

DREAM TEAMS



What makes a standout team? Olympic silver medallist **Annie Vernon** shares her personal insights on how you can transform your team from good to great

Rowing is a sport emphatically based on teamwork. Unlike other team sports where a star player can turn a match, rowing crews rely on developing perfect synchronicity. Despite being the most important part, teamwork is also the most difficult part to get right. Sports teams are somewhere between siblings, spouses, competitors, friends and frenemies. How do you get everyone on the same page? Does the crew need to be friends? And – much like a marriage – do opposites attract, or is it better to be similar personalities? →

Left: Success at the British Rowing Masters Championships

ANNIE VERNON

Annie is a two-time world champion, Olympic silver medallist (Beijing 2008) and world silver medallist. She went to the 2008 and 2012 Olympics, and is now a sports journalist and author. Her first book, *Mind Games*, looks at how elite sports performers train their minds, and will be published by Bloomsbury in March 2019. Find out more at www.bloomsbury.com/uk/mind-games-9781472949103

PHOTO: DREW SMITH

BUILDING THE MAGIC

THE CONTEXT

“GREAT TEAMWORK IS ABOUT UNDERSTANDING THAT EVERYBODY BRINGS SOMETHING DIFFERENT TO THE CREW”

Olympic silver medallist at Rio, Jess Eddie says: “When a rowing boat is going well, it sounds silly, but you think you’re flying. It’s easy; your body is in perfect unison with your mind and with your teammates. Yes, it’s physically hard, but it’s incredible. Especially, in an eight – getting nine women to do the same thing at the same time on the same page is so hard, so when it does work, it’s a bit magical.”

We can’t jump into a boat and immediately experience the outcome described by Jess. It takes hours of training and disagreements before things start to come together.

So, how do we build a team?

The first step is acknowledging that the crew is only as good as its weakest member.

I learned this early on when I realised that I was only focusing on my own performances and wasn’t thinking about anyone else’s.

Jess had a similar lightbulb moment, revealing: “For a while, I was going through the system and just thinking about me, and making myself the best I could be, and getting my head down – and thinking I’m going fast, why aren’t we all going fast?”

“But then my coach pulled me aside and said, ‘You can do all this, you can do the training programme; I could set you more stuff and you’d still do it. But you need to start taking everyone else with you. Don’t be an island’. Then I had to put my pig-headedness and competitiveness aside.”

Great teamwork is about understanding that everybody brings something different to the crew. I never felt I had to have all the answers on my own because I was surrounded by a

Below: At Henley Women’s Regatta



PHOTO: MERONCOULIK

diverse group of people with different backgrounds, identities, approaches, strengths and weaknesses, who all bring their little bit to the party.

Olympic silver medallist and former world champion Cath Bishop agrees, saying: “I’d have thought if you had two similar people, you’d clash a lot, and you would want to complement each other. [One former rowing partner] was always very relaxed, and I’d be always going, ‘No, we need to do it again, that’s not good enough’. Whereas, if you had two people going, ‘No that’s not good enough’, you’d never finish the session! In my mind, it’s more normal to have that blend of relaxed and negative people in a boat.”

Olympic and former world champion

Anna Watkins also agrees. Having lots of different personalities is a strength, as long as the team explicitly makes it a strength.

Relating this to when we rowed together in the double sculls, Anna says: “As I got more experienced, the common thread between all my different teammates was the realisation that bringing the best of myself to the boat was only part of it, and it was also about how you, and [other crewmates], needed to be in the boat.”

“So, for you and me, I understood that it was helpful for you if we had a laugh, but also that there were certain points where I was in charge, and assertive; and that made you feel like you didn’t have everything on your shoulders

in the stroke seat. I sensed that you performed better if I was clear and decisive. And for [other rowing partners], they were both very different again and needed different things from me.”

Role clarity isn’t just about who sits at stroke, or who has the steering foot. It’s about informal roles: how we relate to each other as people. Some of us need to have a joke, some are fond of spreadsheets, some like firm instructions. How did Anna learn to read her teammates?

“I don’t know if it’s emotional intelligence, or just being stuck together 24/7 for years!” she says.

“You are going to see them at their best and their worst, and you’re going to have a pretty good idea about their whole self – which I think is a pretty awesome thing about team sports.”

Though we’ve only heard from female rowers, this applies equally to men.

Another key question is, do you need to be friends with your teammates?

Initially, I would have said no. I’d have argued that as long as you can work together, you don’t need to be friends. Over time I changed my mind. Being friends can help you develop better resilience.

One psychologist who has a unique take on friendship is Ken Way, psychologist to Leicester City FC during their Premier League-winning season of 2016. He believes passionately in the need to be happy. Can rowers learn from footballers?

He says: “The team spirit was fantastic, and for me it was epitomised by one of the players, an Austrian international called Christian Fuchs, who said we were just friends having fun on the football pitch. And that for me really encompassed exactly what was going on. The guys were just enjoying themselves – they were having fun.”

“When you can actually construct teams to be really, truly *truly* – and I can’t get this across strongly enough – happy and having fun being together, it just produces an electricity that is almost unfathomable.”

Jess told us that great teamwork is magical, and Ken describes an electricity that is possible. There’s something special and intangible here in our sport of rowing. →

TEAMWORK

THE PERSONALITY MIX

“EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND COMMUNICATION IS WHAT SEPARATES THE GOOD FROM THE GREAT”

Teams aren't just relevant to sport. They exist in every part of life and are critical in the workplace. But I want to know what Mother Nature intended.

Are we predisposed to teamwork, or are we wired to be better off on our own?

Anthropologists have compared our behaviour with primates, and have concluded that one of the key reasons for our success, in evolutionary terms, is the fact that we are team players. We can, and do co-operate, and share the spoils.

One research paper observes: "Humans' ability to collaborate to obtain otherwise inaccessible goals may be one main cause for our success as a species."*

And in addition, we as humans are prepared to enforce teamwork, and exclude those who don't collaborate effectively: "Humans, in contrast to all other species, employ a wider range of enforcement mechanisms, which allows higher levels of cooperation to evolve and stabilise among unrelated individuals and in large groups."**

Could we therefore argue that single scullers are fighting against evolution?

From anthropology to personality profiling: the tool that Anna and I used to explore our personalities and so approach to teamwork – more of this later – was the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)***. Developed by Isabel Briggs Myers and her mother Katharine Briggs in 1942, it is based on the theories of psychiatrist Carl Jung and is one of the most widely used personality profiling tools across sport and business. Katharine Briggs embarked on her work after meeting her future son-in-law and considering him to have a different personality from the rest of the family. We should reflect on that the next



PHOTO: DREW SMITH

In the zone at the Power8 Sprints earlier this year

time our mother says she doesn't like our new partner. Fortunately, my mum has never felt the need to develop a new psychological tool that influences corporations and governments, on the basis of a potential Mr Vernon that she wasn't keen on.

Jung's theory describes how humans use four principal functions – sensation, intuition, feeling, and thinking – to experience the world. Myers-Briggs assesses people according to those four markers, selecting individuals into one of 16 categories based on a matrix

of the four pairs of preferences.

The four pairs are as follows:

Your attitude is described by introversion / extraversion (based on whether you seek people or withdraw into yourself under pressure); then two sets of functions relating to the outside world: gathering information through sensing / intuition and making decisions based on thinking / feeling. Sensing is about relying on the five senses and the here and now; intuition refers to looking at the big picture and the future. Thinkers will analyse

information then make a judgement, whereas feelers make decisions through empathy.

Finally, how you relate to the outside world is judging / perceiving. People in the judging category like structure; perceivers may put off making decisions and are happy to be flexible.

How you sit within these four pairs will give you an acronym – for example ISTJ (Introvert / Sensing / Thinking / Judging). Like a recipe, these four characteristics are blended together to describe your personality as a whole.

Critics have said it has poor reliability; and it may be imperfect but MBTI is the most popular method used worldwide. Anna and I found that personality profiling is a way of understanding why conflict or harmony exists in teams. Effective teamwork isn't just about making technical changes in order to row together: that's the easy bit. Emotional intelligence and communication is what separates the good from the great, and personality profiling quantifies and offers explanations as to what's going on. →

The research – take it further

- * The evolutionary roots of human collaboration: coordination and sharing of resources, by Alicia P Melis. The New York Academy of Sciences (2013) – www.bit.ly/brteamwork1
- ** How is human cooperation different, by Alicia P Melis, Dirk Semmann. Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B (2010) – www.bit.ly/brteamwork2
- *** Find out more about the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator at www.myersbriggs.org

PERSONAL INSIGHT

RESOLVING
TEAMWORK ISSUES

“DOING THE MYERS-BRIGGS EXERCISE WAS ONE OF THE BIGGEST PERFORMANCE STEPS WE'D MADE ALL SEASON”

PHOTO: DARREN WHITER



Right: Annie Vernon and Anna Watkins working together in 2009

I'm going to tell a tale of two double sculls. I had the fortune to row in a double with Anna Watkins twice in my career. Once in the 2006 World Rowing Championships, when we were both wet behind the ears; then again in the 2009 World Rowing Championships, wiser and battle-hardened, when we'd both returned from the 2008 Olympics with medals. She, a bronze in the double; me, a silver in the quad.

The two doubles were chalk and cheese. The first time was terrible, the second fantastic. Same people, same

boat, two very different experiences.

In 2006, we approached our rowing from fundamentally different places. Both of us were convinced that we were 'right' and the other was 'wrong'.

There were too many differences. Anna enjoyed pushing our top end performance and the big picture; I wanted every detail to be perfect.

Anna liked to discuss our training and performance with other members of the team – I preferred to keep things in-house.

I liked to complete every final kilometre of the training programme,

whereas Anna was happy to focus on the most important parts.

Late in that season it was recommended by Dr Chris Shambrook, our sports psychologist, that we do a personality profiling exercise. Myers-Briggs was suggested. Doing this exercise was one of the biggest performance steps we'd made all season.

It enabled us to quantify what was going on: that it wasn't that one was right and one was wrong, but that we were different. We viewed the world through different eyes and had contrasting priorities and approaches.

It revolutionised our approach to teamwork, but we did the exercise too late to make an impact at the World Rowing Championships.

What happened? We went slower than we were capable of, and finished the season with a fourth place at the Worlds and a head full of regrets.

The second time around, we explicitly targeted the mistakes we'd made three years previously. We made sure our strengths complemented the other's weaknesses, and we prioritised our communication. We worked hard to find common ground, and built on that; plus,

rather than fighting over who was 'right' and who was 'wrong', we accepted that we each brought contrasting approaches to the boat. We became world silver medallists behind a strong Polish double at the 2009 World Rowing Championships in Poznan.

Anna and I remain close friends and still talk about how far we punched below our weight in 2006. And it's worth pointing out that in 2006 we hadn't long graduated, and were still carrying the consequences of the university beer and kebab diet, so there was a lot of weight to punch below. →

ANNIE'S FIVE TIPS FOR GREAT TEAMWORK

- 1 The quality of your communication will determine the speed of your boat.
- 2 Understand your teammates' motivations and approaches.
- 3 It is important to be friends. Take time to build relationships off the water.
- 4 Learn from each other: everyone has a different perspective.
- 5 Play around with the seating order. You might be surprised by what clicks.



The PR3 mixed coxed four celebrate gold at this year's Worlds

PHOTOS: NAOMI BAKER

TEAMWORK WISDOM

R&R asks three current GB rowers for their thoughts on what makes a great team



Graeme Thomas was at bow in the men's quad at the 2018 Worlds
 "Teamwork is creating something greater than the sum of its parts and

the only way to achieve this is by making sure all the parts are the best they can be. In the GB sculling squad, we have a group of athletes who are all willing to work for each other. We all have our individual goals but understand that our greatest chance of success lies in working together and providing support. Last year was probably the best positive example of teamwork in action.

"I missed most of the 2017 racing season after a hip operation, but throughout the winter and summer the scullers always kept me motivated, checking in on my progress and making me feel part of the team. I guess my role during this period was to demonstrate my commitment to getting back to full fitness and showing my diligence in getting my rehabilitation right.

"The culmination of this occurred before the 2017 World Championship final of the quads race. Pete Lambert had a back injury and knew he couldn't race and they paddled back to the landing stage to find me as a last-minute spare. John [Collins], Jonny [Walton] and Jack [Beaumont] showed great character and belief that we could still deliver a great performance and we took away the silver.

"In the 2018 season, it was sadly Pete who has had an operation. I hope that the same teamwork can help him come back strong for 2019. I guess the takeaway tip would be: in sport anything can happen and everyone is important; you never know who you might end up racing with, and in order to deliver top performances you need top trust in the people around you and that comes from teamwork."



Erin Wysocki-Jones, cox of the 2018 world champion PR3 mixed coxed four (pictured above)

"For me, teamwork

is when individuals come together to achieve a common goal, recognising their strengths and weaknesses in order to work cohesively, and effectively.

"My 2017-18 season demonstrated excellent teamwork, particularly at times when we were compromised by injury, illness and personal challenges. It required the athletes to look out for each other, the support staff to communicate well and the coaches to drive us to success and install a belief in ourselves. Thankfully, it was outstanding teamwork that ultimately resulted in a gold medal at Worlds this year.

"My top tip for fostering great teamwork would be to look at yourself and understand the role you have

within the team – how can you add value to those around you, and where can others support you? If you are able to understand your place in the team, you put yourself in the best position to get the most out of those around you and achieve your common goal!"



Jamie Copus stroked the lightweight men's double sculls
 "Back in my schooldays, we were one of the

top schoolboy crews in the country. We won the Schools' Head, we were second at Nat Schools, and we won the Princess Elizabeth at Henley – the 'Worlds' of school rowing.

"Abingdon had a history of being a top schoolboy crew, but we hadn't won 'the big one' [the Princess Elizabeth] for nearly 10 years. Throughout the year, our coach Athol Hundermark had stressed the importance of teamwork, and so we got together as a crew for movie nights before every big regatta. The first one was at our house, and then we rotated it through the crew. It might not seem like much, but just hanging out as a crew really built our spirit.

"Bottom line: off the water is as important to teamwork, cohesion and camaraderie. The more you can bond off the water, the more you'll pull together on it." 📌