

Coxing & Bowing Package: Making good calls & knowing when to make them

For all coxswains & bow-people: this is a guide you can use when you want to motivate your crew and/or determine what the crew needs to work on. You'll still need to determine what YOU think is most important to work on for your crew, but this will give the guidance once you have a general feel for where you want to go. This will also be helpful in understanding why you make the calls you make, rather than calling "blindly"/without understanding.

If the levels are off:

Levels are all about body weight distribution, *especially* hand levels. If the boat is down on PORT, then port's hands are too low and starboard's are too high. If the boat is down on STARBOARD, then starboard's hands are too low and port's are too high.

**We are talking very tiny adjustments here, within a few inches

- If the boat is sitting on one side, tell the crew which side needs to carry their hands a little higher and which needs to carry their hands a little lower (on the recovery)

It's all about the FINISH... here are some good calls for focus 10s or good reminders to help with levels:

- "Down and away together" → pull it in high to the bra-line/sternum and go DOWN to the bellybutton and then away from the body
- "Steady hands" → a common mistake is to change the hand heights throughout the stroke...the hands have to stay steady, come down and away from the body and then hold the same line
- "Down and away at the finish, raise the hands slightly to the catch"
- "Quick hands" → sometimes it helps to just have quicker hands...but TOGETHER!
- Watch the blade angles, from your perspective you should see that all of the port blades are in line with stroke seat, and all of the starboard side blades are in line with seven. If that's not the case, then you need to tell that person that their hands are too high (their blade is too close to the water) or too low (their blade is way up in the air)
- Watch the blade DEPTH on the DRIVE → *only the painted blade should be underwater, no more...no less!* Watch for athletes who are "digging" their blade too deep (so that half the shaft is under water) or "washing out" (not putting their blade deep enough) and call them on it. Have them look at their own blade for a few strokes.
- Note: You can't have balance without TIMING and without RUN/POWER so remind of those two things

If the timing is off:

Timing seems like a self-evident thing: you just have to row in time. But most of the time, rowers THINK they are rowing in time and won't/can't notice if they aren't. Making a general call for "timing" is a **POOR & UNADVISED COX/BOWPERSON CALL**. A general call for "timing" might seem obvious, but it's not specific enough, and the rowers will be unable to determine which aspect of the timing is off (e.g.: at the catch, at the finish, with the body swing, etc.). Timing can come from many different parts in the stroke:

Catch timing: Refers to when the blades enter the water.

- **BE SPECIFIC WITH YOUR CREW:** If someone is late or early, compared to the stroke seat, tell them i.e., “Five seat, you are late at the catch, get your blade in sooner” and then make sure you tell them when they fix it. **Positive reinforcement is a VERY powerful tool and should be used when you see something working well.**

Finish timing: Refers to when the blades come out of the water. Same thing as above.

Recovery timing: When the rowers are coming up to the catch, watch their blade angles. All of the blade angles must be the same. If they aren't the same, then someone is too slow/too fast. A good call to make is to tell the rowers to look at their blade angles and make them the same.

- **TRY USING THIS CALL FOR RECOVERY TIMING:** “Elbow to elbow, shoulder to shoulder, seat to seat.” Explain that your elbows should be doing the same thing as the person in front of you (bending at the same time, straightening at the same speed, etc.), your shoulders should be moving at the same time (swinging at the finish, rotating out to the catch), and your seat should be moving up and down the slide at the same speed.

Drive timing: Everyone should be PUSHING OFF the catch at the same time and DRIVING THE LEGS DOWN at the same speed, tell rowers to look at the person in front of them.

In general, when it comes to timing, you should be SPECIFIC and make them take responsibility by using the many cues listed above that rowers can look for. REMEMBER: Just calling “timing” is not very helpful.

If your boat is in time, you will HEAR it as well as see it. You will hear ONE catch as the blades enter the water at the same time and ONE loud finish as all of the oarlocks click at the same time. Challenge your crew(s) to find that & hear the click.

For more POWER (boatspeed):

Power comes from the legs, but you can't call a focus 10 on leg drive constantly or it gets tiring. Instead, focus on different areas of power application. Here are some tips to motivate your crews to push harder:

- “JUMP off the catch” (also, “Don't hesitate at the catch, get there and drive” or “Slam your heels down right from the catch” or “STAND UP off the catch”)
- Try to get the boat to SURGE at halfslide (**i.e.: during the pry**). To know how this feels, in your warmup one day have your crews row really, really light for the first half of the drive and then 100% pressure for the 2nd half of the drive. It feels really good and you can mimic that even when at ‘full power’.
- “Pull in strong with the outside hand” (also, “Squeeze the biceps at the finish” or “Fast hands IN” or “HANG off your blade, keep your arms straight for as long as possible”)
- Make the finish quicker – “SEND the boat at the finish with QUICK hands”

- Make the entries & catches more aggressive – “AGGRESSIVE catches”, “HARD catches”, or “QUICK entry” (you want to see a V-shaped splash, or at worst a BACKSPASH from the blade, so it needs to go in quickly & aggressively) “Don’t just PLACE the blade in the water, enter & catch like you mean it!”
 - o **IMPORTANT TO NOTE:** “Aggressive catches” are often misunderstood by rowers & prompts them to dig the blade – something you DON’T want. Explain to your rowers/crew(s) the **difference between the “entry” and the “catch”**. The catch occurs once the blade is already in the water. The entry is when you enter the water, and a quick entry will give you black-splash or v-splash. Aggressive catches will give you the drive you need from the catch to finish. The catch is when you really LOCK into the water.

It’s all about RUN...

“Run” refers to how much distance the boat travels between each stroke. Rowing at a higher stroke rate won’t necessarily increase the actual boat speed. To be EFFICIENT, you need to travel as much distance as possible between each drive, otherwise you aren’t really going anywhere. Going “FAST” in rowing is more about control than about ramming up and down the slide.

HOW to get good run will be described soon, but first, here are some cues for coxswains & bow-persons:

Signs of good RUN:

...You are “clearing the puddles”

- Each rower creates a puddle (a mini whirlpool) with their blade as they row, you can see them. The GOAL is to have BOW PAIR’S puddles as far to the stern as possible before the next stroke. In an eight, bow pair’s puddles should be at the coxie before the crew takes their next stroke, or even farther if you are really good at it.

...You can hear bubbles under the boat

- LISTEN to the boat... if you have good run, you will actually make the boat sing because you are LIFTING the boat off the water such that little air bubbles run between the surface of the water and the hull of the boat, it sounds like trickling water. This is a VERY good thing.

...If you’re rowing at a high rate, but as a rower you feel like you are still at a low rate

- This means you are being very efficient in your stroke

...You have RATIO

- This refers to the ratio of time spent on the drive and time spent on the recovery. For every second on the drive, you should spend at least 2 seconds on the recovery. **EVEN AT A HIGH STROKE RATE...** yes this is possible at 38 strokes per minute!
- When racing at Henley, I (Alessandra) used to keep a 1:3 count ratio for drive-to-recovery. It helped when stroking because I would stay consistent in my ratio REGARDLESS of what stroke rate we were at. This also ensured that the crew was pushing harder & faster on the drive during the higher stroke rates (i.e.: NOT losing power by keeping the same pressure and simply speeding up the slide).

...The coxie is getting a smooth ride

- The coxie should be able to sit steady and not feel like the boat is throwing you around and giving you whiplash, that's bad!

Signs of NO run:

- ...as a coxie you can feel yourself being slammed around as the athletes come to the catch → this is called "stern check" and if you are really rough about it, the boat will actually stop or travel BACKWARDS
- ...Stern pair is "rowing in bow pair's puddles" → this means exactly how it sounds, stern pair's blades are entering directly IN bow pair's puddles...or, even worse, the five and six are rowing in bow pair's puddles! (In an eight)
- ...you are rowing at a low rate and it feels like a high rate! (aka: RUSHING THE SLIDE)
- ...you are traveling the same speed on the recovery as you are on the drive, or even going faster on the recovery

OK so how do we get RUN?

First, if we consider that there are two components to the stroke (the drive and the recovery) there are two ways we can set or increase the stroke rate. We can change the length of time spent on the drive, or we can change the length of time spent on the recovery. If you are at a LOW rate, then slowing the recovery will be good enough. If you are trying to take the rate UP, then you CAN'T BE EFFICIENT IF YOU JUST SHORTEN THE RECOVERY TIME. You must make the drive FASTER.

1. The recovery MUST be slower than the drive: HOW?

- o Push harder on the drive to allow more room on the slide
- o The hands and body need to move out of the bow VERY QUICKLY and you need to "get onto the slide" very quickly...but then you need to constantly DECELERATE on the recovery
 - "Quick hands, slow slide"
 - "Put pressure on the balls of your feet, PUSH AGAINST YOURSELF as you come up the recovery to slow down"
 - "Let the boat move underneath you, don't PULL yourself up the slide"
 - "Send the boat at the finish"
 - "Send your puddles away from you at the finish"
 - "Control the slide"

The key is that the body needs to get out of the finish as fast as possible → get your crews to EXAGGERATE this one day by spinning the hands super fast at the finish, swinging the body over super fast and getting onto the slide quickly and then SLOWING RIGHT DOWN as they come up the slide.

2. The flipside: the drive MUST be faster than the recovery...

- o Sometimes, a crew just isn't pulling hard enough (See the above section on increasing power)

3. The blades need to be off the water → the oars create friction, which slows you down!

- (See the section on balance and timing)

4. IT'S ALL ABOUT CONTROL

- Remind your crews to RELAX, stay CONTROLLED
- Crews must be AWARE of their bodies → “Don’t let the boat row YOU, YOU need to be in charge of your oar and YOUR BODY, take responsibility”

5. GETTING THAT LENGTH IS CRUCIAL

The LONGER your stroke is, the more run you CAN have (and the more POWER you are going to get!)

- **A good motto:** LENGTH AND STRENGTH → some of us are quite short, but sometimes the shortest rowers also have some of the longest strokes in the boat and the most power. Learn to ROW LONG.
 - “Layback at the finish”
 - “Swing the body over out of the bow – get your shoulders in front of your hips before the knees bend”
 - “Don’t bend your knees until your handle has crossed your knees”
 - “Rotate out to your rigger – keep your shoulders parallel with the handle and REACH out”
- As a coxswain or bow-person, you should be able to see a SPLIT in the boat at the catch, because all of the ports are rotating out to their own rigger (i.e.: to port) and the starboards are doing the same to their riggers (i.e.: to starboard), and in a really good crew you will be able to see straight down the middle to the bow-ball (or stern).
 - “REACH at the catch – sit up tall, but reach back with your blade and grab the water”
 - “Get your blade in RIGHT at the catch, don’t miss any water and don’t drive until the blade is IN”
 - “Don’t miss any water at the finish – hold your blade in the water until the last possible second as you go down and away at the body”
 - “Be patient at the catch, take the time to reach out”

Some good drills to practice with your crews for improving stroke length include: Wide Grip (put the inside hand all the way off the wooden/plastic handle onto the shaft and at the catch rotate out to the rigger); Inside Hand Only (put the outside hand behind the back – done on the feather); or Outside Hand Only (put the inside hand behind the back – done on the square)

You’ll know when you have run because it’s a very specific & unique FEELING.

Some general coxswain help (NOT for bow-people):

Ideally, you should treat every row like a race so that you will be mentally prepared, but realistically, practice is the best time to do technical work in a more comfortable environment. For coxswains, the key thing is that **you can’t stop talking**. Silence is deadly in this sport –

in an eight you have eight wandering minds all focusing on different things, they need you! The only time you can go silent is if you are having the crew focusing on LISTENING to their stroke. Here are some ideas to keep you going:

Go through the parts of the body:

Do focus pieces (i.e., tens, or 30 seconds, etc) for each part of the body with SPECIFIC things to focus on... and at ANY point when you are coxing, these are good focus 10 ideas!

- HEAD – “Keep your eyes in the boat” “Keep your head still – that’s 10lbs of weight you are throwing around” “Keep your chin up so you can breath” “Pick a point on the back in front of you and stare at it”
- SHOULDERS – “Keep your shoulders down, relaxed” “Squeeze your shoulder blades together at the finish” “Keep your shoulders parallel to the oar handle, rotate out to the catch” “Don’t drop your shoulders at the catch, keep them level” “Watch the shoulders in front of you and move at the same time”
- CHEST – “Keep your chest pointed up and out the whole stroke”
- BACK – “Sit up tall, be proud” “Keep your back strong, don’t slouch or hunch” “Keep your lower back slightly arched, don’t sacrifice posture for reach”
- ARMS – “Pull in strong with the outside arm” “Squeeze the biceps at the finish” “Try to hit the person behind you with your elbows at the finish – pull STRAIGHT back”
- HANDS – “Fast hands at the finish” “Steady hands through the recovery” “Relax your grip, no need to grip for dear life”
- HIPS – “SWING out of the finish quickly” “As you swing feel the weight shift from the back of the seat to the front of the seat”
- LEGS – “The legs are the strongest muscle in your body, drive them down hard” (see above section on power for more leg calls)
- FEET – “Keep pressure on the balls of your feet the entire stroke, slow yourself down as you come up the slide” “Slam your heels down at the catch” “JUMP off your footboards”

You can also switch this up by doing similar focus pieces for the different parts of the stroke:

- Catch
- Drive
- Layback
- Swing
- The finish (down and away)
- The recovery

An example of how to turn a poor call into a good/better call:

- Poor call (unspecific): *“You’re almost there you can do it!”*
- Good/better call (specific): *“You’ve already come [state the distance or time] don’t give up now – you’re stronger than that and I know it, don’t waste your time you’ve come too far for that”*

General tips for coxswains AND bow-people:

- Keep your voice rhythm aggressive and similar to the rhythm of the stroke...
- Always count at the catch OR start the call at the catch & finish at the finish (e.g.: That's ONE, That's TWO → "That's" is said at the catch, and "ONE" is said at the finish, etc.)
- If you sound bored, your crew will get bored and unmotivated → no matter how YOU are feeling, you need to hide it and sound enthusiastic and motivating
- Speak to your athletes specifically, use their names, do focus/hard pieces for each person, for pairs, for bow four and stern four, for port and for starboard, etc.
- **Challenge them:**
 - o NEVER tell your crew that they "suck", but DO tell them if something isn't good enough & it doesn't feel good. On that note: NEVER LIE TO YOUR CREW. They know better and sometimes need to be told the harsh reality. For instance, "We've been sitting down on port this entire row, don't settle for this! Port side, raise your hands NOW and starboard lower them, this isn't good enough I know you can level this boat" etc.
 - o **BUT REMEMBER: You are part of the crew.** Unless you're specifically giving feedback to one athlete or one pair of rowers or one side of the boat, you should refer to calls as "WE need to do this" or "WE can do that" or "WE must", etc.
- If you are doing pieces, treat them as races → its good practice for you & you can remind your crew of a race that is coming up to motivate them
- **BORROW FROM YOUR COACH(ES):** they are giving valuable feedback to the athletes that you should be repeating and reinforcing.

Generally motivating calls:

Motivational calls depend on the crew. One crew may love a call that another crew despises, so discuss calls with your crew when you're on-land. Here are a few examples of calls used by the coxswains or bow-persons of crews I've been in and/or have coached:

- "You are not novices anymore, you've raced this boat, you know you can do this, you know how to row now let's show them that you know how to row..." etc.
 - o Every crew probably could have some variation of this... the point is to PUT THE PAST BEHIND YOU and recognize that you CAN do what you couldn't do before
- "There is no can't, don't listen to that voice – you CAN do this...I know you can do this, YOU know you can do this, now do it!"
- "No excuses, no regrets"
- "Put it all on the line, we have 2000m of water to make this happen and you are running out of space with every stroke, make it count!"

- “Think of one person you are rowing this race for ... it could be yourself, it could be your coach, it could be your crewmates, it could be your family, think of that person and pull your guts out for them, make them proud”
- “I know you have more in you than this, is this all you are going to give me today? I don’t think so”
- Remind your crew that you ALSO wake up every morning, you are also committed to the team and that you don’t want to waste your time if they aren’t going to bother trying

KEY TO REMEMBER:

ALWAYS tell your crew when it is feeling good, keep the negative comments to a minimum or try to spin them so that they sound positive (be constructive!!!)

- “That was a good stroke, now let’s do it again”
- “I want levels for five strokes, that’s it, give it to me for five strokes in a row” (SET SMALL GOALS, ACHIEVE THEM, AND THEN SET THEM HIGHER!)
- “You’ve rowed for longer than this before, don’t listen to that voice in your head you can do this”
- “Think of how good you are going to feel when you are finished this race/piece, think of how fast you are going to recover”
- “Pain is temporary, push it out of your mind and focus on the stroke”
- “Leave everything else in your life on the dock, all you need to do is row”

FINALLY: THE 2KM RACE

A 2000m race plan...

This is meant only as a guide – your specific coach(es) will likely have things to add/change with their own race plan in mind, but here is a really general overview:

- THE START (from the starting gates through the first 250 metres)
 - Basically, your body has 30 seconds of anaerobic capacity that it will never remember, so you have got to go all-out at the start (collectively as a crew). You can’t WIN a race off the start but you can definitely LOSE one. The first few strokes need to be controlled to get the boat moving, but the rest of the 30 seconds is free to push as hard as humanly possible. Your body will be just fine.
 - REMEMBER: settle after about 25-30 strokes. Your adrenaline will be through the roof, but you need to get control and settle into your race plan. If race pace is 32 strokes per minute, then don’t hold it at 40 just because it feels good at the time – after 250m you need to be settled.
- BREAK THE RACE UP INTO 500M PIECES
 - In St. Catherine’s, the course is great because each 500m is CLEARLY marked. Try breaking the race up into 500m pieces (or even 250m pieces for more experienced athletes)
 - RACE to each marker, and then begin again
 - Do a hard 10 at each marker (and a hard 20 at the 1000m mark to get through halfway) After the hard 10, do a re-focus 10
- PLAY OFF YOUR OPPONENTS

- You need to race YOUR race... but you are also racing. If a crew makes a move on you, RESPOND. If you are ahead, PUSH the other crews away and hold them off. If you are behind, take a chance and do some tens to catch up.
- THE THIRD 500M – The 3rd 500m is the hardest. This is when the “I can’t” voice comes out, when the legs are burning the most, when the race seems like its hours long and when a crew will defeat THEMSELVES. If you can stay strong in the 3rd 500m, you’ll be strong. In St. Catherine’s the course is great because the 3rd 500m is right in front of the island where all of the trailers are and where everyone will be watching... USE THIS!
 - Remind the crew that everyone is watching them – and cheering for them!
 - Make them LOOK good – if they look good, they are rowing well... focus on technique in the third 500m, do focus 10s, cleanup the timing and get the catches strong and the finishes quick
- THE LAST 500M
 - The last 500m is when you just hang on for dear life. You always think you can’t, but then you will always surprise yourself because really your body CAN take more than what the 3rd 500m dished out!
 - In the last 500m you need to do A FINISH and sprint it to the line... the rate needs to come up and you need to LAY IT ALL OUT so that when you cross the line, you physically cannot take another stroke... empty the tanks! For the last 250M you need to just GIVE ‘ER (if the lane buoys are there, 250m from the finish is when they change from yellow to red...if not, it’s the start of the island that comes up on the coxie’s/bow-person’s right hand side)
 - Here’s a general last 500m plan that you can try (and remember, 500m is less than 2 minutes of your life!):
 - At the 500m marker:
 - “Fast hands 10”
 - “Legs 10” to refocus on power
 - SEVEN UPS: “Build the rate over three...hold for seven... build the rate over three... hold for seven” and keep doing that to the end. On each build, the rate should go up by 2. (Alternative: TEN UPS: “Build the rate over one...hold for nine”
 - At this point, you are running out of space and you are SO CLOSE to being done, so you just have to go, no need to pace yourself anymore