

# THE MOTIVATOR!



How do you inspire your crew during the winter months, and how do you make sure that you are also fired up when the going gets tough? Rowley Douglas offers advice

In my experience, motivation to win often develops throughout the training cycle and builds during a crew's collective journey to the start-line.

Recently I was asked about using 'the good stuff' during training, in the context that it was perhaps a waste to employ it then rather than preserving it for that crucial moment in the race. Personally, I think you should always use 'good stuff' in training: motivation is imperative and you need to practise your calls as much as the rowers need to practise their stroke pattern.

I recently spoke to a couple of members of the Oxford and Cambridge University Boat Clubs about their motivation through their respective Boat Race campaigns.

The Boat Race squads have to really keep the show rolling hard through the winter months, as their big day approaches in spring. I have gone back in time a little way for some input and spoke to David Gillard who was in the winning Cambridge crew in the 1993 Boat Race, and Andrew Triggs Hodge who rowed in the winning Oxford crew in 2005.

Both 1993 and 2005 were excellent race years for slightly different reasons. In 1993 CUBC were faced with the reality that since 1975 they had only won one Boat Race. So

while Oxford might call 1976-1992 the 'Topolski Era', at Cambridge the period is known as the 'Years of Dread'. CUBC turned things around in style in 1993.

On the other hand, during the 2005 season, it was Cambridge who were billed as the best ever: a super-crew destined to thrash Oxford. But that was not to be and it was actually Oxford who trounced them.

So how did these two crews overcome the odds stacked against them?

Amongst other things they stayed extremely motivated to keep progressing and find more speed together. Each crew made sure they stayed that way in the face of massive opposition and pressure.

## Developing motivation

Interestingly, there were a number of common factors that both Boat Race rowers spoke about that I think present some good learning points for coxswains from any club. Both Gillard and Triggs Hodge were clearly motivated to beat the 'enemy' – and both seem prepared to fight relentlessly to claim the annual bragging rights!

The burning desire to beat a specific group of individuals is a massive motivation, and this energy can be used on a regular basis. Obviously most of us do not have such a fixed calendar date with the same opposition every year, but that



PHOTO: PETER SPURRIER

Crunch time in the 2005 Boat Race with cox Acer Nethercott and Andrew Triggs Hodge at stroke for eventual winners Oxford

does not mean you cannot target a few of your traditional foes! Why not motivate your own crew with the thought of being the best local club or beating the old enemy. Are you training as hard as they are on the water? Use this to drive the group and also individuals forward.

Having a face or name to focus your energy towards beating is very powerful, but be careful not to become obsessed about any single club – they might not be the benchmark by the time you race, although using them as **part** of the motivational journey will do no harm.

Earlier in this piece, I also mentioned the importance of practising your ability to motivate the crew in training – it is not just an 'on the day' thing that you get right during the race by chance. Again, both Gillard and Triggs Hodge spoke about the importance of building on this ability to motivate throughout the season.

In particular Gillard spoke of how Cambridge used training pieces and pre-race fixtures to practise how they would execute a race-winning push: the 'two-man move'.

I am sure many coxes have told the crew "I am on their two-man" as a point of information, but it



What emotive quotes from training could you use during a race?

“You need to practise your calls as much as the rowers need to practise their stroke pattern”

## 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.

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can be so much more powerful than that. Gillard said that when the Cambridge cox Martin Haycock called that they were on the Oxford two-man it actually meant that the time had come to hit the afterburners and execute a move to break their opponents and take the race.

Haycock had practised this during training and knew what to say and exactly how to say it. Hearing this during the actual Boat Race would have been a massive motivation for the rowers – something they had practised way back in those cold winter months was now coming into play and working during race conditions. As they pulled clear of Oxford, Gillard remembered Haycock being very forceful and aggressive with his use of words, reinforcing what he had practised over and over again in training to ensure that all the crew remained mentally strong in the face of the increasing physical fatigue.

Meanwhile Triggs Hodge spoke about how his 2005 Oxford crew used the good training days as a big 'gee-up' and made sure that their strength as a group helped them to overcome the bad days.

As a cox these good training days are important to remember: you can refer back to them, if

necessary, during a race or future training sessions. Speak about what exactly got you 'geed-up' and remember that miserable day when you succeeded in pulling together to still get the job done.

Triggs Hodge also mentioned the importance of all of those days during the first half-mile of the Boat Race. "They defined us as a tight group and gave us confidence," he said.

Specifically, he explained how the cox Acer Nethcott had cleverly used a combination of technical calls, emotive comments and past quotes from crew members at crucial parts of the race. I love the idea of quoting something someone else in the crew has said in the past, using their poignant words back as motivation at the relevant time – this concept can of course also be used during training.

### Motivating yourself

Being a part of the overall journey and experiences that I have covered here is an important factor in being motivated yourself. But sometimes you also need to have those key phrases said to you so **you** get pumped up as well.

Rowers get warmed up on the ergo before

training and racing, and you too must find a way to effectively get 'warmed up'. This could mean talking to a specific coach who offers you the right words before racing or training, but it may come from somewhere else entirely. You should be clear in your mind how you are going to get fired up before sessions and races so that you also hit the water at the right temperature.

I have a number of coxswain friends who text or call me before races to talk to me as a fellow cox, and we bounce ideas around to try and build some excitement in their own minds. It is helpful to have a group of people you know you can trust and rely on as part of your own motivation.

Plenty of coxswains also have a specific playlist that effectively has the same rhythm and pace they are hoping to achieve with their words and voice – whatever works!

Whenever I look down at my cox box I see a simple square of blue electrical tape: I stuck it there to remind me of my own personal motivation. It's a constant reminder of the things that drive me to always keep pushing.