

POSTURE PERFECT!



How should coxes sit in an eight? **Phelan Hill** and legendary Canadian cox **Lesley Thompson-Willie** exchange experiences

Like many things in rowing, there is no right or wrong way to sit – you need to find what is best for you to optimise your performance in the boat.

The way I sit evolved as an organic process derived from my desire to have the ability to stay still, be in the best position for me to feel the movement and speed of the boat, be comfortable, and keep me injury free – particularly with my lower back.

In many ways the rowing shell you are in will determine how you sit in a boat. I'm fortunate that I spend the majority of my time coxing in large, heavyweight men's Empacher shells that I find very comfortable.

I (PH) recently sat down to talk posture with seven-time Canadian Olympic coxswain Lesley Thompson-Willie (LTW) who has one of the most distinctive coxing styles in international rowing.

PH: *I know you use a Hudson, is comfort an important factor in your posture?*

LTW: Of course the size of the shell and the trim of the boat along with other factors put limitations on how you sit, and I always look to sit comfortably whatever the

shell. I have the principle that the more comfortable the coxswain or rower, the better the concentration and hence better performance. We are in a larger boat and I am quite a bit more comfortable now than I have been in the past. Put me in a men's boat and it is like flying first class in terms of room. So comfort is a factor.

PH: I have two objectives: to be comfortable and to sit still. I do this so I can feel the boat rhythm and flow. I like to think of the contact points I have with the boat; I have my feet (I never cox in shoes), seat, back of my seat, and my hands. The contact with the back of the seat rest for me is so important to the feel as from this you can gauge the check on the hull (how much the boat stops and jerks at the catch). Low check on your back means the boat is running well; high check means you're killing valuable speed; leaning forward reduces this contact area so it's a big no-no for me.

PH: *You have a distinct style. What's important for you?*

LTW: I too race in bare feet, which allows me to lower my feet in the boat thereby keeping my hips in the best position for me. This is where getting the



right coxswain station set-up is important. I suppose if a coxswain feels their hands are a major contact and stabilising point (I like to keep mine more for steering, feeling roll, and dealing with flying visors, etc) they might lean further forward but that's not me. Where I place my hands – and elbows – is also specific. I have found that the wrong placement of my hands (either too far forward or back) can sometimes affect my shoulders, so where I place my hands is to help me be injury-free.




PH: I'm really particular about where I have my hands too; I measure exactly where the steering toggles go, but I like to have my arms straight and further forward on tight rudder wires. I'm at my strongest sitting up. I'm pressed against the back of my seat, my core is strong so I can stay still and in a race can turn to see where other crews and objects are without disturbing the boat balance. Just like a singer I think sitting up more also puts your diaphragm in a stronger position to deliver vocally.

Above: Lesley Thompson-Willie in the driving seat

PH: You mentioned staying injury free a moment ago. Is that a factor for you when coxing?

LWT: I started as a cox weeks after knee surgery for a gymnastics injury. Many coxes I speak to often talk about back pain, particularly in the lower spine and knees. This can be addressed with good posture. I've known coxes to get pain in their mid-back, right where the back of the seat hits your body. It's pretty common to have a line of bruises going across the back from the movement of the boat. Use your legs to press

yourself into the back of the seat so you don't bang back and forth. A little extra padding against your back is a good idea – it can be anything: a foam pad or T-shirt.

PH: Well Lesley, that's been great, thanks very much for your time! 

Find out more about Lesley at www.rowingcanada.org/national-team/athletes/2014/lesley-thompson-willie

Phelan Hill's biography is at www.britishrowing.org/gb-rowing-team/biographies/phelan-hill – you can follow him on Twitter at [@PhelanHill](https://twitter.com/PhelanHill) 