

SCRATCHING AROUND



This month Olympic champion **Anna Watkins** shares her advice on scratch crews and rowing in bad weather

At this time of year rowing can be a sport for masochists. We've all had outings where the main pleasure is in getting back to the bank for a hot cup of tea and some dry clothes. Gale force winds and fast streams can make technical outings seem like a waste of effort for even the most accomplished of crews. You can talk about light control in the fingers all day but if your

hands are totally numb, it's not much good. To add to the woes of the winter rower, it's head racing season and you've probably been on the ergo instead of on the water, your crewmates have had the flu and you've lost count of the number of cancelled outings. You've got a race coming up and you are basically a scratch crew.

So for the wonders of wintertime, here is my guide to rowing in bad weather and in scratch

“Doing things less well, but together, is faster than doing something different from the person in front.”



Rough conditions for the Cambridge University Lightweight crews in 2011

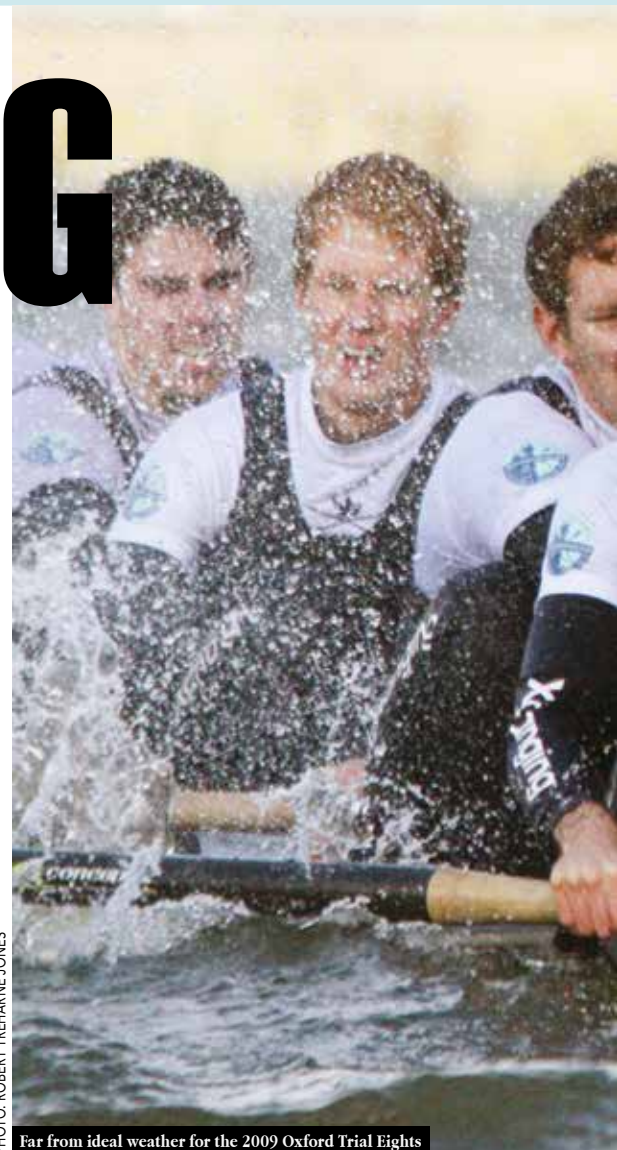


PHOTO: ROBERT TREHARNE JONES

Far from ideal weather for the 2009 Oxford Trial Eights

crews. In both cases, it's a matter of priorities. There are always plenty of things to work on, but what should you focus on when time is tight or when you're getting walloped in the face by the wave that's just broken over your rigger?

The key is to accept that you will be far from perfect, but so will the opposition, and so you are going to have to put your energy into the things that will have the biggest impact on boat speed right now.

Poor conditions

If you are out in poor conditions you are likely to spend a lot of strokes missing the water at the catch, having waves knock the handles out of your hands, and having wind affecting the steering and picking up the spoons when you square. Every stroke is going to be different. There is a mantra for the very worst days. You can get a long way through thinking "Blades in - Legs on" and keeping it as simple as that.

The absolute number one priority here is to get

ANNA'S TIPS

1. Really tricky tail-winds are where world records get broken. Go for death or glory!
2. Project confidence and be vocal with your scratch crew. Strong leadership (from wherever you are sitting) will help to get the crew quickly.



ANNA WATKINS

Anna won gold at the London 2012 Olympic Games in the double sculls with Katherine Grainger, breaking the Olympic record in their semi-final. They were named 2012 World Rowing Female Crew of the Year by FISA in recognition of their achievements over the season.

Four years earlier, Anna had also won bronze at the Beijing Games in the double sculls with Elise Laverick in the tightest finish of the Olympic Regatta.

Introduced to rowing while studying at Cambridge, Anna trialled for the GB Rowing Team's Start programme and her talent was quickly apparent when she won gold in the 2004 U23 World Championships.

In between looking after her baby son William, Anna is studying for a PhD in Mathematics while training for the Women's Head of the River and this year's London Marathon. She is also Ambassador for The 2014 BNY Mellon Boat Race.

the blades in the water. The time when you have the blades buried is the only time the boat is going to be stable, and the only way that you can generate speed, and the only way you'll get a grip on the steering. Be more aggressive if you have to, even if they go a bit deep. This is better than having bow-side in and stroke-side not! Be insistent against a wind that is trying to blow the spoons skyward at the catch. It can feel like a fight but you mustn't relent. You must win at any cost, because if you don't get the blades in you've got no hope.

In a head-wind, you've then just got to accept that the drive will take longer so you won't have as much ratio. Lever through patiently, don't be tempted to cut the stroke short. Then focus again

The secret to success in all of this is state of mind. Relax, waves will hit you, it will go wrong, the winners will be those who keep going regardless and don't let the tension increase. Accept that you might rock and roll and waves will hit you and then don't worry about it. Better to get wet than lose. Smile and laugh at the predicament you are in; it will lighten the mood. Sing a daft song. Rowers are crazy and you know it. At least you're not on the ergo.

Scratch crews

For crews not used to rowing together, the priority is to get the leg timing the same throughout. This applies from novices through to internationals; at the novice end it's more about getting rid of those

during the first half of the leg drive. Conversely, to make the legs last longer, start with the leg drive as always but then really emphasise the trunk opening. Remember, we are not going for rowing perfection here, only to match your drive phase across the crew. Doing things less well, but together, is faster than doing something different from the person in front.

Stroke has a different job. They should keep their attention on setting a smooth and consistent rhythm and timing the blade entry nicely. If they are setting a good lead with getting the blades in then everyone else only needs to follow.

As you haven't had time to learn together, your only hope of having the crew thinking the same thing at the same time is to have a very, very clear race plan. Plan the technical calls and pushes, and go through what you are going to DO and what you are going to THINK at each. If you are really short of time, write it out and email it before you meet. □

“The absolute number one priority here is to get the blades in the water”

on getting a sharp catch, one stroke at a time.

In a tail-wind you've got another problem which is that it can be difficult to work hard when you are getting blown along. To fix this you have to drive your legs quickly. Fast legs will mean you are picking up the boat and adding speed. Finishes are less important: don't worry about trying to row a long finish, just try to make them clean.

jolts when the leg drive is mistimed, and at the higher end it's about everybody making it feel lighter and racier for everybody else.

Watch the seat in front, making sure your seat starts when theirs does and also, importantly, stops at the same time. Notice if they are particularly dynamic or if it seems to take a long time. To make your legs more dynamic, keep your trunk really still

MAKE IT EASIER TIPS

1. In wet conditions, rub surf wax on your hands to make the handle easier to keep hold of.
2. In a scratch crew, quarter-slide pauses provide a reference point and help everyone to relax.