

# Get prepared



PHOTO: FIONA RENNIE

Communicate with clarity



PHOTO: PETER SPURRIER

## Olympic gold medallist **Rowley Douglas** shares his coxing tips for the new season

October is upon us, and what you do now will really count for both you and your crew. It is easy to think that you are not required when no coxed boats are out on the water, but this could not be further from the truth.

Now is the time to be working with the coaches to get the programme moving and the rowers motivated to work hard through the winter months. You can learn

### Head racing

You will be at your first head race before you know it and you will achieve a good result by being prepared.

The first head race I went to with my old school, Monkton Combe, did not go so well. I was coxing the novice 'A' crew and, along with the novice 'B' eight, we were told to make our way to the start early and be ready to race.

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a lot about each person from what goes on in the gym and small boats. These lessons will help both you and the coaches shape and drive the crews all season. You will become part of ‘the journey’, but that cannot happen if you're keeping warm in the pub!

We neglected to check any information about the course or marshalling and just rowed up to the start of a river very much in flood. We were keen and did manage to follow our instruction of being early, but it meant that the marshals and starter had not yet arrived. When we got to the start of

## Start of season coxswain's checklist

1. **Gear check**
  - a. Winter clothing – sorry but yes, it is time to get those layers out and keep warm!
  - b. Coxing equipment, cox box, tools, speakers – check it all works in good order. (Check out [www.nkhome.com/support/instructions/coxbox.html](http://www.nkhome.com/support/instructions/coxbox.html))
2. **Reflect on last year's achievements and failures**
  - a. If you or anyone else has kept a diary, review it now and pick out any key information
  - b. If you have not kept one, go get one and start investing in the information for the future by recording things that work and do not work this season.
3. **Meet the coaches**
  - a. Agree winter crew goals – what do we want to achieve, how and by when?
  - b. Agree winter coxing goals – what should I do to improve my skills, and how will I be measured on this? (Should tie in with above crew goals)
4. **Familiarise yourself with the training and racing calendar** – it's always good to know what's coming before it arrives!

## 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. He made his GB debut in 1997 at the Nations Cup. His successes also include winning a Henley medal in the Britannia Cup.

the weir! Anyone who knows me will probably not believe that I was told I needed to talk more in those days and give more feedback to the crew.

This time we went off the start all in good order but I was a bit nervous and unprepared – so, having said nothing for the first few strokes, I turned to my trusty cox box for inspiration. I have never been allowed to forget what I said next: "Thirteen seconds gone, keep going!". I cannot remember how long the race was but I am confident no crew likes to be told they have rowed for only 13 seconds!

I believe head races are a great opportunity to have extended periods of

**2. Silence can be golden** – use silence before a call to enhance the impact. Also set the crew a goal and let them get on with it for agreed periods of time, like 20 strokes: e.g. "I'm going to be quiet and want you to work on opening your backs earlier with straight arms for 20 strokes. Ready, GO!" Perhaps at 10 strokes give some brief feedback on how it has affected the boat speed and say 10 more to go. ▀

## Head racing checklist

1. Identify the races you will be competing in or helping the coaches with – e.g. small boats.
2. Look on a map, like GoogleMaps' satellite view – this is invaluable information to:
  - a. Familiarise or refresh your memory prior to arrival
  - b. Mentally plan your ideal racing line and rehearse potential scenarios – e.g. overtaking. Keep in mind the river and race rules. If you're not coxing and assisting with small boats, try to find a few minutes to sit and discuss the course with whoever is steering.
  - c. Start to plan the calls that you will make – remember a small number sounds better when talking distance (in a 5km race you would say 1km gone, not 4km to go – or 1km remaining and not 4km gone).
3. Check the web for past results so you know roughly how long different boat types take to complete the course – this helps with planning your strategy before the race starts.
4. Agree a structure for the race regarding calls and things from training that you know have a positive impact. Discuss these with the crew and make certain everyone understands their meaning.
5. If you plan to push on to get past crews in front, then pre-agree the way that the push will be called and how it should be executed – practise this during training!

Remember the old maxim – "Failing to prepare is preparing to fail".

## “No crew likes to be told they have rowed for only 13 seconds”

the course we just carried on rowing upstream, straight over the weir! Luckily, the river was so high we did not even notice, with the exception of a huge amount of turbulence throwing both boats across the river. Moral of that story? Check the race info and look at a map!

The next year I was promoted from the novices to join the school's second eight where we again returned to Bristol Ariel to race. I now knew the full length of the course and the optional extra bit beyond

time, in race conditions, to work on effective communication with your crew.

### Communication

I would make two key points for coxswains to keep in mind when thinking about communication with their crew:

1. **Communicate with clarity** – practise what you want to say and the delivery of the words in training and seek feedback from the crew.



PHOTO: NICK HARTLAND

Coxing at Evesham