



“The key thing to remember is that *everyone* wants the boat to go faster”

GB cox Phelan Hill with the squad at Caversham. Phelan led the men's eight to an outstanding silver medal at last month's World Rowing Championships, finishing narrowly behind the reigning world champions Germany

The ninth seat

Coxing is a complex role. This month **Rowley Douglas** looks at five key challenges and gives advice on overcoming them



PHOTO: PETER SPURNER

When I was first introduced to the sport of rowing, the coach asked us all to stand out in front of the boathouse and he told us we were going out in a couple of eights. He then asked us how many people were in a rowing eight, to which the response was ... you guessed it ... eight sir. Eventually we got the right answer!

This is not going to be an article about how hard done by the cox is, and I'm not going to suggest that the eights' event should be renamed the nines' event. What I do want to do though is dispel the myth that even some coxes buy into: the myth that the cox is just there to steer and give well rehearsed calls.

Remember, you may not have an oar in your hand, but you are still responsible for one ninth of the boat-speed. Here are some of the key challenges, as I see them.

- 1 Getting selected
- 2 Self improvement
- 3 Being an unelected leader
- 4 Dealing with 'big personalities'
- 5 Facing in two directions

1 – Getting selected

One of the most difficult challenges is that the selection of the cox is often left until the end and perhaps appears less important. It is easy to focus on the rowers because they can provide data driven results to review and there are more of them than coxswains. It is therefore easy to believe that you are less important.

Speak with the coaches early in the year to make sure that they have a clear process for selecting coxes – and if not, ask them if they can develop one and keep you informed. Everyone needs to know how they are being measured in order to both gain selection and improve.

2 – Self improvement

Last month I talked about meeting the coaches and agreeing goals: this is the basis for creating data to measure your performance and is closely linked to selection. Agree a list of skills that the rowers and coach feel is important, and

then have yourself rated on a scale of 1-5 for each of those skills. This is not dissimilar to employee feedback reviews in most industries. You should add to the list, no matter how basic the skill, until you have a wide range of important skills.

You are responsible for your own improvement: ask for feedback before, during, and after training. We will explore this subject in more detail through later articles.

3 – Being an unelected leader

Often the cox will be the sole voice, choosing the direction the boat travels and giving the commands – that sounds like a leadership position to me! It is important to deal with this in a positive way, as you are unelected. When the situation requires strong leadership, do not be afraid to give it, for example when you are about to give strategic racing calls or simply when you are coming into the landing stage. Remember, it is as important to know when to flex your role away from leading, to listen when information is coming in your direction and be a co-operative team member.

4 – Dealing with 'big personalities'

I have made plenty of mistakes here, but over time I developed my ability to understand and read people better – coaches and rowers alike – and this is down to experience. Sometimes tempers can boil over and sometimes very experienced people become aggressive because they are frustrated that things are not going in the right direction.

One of your roles in the boat is to help bring the crew together and manage these situations. It is not a matter of one voice only – engage the big personalities, keep them positive and try not to take offence.

In a high-tension situation it is also a good idea to ask for feedback from a quieter member of the crew or coach. You may find this helps diffuse the tension and takes things in a new direction. Nobody likes conflict, but if you can deal with it the rewards will be worth it.

The key thing to remember is that **everyone** wants the boat to go faster.

5 – Facing in two directions

This is a simple, yet often overlooked, aspect. Coxswains are not coaches and they are not rowers: you are in effect the bridge between the two groups. It is really important to work together with the coaches to achieve the goals they are setting out, and it is equally important to be a part of the rowing crew. You will need to learn how to flex your role according to the situation. The two main situations are:

- Training may require you to have a very clear and front line role if the work is set pieces. But if the coaches just want to work on a technical aspect you need to take a back seat, listening and concentrating on what is working and what is not, so you can give feedback and, most importantly, so you can coach

“You are responsible for your own improvement”

the specific technical focus in the future.

- Racing – this is where all roads lead in the end; you are now the coxswain and the coach! Having worked closely with both the rowers and the coaches you should be confident to lead the crew on race day.

Be the plus!

I mentioned at the start that we often describe the main coxed boat class as 'the eight'. Internationally it is always referred to as either M8+ or W8+, and I for one am more than happy striving to be the plus! ▀

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.