! If a four-year-old has the savvy to untwist the cap, then he has to face the safety seal. The handle on the safety seal is about the size of a tic tac, and there's no label that says "peel here." Kids can't find it. So they solve the problem by stabbing the top with a knife. Now, due to an assumption and a failure to explain, the kid's default opening maneuver is to stab things. Good. And you can *forget* about him putting the cap back on at the end.

You have to recognize your assumptions and consider whether they require explanation.

For example, for instructions about a physical landmark, it helps to describe some visual characteristic unique to the landmark, rather than to use a potentially ambiguous label. For example, you might try a command like "Go through the second arch, the one with the Villanova symbol on it." This level of detail usually isn't necessary after the first time you use the command. Once you and your coxswain understand each other, the "second arch" will probably do. **By ensuring clarity the first time around, you save time in the long run that you otherwise have to spend repositioning the boat or yelling at the coxswain.**

I call it the **Peanut Butter Sandwich Rule.**

The Peanut Butter Sandwich Rule applies to any warm-up, drill, or workout. You save everyone lots of time and grief if you go through the sequence, piece by piece, with your coxswain.

Suppose you tell the coxswain that you want to warm-up with rolling sixes, each six doing ten strokes legs only and ten strokes full slide, and the same sequence all eight. Now, the way I just said that presents a minefield of possible misconceptions, especially to a relatively new coxswain or a coxswain who has spent much of her time working with another coach. Do you want the cox to go through the sixes and eight first with just the legs only strokes, then a second time with the full slide strokes – or would you prefer that each set instead do the twenty stroke sequence all together? Do you want the sequence done all eight between each six, or only at the end, after each six has gone? For a novice coxswain, the confusion might begin as early as "What the deuce is a rolling six?"

A better way to explain this the first time to an experienced coxswain might go something like this: "Start with stern six. Have them go ten strokes legs only, then ten strokes full slide. Same thing through each six. Finally, at the end, run the sequence once with all eight rowers. Weigh enough when you're finished." This takes about seven seconds longer to say than the first way. (Yes, I just tried it.) It's worth the extra time because you won't have to stop the coxswain or re-do the drill if it goes wrong.

You might be thinking one of three things right now:

1. “Chelsea, it sounds like you’re asking me to treat my coxswain like an idiot. Who needs that much explanation?”

   In most situations, you are right. The critical situation that we are discussing here, though, is when you are asking the cox to do something a little bit different from anything you have ever asked her to do before. The worst that could happen is that you’re telling the coxswain something she already knows. She’ll look at her stroke, and her stroke will look at her, and one of them will roll her eyes, and the other one will laugh – and that will be the end of it. After that, the coxswain will proceed to do exactly what you want her to do. Remember, you can usually simplify the command after the first time you ask a coxswain to do something. In fact, you should simplify it. Here’s why:

2. “Chelsea, this extra explanation might just confuse my coxswain, who might think I’m asking her to do something more complicated than I actually am.”

   This is why you should simplify the command after the first time you give it. If you have asked a coxswain to roll sixes several times in the past, she probably doesn’t need you to tell her which pair to add in and which to take out in what order. Moreover, if it’s just a warm up, chances are you don’t care too much about the order, or else you just expect her to do it in the same order everyone at your team always does it. That’s fine – don’t explain it when the coxswain has previously demonstrated that she does not need the explanation. It is in the absence of this previous demonstration that you should be extra clear, just to make sure.

   If the coxswain says that she is confused about what you want, then you can try simplifying the instruction: “I just want you do these twenty strokes with each six.” If this fails, it is possible that your explanation actually wasn’t clear or detailed enough. **If a coxswain seems unsure about your command and you cannot tell if the command was too complicated or too simple, try simplifying it before expanding it.**

3. “Chelsea, how am I supposed to detect my own assumptions so I can explain them? They’re my assumptions, so clearly I don’t actively think about them. How do I notice them if I never think about them?”

   A little bit of trial and error will help you sniff them out. Here’s a good tipoff: the command sounds perfectly clear to you and the coxswain still doesn’t get it. You can tell that the coxswain doesn’t get if she asks questions about the command, gets in an argument with the stroke seat, takes an unusually long time to start doing what you said, or does it incorrectly. If she’s taking forever, you can ask her whether she gets it or whether she needs clarification. This will give her the opportunity to ask, in case she is nervous about asking, while letting her know that you expect her to get moving. If she does it wrong, stop her. Before you yell at her, though, consider whether your instruction could have ben interpreted to mean whatever it was she did. If so, then congratulations! You just found an assumption. Now you know to explain that particular thing to coxswains who are new, or who are new to you, in the future. That way you won’t ever have to correct their execution on that thing again.

If it couldn't have been interpreted to mean whatever it was your coxswain did, then you know she wasn't really listening. It's the coxswain's responsibility to listen to you, so in this case, she should have paid attention.

Communication Strategy #2: Make sure your coxswains can hear you.

This sounds twice as obvious as the first strategy did, but it's easy to lose audibility. Launch motors roar really loudly. Megaphones break. Vast expanses of water magically appear between crews and their launches during the course of regular drills and pieces. These obstacles make it difficult or impossible for coach and cox to hear one another, let alone to run a productive practice together.

You have the power to solve audibility problems by tweaking your commands. Think of a command right now — any command you might give your coxswain. Now, we will make it easier to understand by tacking on some finishing touches:

1. **Add the coxswain's name to the beginning of the command.**

   Hearing a person's own name evokes a strong response in the brain unique from any other word.[5] Because of this, your coxswain is most likely to hear and listen to you if you key her in first using her name.

2. **Once you have your coxswain's attention and you give the command, add this onto the end: "Okay?" or "Do you understand?"**

   This gives the coxswain the opportunity to say if she could not hear you. Additionally, this lets the cox ask for clarification on a command, providing a catch-all in case she did not understand the explanation.

3. **Ask all your coxswains to acknowledge your commands by raising a hand after you finish saying something.**

   The hand-raise means that the coxswain heard and understood the command and that you can expect the boat to perform whatever you asked. The hand-raise is highly visible and easy to spot, even across large expanses of water. In fact, while you're at it, you might make up some more hand-signal language so you can tell coxes what to do when they can't hear you. When you wave your hands back and forth with the palms facing downward, most coxswains will pick up that this means stop the boat. Creating a circling tornado in the air with your whole arm gives a pretty clear signal to turn around. Whether or not you decide to get creative with the hand signals, definitely ask your coxswain to always raise her hand to acknowledge commands. This drastically improves coach-coxswain communication.

   Remember our second example of miscommunication from the beginning of the chapter: the novice cox who seemed to ignore the command to begin rowing with stern six. Had this coxswain known to raise her hand, then you would know whether the coxswain had heard or understood. (No hand with silence probably means the coxswain didn't hear it. Most coxswains will ask a question if they hear but don't understand, assuming you have not made them scared to admit that they don't know everything).

[5] Folmer, RL and CD Yingling (1997). "Auditory P3 Responses to Name Stimuli." Brain Language 56:2, 306-11.

If a coxswain raises her hand and then the command does not happen right away, a number of things may have occurred. In the case of this novice, she may just be trying to remember the calls to go with that action. Give her a second to figure things out before shouting at her. Beginner coxswains sometimes need to think about the calls because they only recently memorized these calls. It's the same as when you need to think for a minute before remembering a word that you recently memorized for a vocabulary test. You know the answer; you just need a second. Obviously, if you encounter this same situation with a more advanced coxswain, the problem probably isn't the call. There may be an equipment issue, or the coxswain may have raised her hand without actually understanding what you wanted her to do. Tell her again what the hand raise means. She needs to catch on pretty quickly. If she doesn't catch on, she's not listening to you. Feel free to reprimand: she needs to listen!

You can almost always assume that coxswains don't botch or ignore commands out of outright disobedience. If a coxswain wanted to outright disobey commands, she probably would have disobeyed the command to wake up at five o' clock in the morning and launch herself into the middle of the river in a hollowed out toothpick. If you have a coxswain who regularly disrespects your authority, then you don't have a coaching issue – you have a disciplinary issue.

The Worst Coxswains You've Ever Had

You know who I'm talking about. Nobody liked her. Maybe she couldn't steer or make the most basic calls. Maybe she talked so quietly that no one could hear her, or so unsurely that the rowers themselves were terrified to obey her. Or maybe she was the exact opposite: a drill sergeant who liked to assign push-ups for talking in the boat. Every team, at some point, has a coxswain that none of the rowers want in the boat. That coxswain rarely enjoys practice, and the rowers often wind up frustrated. In the worst case, social rifts form against the coxswain, completely disrupting the team atmosphere.

Before we talk about teaching your coxswains and making them better, let's look at some common bad coxswain qualities. Here are four profiles of hated coxswains. If you recognize one of your own coxes in here, congratulations! You are (well, she is) not alone. We'll explore how coxswains develop these bad qualities and how to get rid of them in the future.

WARNING: as I talk about how coxswains develop these bad qualities, I will point out the coach's mistakes. If you, as a coach, get offended easily, I recommend that you put down this book, read something other book about accepting criticism, and then come back when you're ready. I'm not here to offer love, praise, and ginger snaps. I'm here to teach you the strategies to make your coxswains awesome.

Strap in soldier. Here we go.

Hated Coxswain Profile #1: The Incompetent Coxswain

The incompetent coxswain cannot get down a buoyed lane without hitting the buoys, and she never knows what to say outside of basic execution drills. Maybe she fills the dead space with the latest gossip or a weather report. Maybe she can't help rowers improve their form. Maybe she tells her boat that the faster they reach the finish line, the sooner they can eat the cookies back at the tent (this one particularly pisses off that one lightweight who always has to bring down the boat weight average). Or maybe – oh, the horror – she calls 24 power tens end-to-end all the way down the 2k course.

The incompetent coxswain cannot steer or execute anything because no one teaches her to steer or execute anything. Coaches forget to break things down for a new coxswain, and then the coxswain never learns how to do it the right way. Remember the **Peanut Butter Sandwich Rule:** explain all the steps the first time around. You can use this rule to prevent incompetent coxswains. We'll talk soon about how to start the novice coxswain. If you already have an incompetent coxswain on your hands, then you'll have to start from scratch with her training. Sorry. It sucks, but we already established that she actually can't steer or execute anything. You may even have to break bad steering habits and other behaviors. We'll get to this stuff, too.

Hated Coxswain Profile #2: Whisper Kid

Whisper Kid learned in cotillion class to never raise her voice – not even to shout "watch riggers" down a sixty foot long shell. Most of the time, especially on land, the bow four have no idea that this coxswain is even speaking. Even over the cox box, the bow seat can hardly hear her. Sometimes the shyness comes from lack of confidence – an issue we will talk more about when we get to our next category of hated coxswain – but more often, Whisper Kid is a relatively inexperienced cox who hasn't gotten her bearings yet.

These coxswains often benefit from seeing more experienced coxswains in action, especially when maneuvering the boat on land without the aid of the cox box. Usually, one of two things happens. Either the coxswain acclimates pretty quickly and pumps up the volume on her own, or she realizes that she does not have the personality to cox and she quits the program.

Hated Coxswain Profile #3: "Um"

"Um" coxswain hems and haws over almost every call and often changes her mind about what she wants the rowers to do. She fears the disapproval of the coach and the rowers, but her reservations about taking control earn her exactly that. She lacks the confidence to make a decision and then stick with it. Sometimes the coxswain's personality predisposes her to this trait. Other times the unsure behavior comes from confusion about what is expected of her – what she should be saying or doing.

You can solve this, of course, with simple and clear instruction about the coxswain's jobs and expectations at every step throughout her training. We will break down these instructions and expectations later.

Beginning novice coxswains will naturally take a little time to make decisions. When more experienced coxswains show indecisiveness, the problem doesn't usually come from a lack of knowledge about what she is supposed to say. Constant nitpicking and correction in the past – from a coach or from a rower – may have damaged her confidence. Usually the coach or rower did not mean to do this: more likely, he planned to make the coxswain perfect by correcting each little mistake until the coxswain didn't make any of those little mistakes anymore. Thanks to constant correction, the constant expectation of perfection, the coxswain has never been forced to trust her own judgment. Now she doesn't believe in it. She is desperately afraid of failure; she avoids taking a bold stab at the answer because she wants to avoid launching into the wrong answer.

Reestablishing confidence will require an understanding between the coach and the cox. You can establish this by reassuring the coxswain that you are not going to freak out if she asks a question to clarify what she should do. Encourage clarification questions; they prevent you from having to re-explain or restart an activity.

The really paranoid coxes may even need the assurance that the coach will not freak out if she makes a mistake. When this trust is established, you can command the coxswain to start **following through with her first call every time**, even if she realizes half a second later that she should have called something else. When the same situation arises a second time, the coxswain might repeat the mistake. The third time, though, maybe she'll remember and immediately make the correct choice. Each decision that she is forced to make *quickly* may take multiple tries to get right, but by insisting that the coxswain execute the first call she makes, you teach the coxswain to decide quickly and with confidence.

As the coxswain makes the same mistake again and again, you're totally allowed to become less accepting of the mistake. Indeed, for a more confident coxswain, a quick snapping at might be just the right medicine for a repeat mistake. With a self-conscious coxswain, though, a more gradual approach might better fit the situation. As the coxswain grows more confident, the rowers' trust in her will increase, and they will question her less often when she makes a call. A reduction in direct challenges from rowers will allow the cox to become quite sure of herself.

Hated Coxswain Profile #4: Sergeant Pain

"Um" coxswain's opposite, Sergeant Pain, takes aggressive control of her crew – and not the good kind of "aggressive". She quickly gets frustrated when her rowers mess up, and she tries to teach them some respect by screaming at them or threatening heinous punishment exercises. She knows that she is supposed to lead the crew, but she doesn't really know how to get the crew to follow.

Someone probably told this coxswain that she was supposed to be "the boss". The coxswain does not quite understand what the coach means by "boss". As you know, the healthy rower-coxswain relationship is not master and servant. Instead, it is built on mutual trust. The rower trusts the coxswain to make good decisions, and the coxswain trusts the rowers to follow her decisions.

In this relationship it's okay for the cox to admit to the rowers that she isn't perfect – after all, rowers don't always execute the coxswain's calls perfectly either. As long as the rowers defer to the coxswain when it's time to move quickly and get things done, rowers and coxswains can both benefit from discussing, on an equal footing, the best way to make the boat move fast. In fact, when the subject is addressed with respect, coxswains can often improve by following the advice of their rowers.

Sergeant Pain has no idea that any of this is acceptable, and she probably would regard consulting the rowers as a mistake. You need to speak to the coxswain and crew together about mutual trust; the athletes will all understand better that they are partners in achieving boat goals.

Before your Coxswain Gets on the Water

(estimated training time: 1-2 practices)

Your brand new coxswain just walked in, and you want to start her training. She isn't ready to go on the water yet, though. First, she needs to learn about your two biggest priorities – safety and preservation of equipment. Days one and two consist of on-land lessons about those two priorities, because you don't want your coxswain driving a boat until she understands them. You'll also want to teach her a little bit about coxswain-specific equipment so she knows how to use the things that she brings with her onto the water.

Let's start with your two biggest priorities. From there, we'll move on to the basics of coxswain-specific equipment.

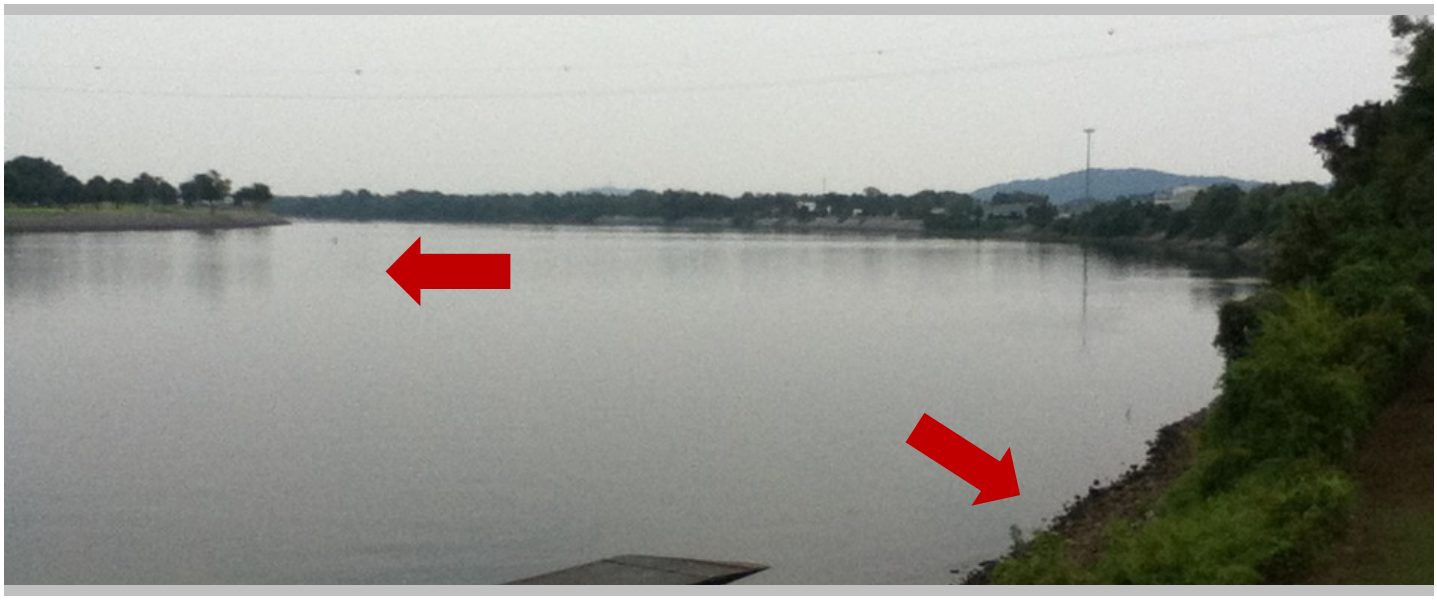
1 Safety

Teach safety before you teach anything else. Human safety is the number one priority.

By minimizing the risk of harm to your crews, you protect both your athletes and your program's reputation. Your athletes are your most valuable asset. Your program's reputation is your second most valuable asset because it draws in or drives away future athletes.

Step One: When your coxswain shows up for her first practice, immediately park her in front of a television and show her a rowing safety video. The USRowing safety video gets the point across about how to handle emergencies (despite its comically bad acting). There are two reasons that I recommend you show a video rather than tell her about safety. First, when she sees the emergencies on video, she will know what to look for in real life. Second, when your coxswain watches a video, she gets to both see and hear about the emergencies, and humans remember things better when they learn using multiple senses.[6] I apply this to teaching as often as I can, and I call it the **Show-Me Principle.**

Step Two: When the new coxswain finishes watching the safety video, it's time to take her to the boat bay. Actually, take her through the boat bay and out onto the dock. You want to point out any prominent hazards unique to the program's rowing venue (the Show-Me Principle at work). At some programs, for example, novice coxswains are famous for launching off the dock and drifting immediately into dangerous rock shoals. You can physically point out such hazards, then explain what the coxswain should do in order to avoid harm. We'll look at some examples in the picture on the next page.



In the above photo you see the tip of a launching dock at the bottom. To the right of the dock you can see that the riverbank comprises large, sharp rocks. If this were your river, you would point out those rocks as something for the novice to avoid. This also happens to be a wide river with regular tugboat and barge traffic. On the left side of the river in this picture is a large channel marked by red and green buoys. You wouldn't want the novice coxswain in the channel with all those big, powerful motorboats.

When you have pointed out the river hazards to your coxswain, it's time to go back in the boat bay and show your coxswain the equipment.

2 Preservation of Equipment

Teach proper preservation of equipment before you teach anything else, except for human safety. Preservation of equipment is the number two priority.

Of course, coaches mention respect for equipment in just about any activity that involves equipment. The coxswain might not listen here unless you tell her exactly how much the equipment costs – at my last checking, an 8+ cost between $28,000 and $33,000, and the oars went for around $2,500. No lacrosse stick even comes close.

Step One: Explain to the coxswain that her first priority at all times is the safety of the crew and her second priority at all times is the safety of the equipment.

WARNING: Assumption alert! You may believe that the bolded statement above is obvious to your coxswain. Say it anyway. Why? When she has to make quick decisions, especially at first, she will not rely on intuition. She will rely on what you told her. Hardwire her right now to put safety first, equipment second, and everything else after that. This is the Peanut Butter Sandwich Rule at work, saving you time and money later.

Of course, the majority of damage to equipment happens off the water when crews drop things on exposed shells or run the riggers or decks into unyielding objects. Emphasize equipment care as you teach a coxswain how to direct the crew while on land. Luckily, preservation of equipment is exactly the lesson you're teaching as you show your coxswain how to maneuver on land for the first time. It's like I planned it that way or something!

Step Two: Show your coxswain where you keep the oars and tell her how they will get onto the dock each day.

Emphasize carrying the oars with the blades in front. This way, the carrier keeps an eye on the blades to make sure they don't hit anything. Also, thanks to the way human arms are attached, carrying the oars with the blades in front makes them a lot harder to haphazardly wave around. (This advice especially applies to young rowers prone to using any long thin object as a jousting pole or other such weapon).

Step Three: Instruct the crew and cox about getting hands on the shell.

If you have a novice crew with the novice cox, then you'll need to spend some time explaining the calls to the rowers and coxswain. Explain each call, one by one. If the novices can watch an experienced crew get their shell get off the rack and launch, that will reinforce the message.

Step Four: show the coxswain where to stand and walk around the shell to watch out for potential collisions.

Where the coxswain stands is very important. For example, at some programs, the shells are stacked up so closely that the skeg/fin of one boat might get caught in the steering wires of the boat above it upon lifting the boat out of the rack. You should have the cox stand beside the skeg, even put her hand on top of it, to make sure that this does not happen. You'll also want her to stand next to the skeg when rolling the boat into the water so she can make sure that the skeg doesn't get scraped along the dock or, worse, placed on top of the dock because the shell wasn't out far enough when it went down and into the water.

While you're standing at the skeg, you can reach under the shell, move the steering, and show the coxswain that the rudder is moving. A coxswain can use her understanding of how the steering works later to think through how to turn the boat in the stage before steering becomes muscle memory.

Step Five: Say the on-land launching calls, exactly, word for word, to the coxswain, who must then repeat them to the crew.

If you want to prepare the launch or something rather than stand there with the coxswain, you could let an experienced rower feed calls to the coxswain. However, I don't recommend this for young athletes with strong personalities. Here's why: the "helping" rower sometimes develops an ego and attempts to gain the reverence of the novices. Then the "helper" intimidates the novices or gets the idea that it's okay to disregard your authority. I do not know why this happens, but you may have to babysit the coxswain yourself if you want to prevent it. You will probably have to feed the coxswain her lines five or six times over the course of the first week before she can get the boat out, correctly and confidently, completely by herself.

"Five or six times? Are you serious, Chelsea? Surely she can get the idea after one run-through. Maybe two."

She can get the idea, but she won't have all the calls exactly right. And if she forgets a call while she is all alone without a reference, she is going to make something up. We'll go over the danger of letting novice coxswains make stuff up in just a second.

"But come on, Chelsea, six? That's ridiculously annoying and time consuming."

Yes, it is time consuming, but you get out what you put in. A mediocre commitment to training coxswains will result in mediocre coxswains. You don't want mediocre coxswains. You want awesome ones.

Now that I've told you that general rule, I'll tell you how to cheat on this so you don't have to babysit the coxswain for two weeks. Provide your novice cox with a 5x7" laminated note card containing the sequence of calls for getting the boat onto and off of the water. The card can also have some very basic on the water calls. This way you can babysit the coxswain one time and then hand her the script to do it alone.

The cards streamline the process of getting onto and off of the water. If you have to launch multiple boats, start your own motor, and generally prepare for practice, the cards allow the novice coxswains to make the correct calls and get their boats onto the dock without requiring a babysitter.

Cards have other benefits, too: firstly, they reinforce the coxswain's role as the commander of the crew. The cox hears her own voice saying the commands, rather than repeating them after coach. The rowers become accustomed to listening to the coxswain's voice during on-land maneuvering. Their sensitivity to the coxswain's voice may save you several hundred dollars one day when the bow swings menacingly toward a brick wall and your coxswain, panicked, squeaks "ahhhhhh!" Of course, "ahhhhhh" technically means nothing, but it might spark the attention of a rower who is used to following that voice.

Secondly, the card gives the cox a point of reference on the dock or in the water that does not involve asking the coach what to do. Such self-sufficiency develops the coxswain's confidence and frees up the coach to focus on other things.

Without the card, the inattention of the coach, even for a second, can lay the foundations for a chronic miscall. How? If the coach is not around and the cox has no answer sheet, she will make up something that sounds kind of right. This is how we get awkward hybrid calls like "Sit ready to row in two. One……..(silence. Birds chirping. The rowers sit frozen at the catch position.) ……two…… (someone moves her hand. The boat flops to starboard.)….row…."(Everyone presses from the legs – slowly - because there is no sense of urgency. The boat lumbers up the river, still down to starboard.)

Rather than force the coxswain to guess and allow the wrong guesses to sink in, the card gives the beginning cox a chance to check her answer before she falls into bad habits.

Yes, eventually the coxswain has to make calls without a script. I acknowledge that the card might slow down the memorizing process because coxswains are not forced immediately to rely upon their own memory. Nevertheless, the calls are too simple to require a crutch for an extended period of time, and I find that the card extends the memorizing process by no more than a couple of days. It's worth it.

Here is an example of a call card, though the calls may differ at your program. Feel free to steal this. Print it, cross things out, write the calls for your favorite drills on the back – seriously, have at it. Punch a hole in the upper right and put a string to go around your coxswain's neck. Download a MS Word version of this for you to edit at www.rowperfect.co.uk/coaching-the-cox .

Out of the House:	**Into the House:**	**Pic Drill:**
Hands on	Hands on	Ready to row arms only, ready, row
Up an inch, and up	Roll to heads, ready, up	Add the body in two – 1, 2, now
Slide it out (of the racks)	Split to shoulders, and down	Half slide in two – 1, 2, now
Split to shoulders, and down	Walk it up	Full slide in two – 1, 2, now
Walk it out-house	Weigh enough	**Switching Rowers:**
Watch riggers!	Sidestep it over	Bow pair out, three and four in two – 1, 2, now
Scoot to the edge of the dock	Weigh enough	**Starting to Row:**
Over heads, ready, up	Set it down gently	Sit ready to row. Ready, row
Roll down and in	Ports wash the boat, starboards get oars *washing*	**Stopping Rowing:**
Launching:	Hands on	Weigh enough in two – 1, 2, weigh enough
Port oars across	Up to shoulders, and up	Down
One foot on the strip	Sidestep	**Turning:**
Down and in	Walk it in house	Ports check it down, starboards row
Ready to shove, and shove	Weigh enough	
	Slide it into the rack here	

3 Coxswain Equipment

After teaching the coxswain how to maneuver the boat on land, it's time to prepare the coxswain to get onto the water.

I use the Show-Me principle a lot for teaching coxswain equipment. Show your coxswain the cox box and explain how to charge it and unplug it as well as how to place it in the boat and connect it to the speakers. Show the speakers to the coxswain so she understands how the apparatus works. Show her how to turn the box on and off. At this point, she does not need to know what all of the numbers on the box mean. In fact, she shouldn't. If she attaches meaning to the numbers, she will want to look at the numbers. She isn't accustomed enough to coxing yet to be looking at the numbers. She needs to be looking at where she is going. She needs to look for obstacles and avoid crashes. So don't explain the numbers.

Do explain to the cox the purpose of the 7/16 or 10 wrench (10 mm and 13 mm spanner) and the adjustable wrench. She will need these on the water if a rigger comes loose and it needs tightening before practice can go on. You can link wrench carrying to the preservation of equipment, which she just learned about when she was introduced to the oars and boats. In the past, I have used the Show-Me Principle to teach this: I have gone so far as to intentionally leave a loose rigger so that the coxswain was forced to pass her wrenches to a rower on her first day. I did this to involve the coxswain in a situation where she needed her wrenches so she would attach importance to them and be less likely to forget them later. The equipment suffered no damage, and the coxswain always had a wrench when a rower needed one

Finally, you should recommend or provide a hat for the coxswain, especially in a stern-coxed boat. If she does not have one right away, provide one. Never let her on the water without one. The hat is crucial. Why is it so important? The hat stops the mic headband from slipping off the cox's head or messing with her hair. These annoyances sound trivial, but they give the cox an incentive to hold the mic in one hand rather than to wear it. Sure, you could just yell at the coxswain to wear it, but a hat does the same job more quickly and efficiently without giving the coxswain a reason to resent your instructions.

You have to pick your battles. This how-to-deal-with-the-mic thing is not a battle you want to fight. If the cox develops a habit of holding her mic, then she simultaneously develops the habit of steering with only one hand, which, especially in a stern-coxed boat, makes minor course adjustments impossible. Since steering falls among the coxswain's most important jobs, the diligent coach will take pains to promote attention to steering. Poor initial training on steering results in experienced competitive coxswains who still can't get down a course in a straight line. This will really stink one day when a top boat loses a race due to poor steering and you want to go ram your head into a wall – repeatedly. We'll talk more about steering in the sections that follow.

Once the coxswain understands basic safety procedure, knows to be careful of the equipment, and has her own gadgets in hand, she is ready to venture onto the water for the first time. She will need a lot of guidance from you on this first sojourn, but piece by piece, you can give her the tools to become successful.

On the Water Training: The Three Levels

The Three Levels provide a rowing coach with a systematic method for training the novice coxswain up to a high skill level.

Each level is designed around a goal for the coxswain. The goals are seriously the most important part of the whole thing, so do not skip over them. Before you begin lessons in any level, you should give the coxswain her new goal. All of the lessons in each level tie back into the goal. Your coxswains will understand the essence of coxing in a way that few coxswains do. Their understanding will prevent most of the vices of the hated coxswains and will fast track your coxswains to success.

Each level also has three sections. The three sections correspond to the coxswain's vital duties on the water: steering, execution, and technical correction. S.E.T. (I toyed with the idea of calling the training program "SET to Succeed" before realizing how much that sounded like an overexposed anti-drug campaign.) Each level contains lessons in each of these three categories.

In the first level, I recommend teaching all of the lessons in the order presented, starting with steering, working through execution, and then doing technique. In the second and third levels, the order is more fluid: though the lessons should be taught in the order presented within any one section, you may jump from section to section. For example, you might do a lesson in steering one day, then try something out of technique the next day, then technique again the day after that, then something from execution, then back to steering.

In general, I recommend moving at an absolute top speed of one lesson per day, and that would be at the most advanced level. In the beginning level, each lesson will probably take several days. (The exception here is the steering portion of Level One. All three of those lessons need to be taught on the very first day. However, those lessons alone should also be the focus of the next few days until the coxswain gets it, so the net days-per-lesson will probably still be greater than one.)

This works exactly like educating a rower. As a rower, you know how it feels to have a coxswain or coach list every single one of your consistent technique faults, one-time mistakes, and childhood sins during the course of one practice. It stresses you out and doesn't help to correct any of the problems because you never have the chance to focus on just one of them. Solid rowing technique comes piece by piece, one simple lesson at a time, so your body can commit each change to muscle memory before moving on to the next change. Coxswain coaching requires the same approach. A coxswain needs time to internalize each skill because, ultimately, she has to perform all of them at once.

Most importantly, the coach should ensure that the coxswain understands everything in one level before moving on to the next level. This may mean stopping to review some things after you have tried to teach all of the lessons. However, the lessons are in an order, albeit a loose one, for a reason. A coxswain with a poor foundation in steering will never please her rowers regardless of whether or not she knows when to ask her bow seat to get to full compression.

Steering, Execution, Technique…Wait, what about motivation?

I excluded motivation on purpose. People like to yell at me when I do this, but I don't really care because I have solid reasons for doing it. I didn't just do it because it messes up my cute acronym, and I certainly didn't do it because I don't think a coxswain should motivate a crew. A coxswain should motivate a crew. However, a coach should not *coach* a coxswain to motivate a crew.

Why? Here's why. Coaches (and rowers too, actually) tell coxswains that their primary jobs are to steer and to motivate the crew, and then the coxswains get the idea that they are supposed to be cheerleaders.

No.

The coxswain's vital jobs are to steer and get all the rowers working together.

For a rowing coach whose career was as a rower, not as a coxswain, it's tempting to coach coxes to motivate the crew. This is because, when you're looking at a coxswain's role from a rower's perspective (especially an experienced rower's perspective), you're already accustomed to the execution calls. It's easy to take those calls for granted because you're so used to hearing them and your own coxswain is (or last coxswain was) used to making them. This can disguise the fact that the execution calls are part of the coxswain's vital jobs. The vital jobs are vital because the boat needs them to function properly. These jobs are so important that you can find them in every functional racing shell, whether or not it has a coxswain. Take an uncoxed quad, for example. Does someone still steer the boat? Yes. Does someone still say who should row and when? Yes. Does someone sit back there and scream inspiring and motivational phrases to everyone else? Well…not in the fast quads, anyway.

Yes, I know that no one in a fast quad screams technical advice either. I concede that technical calls are also not part of the vital role of the coxswain. In this way they are like motivational calls: a non-vital but nonetheless very important part of the coxswain's job.

The difference between the two concepts is twofold, and it got the "T" accepted into "S.E.T." while leaving "M" on the outside. First, technical advice consists of a teachable base of knowledge. A coach can point out what the rowing stroke should look and feel like at optimal efficiency, and he can teach the coxswain how to identify deviations from the optimum look and feel. A hard leg drive and a clean catch will push the boat faster. A sluggish, poor leg drive in which the blade is inserted upside down with water splashing everywhere will not push the boat faster. These concepts are undeniable. Even the topics of debate in rowing form, like the flip-catch versus the early roll-up, have logic or physics backing up either side. Technique in rowing is, in this way, kind of like science.

Motivation, on the other hand, ventures closer to art – there's no necessarily correct way to do it, and two different coxswains could each find success with exact opposite motivational strategies. The production of motivational phrases does not employ logic. Instead, it requires creativity, which a coxswain has to possess or develop largely on her own.

This leads to the second difference between technique and motivation: knowledge of technique does not spontaneously generate in a coxswain's head the way a great motivational call does. Technique requires explanation from a coach. Thus, in these lessons, the coach explains it in detail. The fact that saying something inspiring will make people want to row faster does not require explanation. I have never seen a coxswain who had not figured this out.

Motivational ability will come naturally as a coxswain gains experience and confidence. First, the coxswain should learn to maneuver and command the shell. After that, she will start thinking of other things to say; she will develop the confidence to experiment in the boat by herself.

If a coach tries to force a coxswain to do motivate before she is ready, the result will sound exactly like that – forced. How many times have you been watching a novice boat go down the river when you heard a voice pipe up "come on, guys!" Come on guys? Seriously? It's the kind of thing my mother would say to coax the cat out of his carrier at the vet. It implies that the rowers aren't "coming on" already. At best, the call provides nothing for the rowers. At worst, it tells the rowers that they are not expected to "come on" every single stroke – only when the coxswain tells them to come on. The other classic forced motivation call, "keep up the pressure," does an even more stellar job of consoling the rower who takes an off stroke. To the novice rower, it implies that he doesn't have to "keep up the pressure" unless the coxswain tells him to. The experienced rower, on the other hand, is usually thinking "No shit Sherlock. Of course I'm keeping up the pressure. Are you saying you don't trust me to do my job?" These thoughts do the exact opposite of motivate a crew to its best physical performance.

If you feel strongly about encouraging a coxswain to motivate the rowers, I would recommend mentioning it only after the coxswain has mastered the basics of steering, execution, and technique from at least the first level. Ideally, it may even wait until after the second level.

Some Final Notes

Following each level you will find an outline listing the coxswain goal from the level and the titles of each lesson in the level. This outline can serve as a brief reminder for you to take on the water with you if you want it.

You'll also find a checklist at the end of each level. Do not skip it! Make sure it is completely finished before you move on.

Level One

(estimated training time: 3-10 weeks)

Coxswain's Goal: Earn the rowers' trust.

A healthy rower-coxswain relationship makes boats go faster, but few coxswains understand what a healthy rower-coxswain relationship looks like. After years of trying to figure out the common denominator in good coxswain-rower relationships, I found one: it's trust.

If all coxswains understood trust as the foundation of good coxing, we would have no Sergeant Pains. The rower-coxswain relationship is not one of master and slave, but the rowers must respect the coxswain's leadership

Rowers feel comfortable obeying a coxswain that they trust. They assume that the coxswain will execute the piece as well as she can, and they focus on their own rowing instead of on worrying about the coxswain.

In the ideal, trusting rower-coxswain relationship, the athletes do not judge one another for making mistakes. Instead, they can offer and accept constructive criticism from one another. Feedback can help a coxswain better respond to the needs of her crew. In fact, rowers can play a huge role in coaching their coxswain because they hear much more of what the coxswains say than you do. This goes the other way too: coxswains can help rowers improve by providing technical reminders. If the rower doesn't trust the coxswain to do this, then the rower can't benefit from the coxswain's help. The trust has to be there for crew members to make each other better. In a trusting relationship, rowers and coxswain can even collaborate at the appropriate times upon what might help the boat.

In this level, your coxswain will focus primarily on earning her rowers' trust as you guide her through a series of lessons in steering, execution, and technical correction.

At the end of this level, your coxswain should know the basics of maneuvering a rowing shell during practice. She should also know how to execute the drills and workouts you assign. Finally, she should be able to recognize the most obvious of technical issues, and she should begin to develop a sense of how to correct them.

I'd like to re-emphasize that **you should not move on to the next level until the coxswain has achieved the minimum expectations of all of these lessons;** these lessons lay the groundwork for everything that the coxswain will learn later.

Although the lessons in Level One are best taught in the exact order shown, you do not have to review them in that exact order. If a coxswain is having trouble with just a couple of the lessons here, you can go back and spend more time on those before moving onward. Coxswains will vary hugely in the amount of time they require to complete this level. A quick college coxswain might take three weeks. A novice, high school coxswain who has no siblings in the sport may take a full season to get all of this right. She still has all the potential to develop into an excellent coxswain.

Level One: Steering

How the lessons in steering relate to the goal: The first thing that a rower must trust the coxswain to do is steer the boat correctly. The rowers cannot see where they are going, and they literally blindly follow the direction of the cox. The cox must demonstrate her trustworthiness by, at this beginner level, basically staying out of trouble. We'll talk about picking a point, going straight, and steering the optimal, shortest course at a later time. (If you introduce all of that now, the coxswain will internalize none of it.)

1 The Strings/Lever

This is the basic mechanism that steers the shell. You can introduce your coxswain to the steering while standing at the boat rack immediately before the coxswain launches for the first time. Reach under the shell, move the steering, and show the coxswain that the rudder is moving. A coxswain can use her understanding of how the steering works to think through how to turn the boat in the stage before steering becomes muscle memory.

Once the boat is on the dock and the rowers are putting their oars in the oarlocks, you should take the coxswain to her seat and physically show her how the steering works. You will have one of three kinds of steering:

1. In a stern-coxed boat, push the port-side toggle forward and tell the cox that this will steer the boat to port. Then push the starboard toggle forward and tell the cox that this will steer the boat to the starboard.

   When you move the toggles, push them. Do not pull them. Pushing elicits a faster response from the boat.

2. In a bow-coxed boat with a lever attached under the bow that points toward the stern, you swing the handle towards port to go port and vice versa.

   If the steering moves opposite the method I just described, someone crossed the steering wires during installation. Get a boatman to fix it. (You can even do it yourself if the hull has the steering wires exposed. You can see them there in the top of this photo.)

3. For a lever on the side of the cockpit that goes forward and backward, you pull the lever to go port and you push it to go starboard. The Vespoli V1 4+ has this.

   (Sidenote: if you have the luxury of buying a brand new 4+, I recommend that you ask not to have type 3 steering. Type 2 is less problematic).

READ AND APPLY REGARDLESS OF THE TYPE OF STEERING YOU USE:

1. As you move the steering in front of the coxswain, move it only one inch. This reinforces that normal steering involves small movements. If you push the toggle all the way forward and say "now the boat will go left," guess what the coxswain is going to do the first time she wants to turn left? She is going to do exactly what you showed her, and she'll drastically oversteer the boat. Face it. You don't have the time, patience, or gasoline to chase your coxswain around as she pingitty-pongs all the way up and down the river. So save yourself some grief and teach it exactly the way it should be done.
2. Tell your coxswain that she has to be patient after she applies steering. The shell does not turn right away. It takes about one and a half full strokes for the steering to take full effect. If you don't tell her this, she'll think a small amount of steering is insufficient and she'll steer more. I call this the **Too Many Beers Effect.** It's kind of like that time in college when you drank two beers and didn't feel it yet, so you drank six more beers and booted on the frat house floor. How drunk were you? That's how drunk people will think your coxswain is when they see her weaving all over the place. If you have an emergency requiring a faster response than one and a half strokes, your coxswain will use the rowers to steer, not the tiller. We'll cover that later in this section on steering.
3. Give your coxswain a mnemonic device that will help her remember how to steer the boat. For type 1 or type 2 steering, "point in the direction you want to go" accurately describes the motion. In a bow-cox four with the up and down lever on the side you can point out that "push" and "starboard" both have an "s" in them.
4. Do not ever compare steering the boat to steering a car. Ever. When you want to turn left in a car, your left hand goes down and your right hand goes up as you turn the wheel to the left. If you tell a coxswain in a stern-coxed boat that steering the boat is like driving a car, then she will treat the steering system in the boat as a horizontal steering wheel, and she will try to go left by pulling the left toggle towards her and pushing the right one away. This steers the boat to the right.

2 Traffic Pattern

The coxswain should immediately learn which bank of the river she should follow when moving upstream or downstream. Mention this before the boat launches so the cox does not immediately steer directly to the wrong side of the river like a catastrophe-seeking missile. Especially on the coxswain's first voyage, stop at each bridge and point out which arches are for upstream traffic and which arches are for downstream traffic. Also explain that the coxswain should pass other boats toward the middle of the river.

Unless you row on a donut river, then the boat will have to turn around at some point during practice. Here you want to introduce the coxswain to the calls used for turning the boat, whether your club has people row, back, or hold water to turn. Emphasize that the coxswain should not cross the river until the traffic is clear from both directions.

You may want to make the turning calls for her during the first practice or two so she can listen to how you would like it done. As you work on these steering lessons through the next few practices, though, and as the rowers become accustomed to the motions of turning, you may decide to go ahead and let the coxswain make the calls. The coxswain can be asked to handle these calls once she has demonstrated the ability to steer within the traffic pattern and avoid collisions.

If your river has large motorboats on it, then coxswains will sometimes have to deal with large wakes. As the coxswain's first wake approaches the shell, you should tell the rowers what to do to turn the boat parallel to the wake. Then explain to the coxswain that she should be parallel to large wakes so no part of the boat is ever unsupported by the water. If the boat gets caught with its bow on top of a wave, its stern on top of another wave, and a wave trough in between, that unsupported middle section could crack and collapse. On the next wake you may have to warn the coxswain that it is coming, but the cox may be able to get parallel to it by herself. At the beginning stages, it may be best to have the boat weigh enough for this. Later, you can have the boat row through small wakes.

Just before the boat docks for the first time, explain the traffic pattern around the dock. Emphasize that it is very important to bring the boat in parallel to the dock and at a very low speed, since ramming it at a tight angle at high speed will drive the bow up on top of the dock and possibly break the hull. Mention that it is better to come in farther away rather than too close, because if the boat is a little too far then someone on the dock can usually grab an oar and pull the boat in. Once this explanation is over, you may want to cox the boat in yourself on that first day. On the second day, if the wind and water are mild, you can let the coxswain try it. You'll want to stay there, of course, in case the attempt does not go so well.

3 Collision Avoidance

We have one last steering lesson for the first day on the water: state that the coxswain never wants to hit anything. Do not say anything about injuring or killing rowers because this is intuitively obvious, and vocalizing it makes the rowers themselves very nervous. Just say that the coxswain never wants to hit anything. Period.

Introduce the coxswain to the blind spots on her shell. In a bow-coxed shell, the coxswain cannot see immediately behind the boat or along either of its flanks – just like a car without any rearview mirrors. Therefore, ask her to check these areas before backing up or moving sideways, exactly like she would in a car (this is safe because bow-coxed boats do not ever have string steering, which is the one where you have to be careful about car references).

In a stern-loader, the blind spot is directly in front of the shell. This spot is not so easy to look at. The coxswain can have the bow seat tap it just before beginning the piece to move the bow out of the way and check the course in front for traffic. Then she can have the two seat tap the boat back into position to begin. Alternatively, she can lean back and out of the boat a little on the drive (when the boat is most stable and least likely to be offset by the movement) to get a brief glance at the course in front of her. Encourage your coxswain to check her blind spots often enough to prevent collision. How often this is depends on the size of your river and the density of boat traffic. On the Charles River or at the Head of the Hooch, coxswains will have more traffic than at Hobbs Island in Huntsville or at Tempe Town Lake..

Explain to the coxswain that the rudder is never, ever for sharp turns, but rather for gradually guiding the boat. **Drastic steering to avoid collisions requires the cox to use the rowers**. Why? A) Rower steering is faster. B) This outlook prevents a beginner cox from getting in the *habit* of steering hard on the rudder. Even in head races, big turns require the rowers to do most of the turning. Rudders are for the little stuff. **If you teach coxswains to *only* use the rudder for *small* adjustments and *always* use rowers for collision avoidance and turning, your coxswain will *always* steer straighter when she isn't trying to turn.**

Now let's teach the coxswain how to steer with her rowers. Have the coxswain ask the bow seat to row for a few strokes. Then stop the bow seat and ask the coxswain which way the boat went. Now have the cox ask the two seat to row and and ask her which way the boat went. Then ask her to say them both in one sentence, like this: "When bow seat rows, the boat goes to port. When two seat rows, it goes to starboard." I know that the questions and the repetition seem obvious and borderline demeaning. However, in a situation where the coxswain has to turn fast, *now*, she doesn't have time to think about who to ask to row. She needs to be able to command the turn immediately, and the more reinforcement she receives on how to do this, the better.

Level One: Execution

How the lessons in execution relate to the goal: The second thing that a rower must trust the coxswain to do is coordinate all the rowers together. The rowers must listen to the coxswain to know what is going on, and they must obey the coxswain to do the work correctly. The cox must demonstrate her trustworthiness to execute, at this point, by keeping the rowers informed about the basic questions of the workout: who, what, when, and where. We will get to "why" in later lessons. Right now, if the rowers need to know why, you, as coach, will explain it to them.

1. **Who:** The coxswain has to let the rowers know who is supposed to be rowing at any given time and who is supposed to be sitting still and setting up the boat. Teach her what "bow" and "stern" mean and, subsequently, what "bow four" and "stern four" mean. As the rowers start doing work by sixes, she can deduce the meaning of "bow six" and "stern six" by herself. Familiarize her with all the seat numbers in the boat and teach her to call rowers to "row" or "weigh enough in two" by their seat numbers. As you start rolling fours or sixes, teach the coxswain to call "**x pair out, y pair in in two…one…two…"** Please, please teach her this call. Make her repeat it. Listen to her use it. For some reason, beginning coxswains like to jumble this call, and then rolling pairs takes forever for an entire season until some varsity stroke seat chews out the cox.

2. **What:** The coxswain has to let the rowers know what they are doing. What is the drill? Should they be at the catch or the finish? Do they row half slide? Full slide? When to they row and when do they weigh enough? What's the stroke rate? It is the coxswain's job to ensure that these questions are not darting through the rowers' minds all the time. It helps to have the coxswain repeat your instructions after you give them. This will help the coxswain remember and will remind the rowers, too.

   One thing here: **please make it clear to the coxswain that she is allowed to ask questions if she does not understand whatever you told her to do**. You're not allowed to get mad at her for asking a question, even if you did technically answer that question in your explanation of the drill.

   Why? Here's why. Let's say she knows she'll get yelled at for asking a question. So if she asks, there's a 100% chance she gets yelled at. If she is 50% sure she knows what you want, then she can just do what she thinks you said and have only a 50% chance of getting yelled at. 100% chance, 50% chance. She'll probably just go for it.

   Look at it from your side. If you answer the question clearly, there's a 90% chance you get exactly what you want (yeah, she might still mess up. What do you want from me?) and if she just goes for it, you still have a 50% chance of getting exactly what you want. If you don't get what you want, you have to start over, plus you'll probably waste some time yelling at the coxswain. I am willing to guarantee that starting over and yelling at your coxswain would take longer than just answering her question in the first place.

3. **When:** A coxswain should carry a watch at practice so she can keep track of time. She can help you out by ensuring that the boat gets in on time or reminding you if someone in her boat has to leave early. Also, she will eventually need the watch on race day to see that her boat reaches the start on time.

   Once your coxswain can consistently execute using "who and "what" without your help, you can teach her to keep track of timed pieces for you, as well as collect times on distance pieces, using the timing device on the cox box.

WARNING: Assumption alert! If you think your coxswain is going to figure out the cox box timer on her own, you'll probably be disappointed because it's not that obvious. So yes, you do have to know how to do it, because you have to teach her.

Now, some coaches would respond like this:

"Wahhhh, Chelsea that's not my responsibility to teach wahhhhhhh" (when the real reason is that they don't know how to use the cox box).

Not you guys. I'm going to teach you how to do this right now.

Old Box (NK® box, metal, no cover):

The top of the original NK® box looks like this:

Let's zoom in on the controls:

See the big knob that you use to turn on the box and adjust the mic volume?

To the right of that you see a metal toggle. This toggle automatically rests on the "RUN" setting.

To set the timer, push downward on the toggle toward the word "ZERO." (You don't need to use a pen; I used one so you can see what I'm doing.) The toggle will not naturally stay in this position, so the coxswain has to hold it down. After a few seconds of holding the numbers on the time screen will read 0:00.00

From here, the easiest coaching strategy is to tell the coxswain that she should keep holding the toggle down until the piece to begins. This is because, once she releases the toggle, it will return to the "RUN" position, and the time will start automatically when the magnet under the stroke's (in a stern-coxed boat) or bow's (in a bow-coxed boat) seat moves over the sensor. The box thinks this means that the piece has begun and the time starts automatically. The thing is pretty sensitive. So if the boat isn't in position yet and the magnet rower fidgets or something, the timer starts prematurely. The coxswain should let go of the toggle the moment that the piece begins

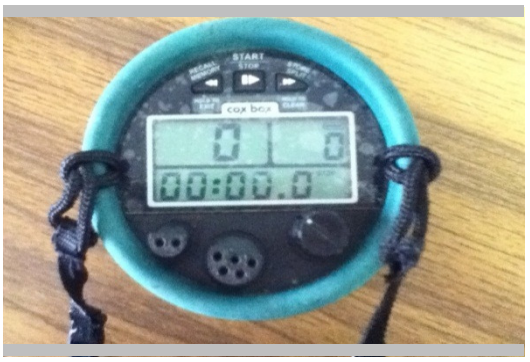
The proper way to do it is to hold at "ZERO" until 0:00.00 appears on the screen, then flip the toggle up to the "HOLD" position shown here. The toggle stays at the "HOLD" position without pressure, as you can see. "HOLD" will keep the timer at 0:00.00 until it's time to start the piece. When that time comes, the coxswain just clicks the toggle back down to the "RUN" position again (shown in the next picture).

This is the exact same position that you had when you began.

Why did I offer my improper hold-down-the-toggle method before the proper method? It's easier to explain the improper one. The proper way has too much down, up, hold, don't hold; coxswains get confused. Even when I demonstrate, a lot of coxswains don't get this right. You can get the results you want with the method that's easier to explain.

New Box (NK® box, rubber cover):

The top of the new NK® box looks like this:

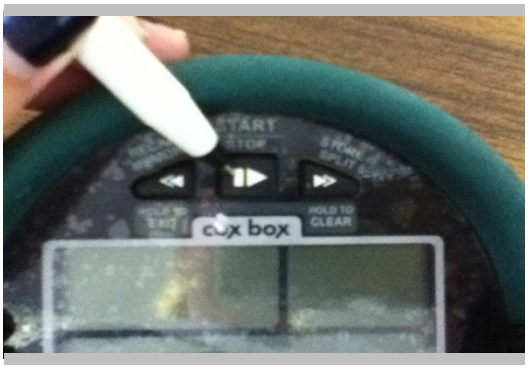


Let's zoom in on the controls:

This is the display you see when you turn it on. The three buttons above the screens control what you see on the screen; the whole interface is a lot more intuitive than the older one explained above.

To start the timer, depress the center button at the moment the piece begins. Again, you can use your finger – I just used a pen so you could see everything.

To pause the timer, or to stop it without setting it back to zero, press the center button again.



To return to 0:00.00 on the timer, press and hold down the button on the right until the time display zeros out.

(Pressing this button once without holding it down will save your splits, if you're recording them.)

You can see your saved splits by pressing the left button once without holding down. When you're done looking at the splits, you can exit the memory screen by pressing and holding down that same button.

Using the Coxmate™ SX

This basic instruction assumes the SX is in its default configuration [Set up for GPS speed sensing; Display set to show Rate, Speed (time/500m), Distance(m) and Time.]

To Turn on and Start

Press the left hand button:

The unit will go through start sequence and top right display will flash ‘GPS’, indicating unit is searching for satellites.

It will take ~30 seconds to locate satellites. Once it has found them the flashing ‘GPS’ will disappear. The ‘RdY’ indicates timer is ready to start.

Display Speed and Rate

When you row the rate (top left) and speed (top right) will be displayed.

To start the Timer and Distance

From ‘RdY’ (ready), press START button.

Timer will display ‘Set’

The seat sensor (or another press of START) will start Timer.

Both Distance (lower left) and Time (lower right) will be displayed. Rate and Speed will continue to be displayed

To stop timer, press STOP. Time and Distance values will stop changing and will flash.

To reset Timer, press RESET button.

Time and distance values will be reset to zero and ‘Rdy’ will be displayed once more.










If you didn't know how to run the box, now you do. We're finished talking about time for the moment. There's one last basic question your coxswain needs to understand right now.

4. **Where:** During fixed distance pieces, coxswains should learn some landmarks so they tell the rowers where they are throughout the piece. For the finish line, you may want to drive your launch to the stopping point and call "over" or "down" to get the exact distance piece that you want. Nevertheless, the cox should know the finish line well enough to tell the rowers when they are approaching it. I don't recommend asking the coxswain to count the last ten strokes to the finish line at this early stage. The coxswain can practice that later after she gains some confidence in her seat and has some experience judging distances.

   Once you have multiple boats competing against one another, you'll want to teach the coxswain to tell her rowers where their shell sits in relation to the competing shells. After the coxswain understands the basics of steering and the other execution calls, you can introduce calls like "one seat up," "one seat down," "bowball," and "open water." A note on the sequencing of the training: **always postpone competitive pieces until the coxswains have been taught to call off other boats.**

   "Chelsea, that's stupid. Why should I wait on my coxswain to let my rowers race?"

   Here's why. If you tell those boats that they are racing, they will get competitive and want to beat one another. To that end, they will want to know their positions against one another at all times. If the coxswain is not capable of giving the rowers this information because she still has to focus on steering and making basic calls, then the rowers will ascertain this information for themselves by turning and looking out of the boat. Telling them not to do it will make absolutely zero difference. By waiting instead, you preserve the good habit of focus in the rowers. Don't tell me your rowers have never had focus problems in a race. I see through your lies.

   The execution lessons in this level may seem very basic. They are. They're also things she needs to focus on, early, by themselves, to make them into cold habits. And once these become habits, you have saved yourself a lot of heartache later.

   What if your coxswain never rolled the wrong pair again, screwed up the timing, or called the paddle early? Wouldn't that totally rock?

   "Yes, Chelsea, it would rock."

Level One: Technique

How the lessons in technique relate to the goal: When four or eight rowers have to move simultaneously to get the boat down the river, the coxswain can help them work together and support each other. For the coxswain who is just learning to provide technical comments, we have three lessons about very obvious, noticeable technical elements that play fundamental roles in the making of a good row.

1 Timing

A good row requires everyone in the boat to get their blades into and out of the water together. Even the most beginning coxswain can see catch and finish timing from the coxswain's seat (in a stern-coxed boat) without looking too hard. Explain to your cox that she should see all of the oars go into the water at the same time and come out of the water at the same time. Explain that, if she sees someone's oar stay in the air longer than all the others, this is called "late" and that if she sees an oar that goes in the water before the others, that is called "early". She can now practice calling out individual seats with **"you're early"** or **"you're late"**. Encourage her to tell the rowers not only when they need to fix their timing, but also when they have fixed it correctly by following up with **"that looks better, (x seat)"**. You probably know from personal experience that this will make the rowers very happy.

In a bow-coxed boat, timing calls become harder because the coxswain cannot see the rowers. However, if she feels the boat surge forward before she sees one of those two blades go in, then the stern pair has already started pulling and the bow pair blade not yet in is "late". Likewise, if she sees one of the bow pair blades go in before she feels that surge of acceleration, then she knows that that blade caught "early." Here's a trick that I use: I put new coxswains in a bow-coxed boat with a big, square mirror. You can get one in the makeup aisle of any drugstore.

I let coxswains use it to look at the blades so they don't sit up and turn around. They can feel for bad timing, then use the mirror to see if they are correct.

If the catches or finishes end up a jumbled mess, as they sometimes do, the coxswain has to call something to collect her crew again. Advise her to watch the stroke seat's blade and call "in" when the rower catches and "out" when the rower pulls the blade out at the finish. These auditory cues remind the boat about timing and help the boat get back on time by following the coxswain's voice. The cox will probably have to repeat the sequence several times by saying **"in….out…in…out…in…out[7]"** until every rower in the boat adjusts to the stroke seat's rhythm.

[7] I used to say "catch…send," but rowers told me that the "ch" sound in "catch" obscured the sound of the actual catches and made it harder to listen for the blades and synchronize their movements.

In a bow-coxed boat, this can still work. Since the coxswain cannot see the stroke seat's catch, she will have to just call "in…out…" roughly with the catches until the rowers synchronize by following her voice. When a coxswain's calls lead to improvements in the boatfeel, the rowers begin to trust their cox.

2 Sliderush

A high recovery time to drive time ratio pays huge dividends toward making the boat feel good and move well. If the stroke seat tries to slow down the slide by herself, she gets all the other rowers coming down heavily on her back. This doesn't help the slide rush, and it can damage the stroke seat's spine. The coxswain can help by getting the whole boat to relax the recovery at once.

Coxswains feel slide rush too. It results in **checking**, a sharp lurch at the end of the recovery followed by a sudden decrease in speed. The motion throws the coxswain's neck against the headrest in a bow-coxed boat, and it throws her lower back against the back rest in a stern-coxed boat. It's like being thrown backward against a wall. It hurts. When you see this happening, you can stop the boat and ask the coxswain if she feels that. If she says "no," she is lying.

Explain that this motion indicates slide rush in the boat, when the rowers are pushing down too slowly with their legs and then pulling themselves quickly back up to the catch. Your explanation will remind the rowers and cox that the boat feels much smoother with better ratio. You may introduce the cox to calls like **"gliiide" or "paaatience"** to encourage slow recoveries.

By drawing out these words, she makes her voice sound how the recovery should feel. By the same token, you can teach her to say the call **"quick legs"** quickly and assertively to make the rowers' legs go down faster. These calls can improve boat ratio.

Also, they will show the coxswain how to use her tone of voice to articulate what she wants. Some coxes and coaches call this **rhythmspeak.** It's a tool that your coxswain will apply more broadly on her own as she gains confidence.

Teach the coxswain to call **"in two relax the slide…1….2, gliiiiide".** When all the rowers know exactly when to change the ratio, they can all make the change at the same time. Make her practice these calls repeatedly. If she tries the above call and it does not work, she can try counting on the recovery. She should preface with **"I am going to count on the recovery. Catch on 3."** Then she counts **"1…2…3"** from finish to catch in order to slow down the slide. She doesn't have to get the timing just right immediately. She can make a guess and then adjust as needed to count at the correct speed for the desired stroke rate. She can repeat the count up to twelve times in a row. To her, it will sound like her calls are boring because she does not realize that the rowers have to focus very intensely to change the ratio in perfect synchronization. The rowers don't get bored with it as fast (if they do, they're not focused). If twelve times doesn't fix it, the rowers aren't listening. Let your coxswain reprimand them.

3 Set / boat balance

The set of the boat constitutes the levelness of its gunwales above the water, and a coxswain can see or feel it from wither a bow-coxed or stern-coxed position. An offset/unbalanced boat makes it very difficult for everyone to get their blades into the water on time, and the rowers on the side with the lower gunwale may not ever be able to get their blades out of the water, no matter how low they push their hands. Thus, as they move up the slide, they essentially back the boat down on that side. A coxswain can provide a lot of help in overcoming this frustration.

Particularly valuable are advanced coxswains who can diagnose the cause of a set issue from among the wide variety of technical flaws that affect set, as this diagnosis may be difficult for rowers to make by themselves while they are rowing. Coxswains who can do this have excellent potential for earning rowers' trust. Obviously, a novice coxswain cannot be expected to do that, so we will begin at a more basic level.

At the novice level, you should ensure that the coxswain knows when the boat is set or unset and which side is down. After you have explained the concept of set, you can drill this in by quizzing the coxswain during the row: is the boat set now? Which side is down? (The correct response is either port or starboard, or course).

Once the coxswain can tell set from offset and can identify which side of the boat is down, you can teach her a rudimentary method for fixing the set: **adjusting handle heights.** It is true that handle heights are not always the reason that a boat is offset – far from it! Nevertheless, no matter where the boat is leaning, changing the rowers' handle heights will change the set.

Have everyone sit at the finish. Now ask the ports to raise their hands and the starboards to lower them. Now ask the coxswain which side of the boat went up. Congratulate her on her correct answer if she points to the port side. Ask her which side went down. The answer, by process of elimination, is the starboard side. Now have the starboards raise their hands and the ports lower them. The boat should tip the other way. Repeat the obvious questions and make the coxswain vocalize the obvious answers.

By reinforcing these answers, you move the coxswain towards the ability to remember this information when she needs it quickly or when she is under pressure. Now have everyone sit with even handle heights. Ask the coxswain what the port gunwale will do if the ports raise their hands. If her answer involves the word "up," then she has the idea. At this point, you can give her the mnemonic: Port hands up, port side up. Port hands down, port side down, and so on. (If you use bow side and stroke side, it's bow hands up, bow side up, and so on).

Now, if her answer about the ports from before involved the word "down," ask her to tell the ports to raise their hands. Now ask her what the port gunwale actually did: it went up. Have the rowers set the boat again, and ask another question of the same type. "Let's try again. If the ports lower their hands, what will the port gunwale do?"

When she gets it, introduce her to the mnemonic above. Make sure she understands that the gunwales will always do opposite things because they are both part of the same object – the boat. So if the port side goes up, the starboard side won't also go up because this would mean that the boat were levitating. No. The starboard side goes down. Reinforce this with the question "If the ports raise their hands, what will the starboard side do?" The answer, of course, is that it will go down.

After this little interrogation, you can resume rowing, asking the coxswain to practice asking the rowers to adjust their handle heights according to the set of the boat. Sometimes she will be reluctant at first to do more than say "It's down to port/starboard". If she does this, she may not yet instinctively know what to tell them. She just now memorized how the handle heights work, and the instinct may take time. You can insist that she tell the rowers what to do with their hands in order to push the instinct development along. Remember to make her go with her first call. Don't let her stutter around. She has to pick a call and say it. If she's wrong, she's wrong. She won't get it wrong forever.

Later, you will have to tell the coxswain that you lied to her and that there are a number of things that may affect set besides handle heights: catch and finish timing, posture in the boat, etc. You don't have to feel guilty. If you gave her all of that information right now, she would feel overwhelmed. By giving her the handle heights call; you give her a roll of duct tape for all of her carpentry jobs. Sometimes the best solution would really be a hammer and nail or glue or tape or a screw and screwdriver or a chewed piece of gum, but for right now, the duct tape holds everything together adequately enough to get the boat through a piece.

Conclusion

If the coxswain is capable of all of these skills and the rowers have seen her demonstrate them, then they will trust her to cox at practice and will generally respect her calls. If they tend to interrupt, talk during her calls, or otherwise fail to listen, then she should feel free to use a sharp word to bring them into line. She may figure this out on her own as her new skills boost her confidence level. If not, you can give her the mnemonic **"ask, tell, demand"**. That is, if she gives a call and it is not obeyed, then she should say it louder to ensure that the rower or rowers heard her. If this fails too, then she can use a sharp tone of voice to effect the call. Part of the rower trust comes from the rowers' confidence in the coxswain to get all of the other rowers to contribute to the goals of the boat.

Level One Review Outline

Coxswain's Goal:
Earn the rowers' trust.

Steering

The Strings

Traffic Pattern

Arches

Pass in the Middle

Turns

Wakes

Docking

Collision Avoidance

Execution

Who

What

When

Where

Technique

Timing

Slide Rush

Set

Before moving on to Level Two, use the following checklist to determine if your coxswain has graduated from Level One:

- My coxswain consistently uses one or two inch adjustments on the rudder.
- My coxswain stays on the correct side of the river and uses the correct arch when going under bridges.
- My coxswain takes precautions to avoid collisions.
- My coxswain can turn the boat safely and quickly.
- My coxswain has demonstrated the correct reaction to a wake (even a little one from the launch, if you don't have big ones, so she knows what to do).
- My coxswain tells the rowers clearly and concisely who should row and what they should do.
- My coxswain used the timing device on her box to execute a piece.
- My coxswain used landmarks in some form or fashion during a practice.
- My coxswain noticed when rowers were egregiously early or late in the stroke and corrected them during practice using the words "early" and "late".
- My coxswain recognized when the ratio was terrible and used her calls to effectively improve it (doesn't count if she made calls and they did not work).
- My coxswain noticed when the set was off and asked for a specific handle-height adjustment to fix it.

If your coxswain is missing items on this checklist, go back and work on those specific things. Make sure she can do all of this before you move on.

Want more?

This exclusive extract from “Coaching the Coxswain” is a gift to you from Rowperfect UK to thank you for joining the newsletter mail list.

We hope you’ve found the first chapter helpful and that you feel better informed about coaching coxswains.

Get more

Buy yourself the full e-book Coaching the Coxswain from the Rowperfect web shop.

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Rowperfect UK sells equipment, book, DVDs and tools for rowing and sculling supporting excellence in technique and coaching.

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Our news page includes coaching advice, commentary from around the web about the sport and product news, special offers and promotions.

Get in touch if you would like us to sponsor and support your rowing club school or university team.