

DEJA VU!



Rowley Douglas demonstrates how visualising different scenarios can have a huge impact on your racing calls

Being able to see how you achieve something before you do is an incredibly important part of what you do as a cox, it allows you to feel as though you have already been there when an event is unfolding.

Prior to the big races I have always gone out for a run and worked through calls in my mind, trying to see how different strategies may unfold during a race. Being behind at a certain point, alongside, or in front – all these scenarios will require different actions.

This month I am going to focus primarily on visualising racing, but will briefly touch on the importance of applying this to training as well.

Training

As a cox it is your job to understand what the coaches are after. You need to be able to have a mental picture of the stroke they are coaching from all possible angles, not just the one you see day in day out.

Try to visualise how the stroke looks at the connection point, what the body positions are, which angles open up to create the drive phase,

on to the required movements to make the extraction, and how the body flows into the recovery.

Overlay this with sounds you expect to hear – for example the slide will make a distinctive sound when you have created the speed required to allow an effortless recovery. It will sound different at 18 and at 38, but distinctive nonetheless.

All this will help you when you are on the water in training. If you are not clear on what the coaches are after and what you are after, how can you expect to improve it?

TIP: Make sure you pay attention during video sessions – this is where you will start to get an idea of the angle of the stroke that you do not normally see, which will help build your side profile visual imagery.

Racing

My visualisation starts the day before. I imagine getting out of bed the next morning and think about the order that I am going to do basic things, from exactly what kit I am going to be wearing through to the pre-race paddle.

I try to see myself taking the crew through the paddle and imagine what I want it to look like – both from inside the boat and out.

I run through the boating times in my head and the warm-up sequence that will take us to the start line – including the point I want to spin the boat either onto a 2km course, or alternatively push the bows out into the stream on the Eights Head course.

Imagine...

Now, in order to visualise a race successfully I think you need to start by asking some questions. Let's imagine we are racing in a London head of the river race.

First start by seeing your perfect course – imagine the amount of steering needed to slide through each bend and under each bridge. Where are you in relation to each bank? What are your landmarks? Then overlay your race calls at these points; what do your crew want to hear you saying, and how? Picture the training strokes that your



A London Rowing Club cox urges on his crew during the 2006 Head of the River Race

crew has been nailing in the lead-up to the race.

Now challenge yourself to respond to the variables of our sport. Identify segments of the course where conditions may change for better or worse – how will you respond?

It's a head race, so think about what gap we want between us and the next crew. A big gap means leaving them in a potential vacuum without us to work off. Or perhaps we already know they are slow, so can plan out where we would like to catch them?

Leaving a small gap means we may want to attack them and throw them off their rhythm. Or perhaps they are so slow we just want to deal with them early?

Visualising something as basic as this now



PHOTO: ALASDHARE JOHNSTON

Being prepared for different strategies during a race will mean that you are really in control of whatever unfolds on the water

“Visualise the process, not the outcome”



PHOTO: PETER SPURRIER

allows you to build various scenarios and think about what calls you will make and how you will deliver them.

For instance, what if we overtake a crew? You now need to see the course in your mind's eye and determine the most effective side to pass them on at different points of the river. What will your calls be? And how will they sound leading up to, during, and after overtaking?

What happens if you catch but cannot pass the crew in front? What happens if you catch them at the same time that they have caught the crew in front of them?

Scenarios

I think you get the idea that this can go on and

on – and within reason it should, until such time you have come up with as many likely scenarios as possible.

Once you feel you have a good plan and understanding of the likely scenarios, you can go a step further. You can go through the calls during training pieces and during low rate paddling.

Frankly, whenever you feel there is a steady section of rowing that the coach is not using to work on something else, go through the calls and scenarios. This is something that can really build momentum in the lead-up to a race.

The quality of your visualisation directly affects the quality of your articulation. But remember – visualise the process, not the outcome.

Rowley Douglas

Rowley Douglas steered the GB men's eight to gold at the Sydney 2000 Olympics – Britain's first gold in this category since 1912. A year earlier, he launched his senior international career by coxing the eight to a silver medal at the Worlds. Rowley first learned to cox at Monkton Combe School, before studying technology management at Oxford Brookes University.

A champion of Explore Rowing, Rowley is currently raising money for the NSPCC by trying out 30 sports as part of the Gold Challenge. Follow Rowley on Twitter @rowleydouglas