Boat and blades

Paul Mattick and Zac Purchase demonstrate efficient bow trim

Robin Williams advises on how you can adopt better technique

Technique is normally about the rower or sculler and how they can improve. So it may seem a bit strange to start with the boat and blades instead but, when you think about it, they are actually the end product. If they are doing the right things then there's every chance that you or your crew are too! Indeed there are plenty of coaches and

> "The boat and blades are a great barometer of your technique"

athletes who focus heavily on these elements alone and win plenty of races.

Anyone who sculls a single well will tell you how much it creates a bond and understanding with the hull. They are sensitive to the boat trim, the balance, run, acceleration, deceleration, check, pick up, heaviness and so on. In a bigger boat this can be harder to feel but they still matter. You also get used to the weight and balance of the blades, and can become expert at handling them: from feathering and squaring through to entry, depth, loading, release and the recovery shape. The boat and blades are a great barometer of your technique: a feedback mechanism.

So how can you raise your boat awareness and blade handling to a higher level? Let's look at boat trim. The boat is like a torpedo and wants to keep travelling since it has no brakes. The stern needs to run as level as possible without the bow digging into the water. That means you need to move smoothly yourself, particularly at either end of the stroke because the mass of your body weight is potentially disruptive to the efficient movement of the boat. If the boat is dropping at either end of the stroke it's because YOU are causing it!

TIP

Attach a length of tubing to the stern so that it creates a fountain of water every stroke (see photo). It's cheap and easy to do and the smoother you row the more the fountain stays put, indicating that you're holding on to boat speed through that tricky front end.

Paul and Zac demonstrate stern trim

Six drills to do...

1. Single strokes easy at front stops – observe the boat run.
2. Feet only / legs only rowing at the front to minimise trunk movement and keep the stern from dipping.
3. Dipping blades vertically at the entry and the exit to practise correct depths and lightness of touch in the hands.
4. Back stops/ feet out / arms only – makes you 'recover off the blade pressure' and stops the boat from ploughing. Also good for blade control.
5. Row or scull and deliberately go shallow with blades, then deep, then find the 'neutral' or correct depth where (or when?) you are drawing level.
6. Row or scull in circles – you can look at one blade and easily make corrections.

You should aim to enter the water and make a connection without losing speed off the hull. Try easy-ing at front stops with the boat underway – you'll see that the boat keeps moving efficiently and only slowly decelerates. However, when you try to change direction that's when the check becomes a problem, so it's vital that the spoons are already in the water to receive the stretcher pressure, or you are pushing against thin air and will slow the hull. This is often very counter-intuitive but as long as the oars are relaxed it isn't a problem.

If you are stiff in the arms and shoulders then the blades go into the water stiffly too and don't connect well with the drive from your legs. The blades need to be well organised on the way forward – squared, close to the water, clean on entry and to the right depth. It's also true that you don't get much check at three-quarter slide so all the potential damage is done in the top quarter of the slide.

A good reminder is that the catch happens **under** the water **after** the entry has been made. It's very common to see people attempting a catching movement ahead of the entry.

All boats have a balance point, like a see-saw, somewhere in the middle – in a single scull it's under the rower's seat, in a pair it's just behind the stroke person and so on. See-sawing is not good for boat speed. A top Italian coach once talked about making the hull like a hovercraft, planing all the time. At the finish you need to work out how far you can afford to sit back and how hard before it harms your boat trim. A real giveaway here is the exit of the spoon; the pressure needs to be disengaged fractionally before the blade comes out square. Lots of people inadvertently use the feather as part of the release and 'collapse' the pressure or row the blade out while it still has pressure in the spoon and 'throw the finish'. The best cure for this is feet out / square blades rowing.

TIP

Another useful tip is therefore to stick trim lines on the side of the hull with electrical tape, then get someone to video you rowing to see how efficient you are at the ends of the stroke.

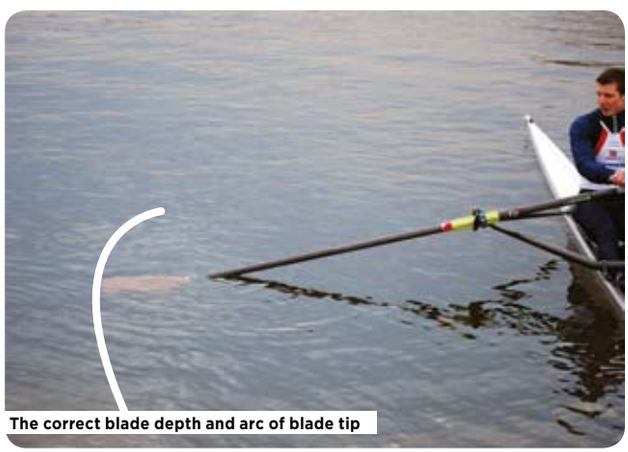
(Some boats come with a suitable trim line, as shown here.)

Depth is critical with the blades. They naturally float close to the right depth and only need a bit of help to be fully covered. It's obvious that if they are shallow and washy you don't get full drive from them, but when deep they are not driving effectively either, yet rowers often mistake this heaviness for 'good work' or 'proper connection'. The stroke is actually shortened because the blade tip is closer to the hull, and other problems arise with body positions and sequences too.

> "The catch happens under the water after the entry"

TIP

Make sure the blades are correctly pitched. The concept is that they hold their own depth with blades self-locked and you are simply hanging off the handle(s).



The correct blade depth and arc of blade tip

The shortening effect on the arc from a deep stroke

PHOTO: PETER SPURRIER

Robin Williams has extensive coaching experience at international level. Lead Coach for GB Lightweights until the end of 2009, he also coached Cambridge to seven victories in the Boat Race from 1994 to 2005.