

TALL TRUNKS



This month, **Robin Williams** focusses on younger rowers. What should juniors concentrate on most when practising technique?

“Sit tall, stay strong and go fast!”

In the last issue of R&R I suggested eight steps to think about if you are a young – or not so young – rower wanting to get off on the right foot technically and build a successful career, or even to emulate our recent successful Olympians.

There are many elements to technique but I repeat that I think **trunk position** is the high priority because it is a powerful, but at the same time a vulnerable part of your muscle chain. It connects your legs to your handle so it will make the boat go fast, but can also be your downfall. The force you produce goes through a right angle turn at your hips because, of course, your legs push horizontally and your back is vertical. This can be an area of stress so it needs to be looked after. However, you don't need to stop your physical training to get your technique right. So this time I've got some ideas which allow you to hit both aims at the same time.

Let's think about the problems first and then some training ideas to help sort them.

The two main issues with the trunk area are the lower back and shoulders. Your legs try to push the base of your spine (hips) towards the bows. Meanwhile the load on the oar is trying

to pull your shoulders forwards, meaning your spine has to hold on to forces at either end and in opposite directions. Lower back shape often deteriorates the further up the slide you go because as you run out of flexibility your hips tuck under at front-stops and your back becomes rounded. This is not a good position when you start the stroke.

With the shoulder area common faults are to over-reach at the front end and let the chest sink downwards, then retract the shoulders too early to help brace the body shape as you begin the stroke. If you are young and habitually load the stroke in these positions you may end up with back problems later on. So here's a technical exercise to help you create good habits, row fast and stay healthy!

Slide length variations

This drill can be done in your warm-up, where it can be mostly technical, and then performed as part of your workout where it can have a fitness training element. Slide length variations can be done as **low rate firm** giving more of a *strength* workout, or at **higher rates** giving more emphasis to *power* production and the cardiovascular system (i.e. higher pulse and breathing rate). I would suggest that you don't do the high rate one

just yet but spend the winter mainly getting strong in the correct positions and introduce the more intensive one further on.

1. Warm-up; fixed leg rock-overs. These are for training your posture and flexibility before you start adding load. All you do is sit at back-stops – sit bolt upright, then slump, and then find a sensible mid-point with your pelvis in neutral. Then keeping neutral, steadily rock back and forth 10 times. Feel your hamstrings stretch and your pelvis move, but don't compensate by slumping in your lower back (lumbar spine).
2. Warm-up; row at a quarter-slide with the same aim. You now have a small load to work with and a moving boat so see if you can keep your basic back shape correct and achieve the swinging movement low down in the pelvis.
3. Warm-up; five at a quarter, five at half, five at three-quarters and back down again, seeing if you can slide longer without slumping.

If this has gone well then you can introduce it as a simple work pyramid in the main session. You could do the following in training:



Quarter slide



Half slide



Catch

Robin Williams

Robin coaches the GB women's pair who delivered Team GB's first gold at London 2012. He coached the lightweight men's four to gold at the 2007 Worlds and to fifth at the 2008 Olympic Games. From 1995 to 2005, Robin was Chief Coach at CUBC, achieving seven wins out of 10 in the Boat Race against Oxford. After learning to row at Monmouth School and then representing the University of London Boat Club, he gained his first GB vest in 1981 when he was selected for the Worlds.



“Lower back shape often deteriorates the further up the slide you go”

Retaining trunk position at half slide

- 10 strokes at each length – a quarter, half, three-quarters – and back down again with the pressure set at 25% for the first pyramid, then again at 50%, again at 75%, and then firm.

Your pyramids can be based on a) length, b) power, or c) rate – or indeed any combination of these. A fourth variable is the number of strokes.

Eventually you should try changing from a quarter to half, three-quarters and full and back down again with just one or two strokes at each length. This requires good slide control, composed movements, consistency and technical competence especially in crew boats because there's less margin of error before the next change is called – or even done silently without any verbal commands!

Slide variations sound simple enough, but they still have plenty of challenges and can be adapted in many ways. For instance, I did some length pyramids then a six-minute section at rate 36 on a quarter slide with the GB lightweight men's double one year because we wanted to improve the hand skills around the finish. We needed some hull speed but didn't want to flog out a full 2000m piece at full pace that day. The quarter slide meant that being at rate 36 was not physically demanding but we had the acceleration and back speed we wanted, the back shape and trunk was under

control, and the handles were moving at speed. This gave a very decent rhythm.

Front end reversals

This is a good drill to promote shoulder control. Sit at three-quarter slide with blades covered and

back them down out to full length; then, keeping the blades in the water, push away again a few inches. Do it steadily and continuously 10 times. This way you can set the correct back and shoulder positions, have the handles at the correct height (because blades are covered) and practise holding the load in the trunk as the legs move you up and down, in and out of front-stops. True, this drill doesn't combine technique and training as much as the previous one, but you can use it as a trunk strength workout by applying more pressure as you get better at it.

Make sure you get into good back habits while you're young – sit tall, stay strong and go fast!



Poor trunk shape at the catch

What's your favourite drill?

Why not send in your favourite technical exercise to R&R? Each month we will publish the one we like best with photos, and if you want to video it we can print a link so others can view it too! Get in touch via magazine@britishrowing.org