

VISUAL CUES



Welcoming a visually impaired rower to your club just takes a little more thought. **Mary McLachlan** provides some common sense tips

MARY MCLACHLAN

Mary worked with the GB Rowing Team for nine years, where she coached the mixed coxed four to Paralympic gold at London 2012. Last October she joined Rowing Ireland as a high performance coach.

Visually impaired (VI) rowers have been a key part of the successful British Paralympic programme since it became a Paralympic event in 2008.

Both James Roe and Naomi Riches, who were gold medallists in the London Games, are two of the most successful visually impaired rowers in the world. But the nature of their visual impairments, and the subsequent challenges they face, are very different.

Naomi was born with her condition, in which the cones in the eyes cannot filter light effectively so brightness makes the impairment worse. She is also colour blind and has no depth perception. James Roe, however, learnt to row and partook in a significant amount of sport before he developed a condition that affected his sight. He has reasonable peripheral vision but can see very little when looking straight ahead.

So if an athlete with sight problems wants to

join your club, what do you need to consider?

Understanding the nature of the impairment is the first step. Things to consider include:

- Is the condition stable from moment to moment? If not, what affects it? Is it light, colour, angle or perspective?

“Just a little bit of consideration could gain your club a valuable and successful member”

- Was the athlete born with the condition, and if not, when and how did they lose their sight?
- What part of their vision is affected – e.g. is it their peripheral vision that's most compromised?
- Some will be completely blind and have been so from birth, and will likely use a guide dog, a white stick or a guide to help them get safely around.

Welcoming the athlete

When a visually impaired athlete joins a boat club they will almost certainly need to be oriented around so that they know how to move about the building and surroundings safely. This is especially important in the gym, and also in a club room that may have chairs and tables or ergos being moved around regularly.

If the athlete's vision is severely compromised, the following is good practice:

- If talking to the athlete, say their name first so they know they are being spoken to, then introduce yourself before talking.
- If you're going to guide the athlete anywhere, ask them if it's okay before you take their arm so they are prepared for the physical contact.
- It may be hard for the athlete to join in socially, as a sighted person would, because they cannot pick up on the physical cues that help inform conversation. So make sure that they are included in conversations and activities rather than assuming they will just join in.

On the water

When taking a visually impaired athlete on the water, it is unlikely that they'll have the opportunity to row a single unless you are in a very safe environment and the sculler can be followed closely and steered by a coach in a one-to-one situation. Otherwise, any kind of crew boat is an option and with coxed boats lots of information – such as distance rowed and position in relation to other boats – can be given to the rower if necessary.

If the athlete finds it useful, a tactile marker can be placed in the boat to show the athlete where to stand when stepping in, something can also be put on the blades or oar to indicate to the athlete when the blade is squared or feathered. This is particularly useful when the athlete is a novice.

If the rower is using a single or is in a position in a crew boat where a rate meter would be helpful but the normal units are not big enough to be visible, then there is an app for an iPad



Mary with the Paralympic champions (left to right): Pamela Relph, Lily van den Broecke (cox), Naomi Riches, James Roe and Dave Smith



The mixed four at Henley for the 2012 Paralympic GB Team Announcement

PHOTO: KARON PHILLIPS

that shows rate in very large numbers that the athlete may be able to see. This can be simply mounted behind the footplate. Tie it into the boat, and a waterproof case should be invested in! You can find the app at the following address. It also has audio available – perfect for VI athletes! www.appato.com/performance-phones-llc/speedcoach-mobile/

On the rowing machine

The main challenge when using the ergo is whether the athlete can, or cannot, see the information on the monitor. It may be that they can see the 'big' screen but not the smaller screens and they may be able to see the screen at lower rates and intensities, but not at higher rates when less time is spent at front stops to focus on what the screen says. If the athlete cannot see the screen in all or some circumstances, there is some software available from Concept II called ErgChatter and ErgBuddy which give constant read-outs to the athlete while they row. This software is also available for the SkiErg. For more information visit www.concept2.co.uk/service/software/ergchatter

Alternatively, someone can support the athlete by giving information, which is likely to be too resource intensive in regular training but more specific and therefore more helpful in a test. Ask the athlete what information they want and how they want it delivered. This is a great job for a cox!

In the gym

There's no reason why visually impaired athletes cannot work out with everyone else, but there are the following challenges:

- The gym can be a noisy and 'fluid' environment, with items continually being moved around, especially if the session involves circuit training. If this is the case, the athlete may need a guide or a small separate area to work in so that they can train safely.
- The athletes may need to be helped to put the correct weights on the bar.
- Visually impaired people have compromised stability and proprioception and therefore may struggle with exercises that demand a high level of balance, such as work on a BOSU or a Swiss ball. This sort of work should therefore be encouraged but will have to be carefully prescribed and supported.

Whether a visually impaired athlete wants to compete at the highest level or just enjoy rowing at a social level, just a little bit of consideration for the points above could gain your club a valuable and successful member. □

The GB Rowing Team's Paralympic Programme is supported by Guide Dogs. Find out more at www.guidedogs.org.uk



Mary McLachlan, during her GB Rowing Team days, with Lead Coach Tom Dyson and a new recruit!

PHOTO: PETER SPURRIER