

Coxing Aid - Introduction

I always say the same things to developing coxes and that is to think as your crew as big lumps of stupid muscle that have left their brains back in their kitbags! You're the mind in the machine from the minute that they cross the threshold to the club. What does this mean? Well, that there are some golden rules to remember:

1. **You're in charge so when you ask them to do something, they should do it.** If they don't then stop them and start again. If the coach tells you to easy oars and they respond, tell them to keep rowing and then you stop them when you're ready. If they decide to take a boat off the rack before you're ready, make them put it back and start again. Like children and animals, they'll soon learn!
2. **You're responsible for the boat and its safety. So, if you need to stop the boat, then stop.** If you need to take time to check something, then do it. *And most importantly, if you feel you can't do something don't feel you have to* – for example, if you feel the weather is too bad and you're not sure it's safe or within your capabilities, then say you won't take the boat out. Safety rules over everything else and you're the common sense in the boat. You have to keep a clam head. They might moan that you took a wide line in a race to get round a crew or they missed an outing but I assure you, its better than crashing or sinking.
3. **You are part of the crew.** What does this mean? No matter who you are in a boat with they should respect you as they do the other rowers and include you as they would the rowers. But conversely, you have a responsibility to your crew to train, learn and practice your skills just as they do. Pick something every outing to practice on – a new call or a set of calls around one part of the stroke. Coordinate with the coach so you can swat up in advance. Make notes of what works or didn't in an outing so you get to know what works for a particular crew (men and women are highly different in what they respond to for example). Know your technical stuff – course maps, currents, etc. and come prepared. **EVERY cox should ALWAYS carry a tool kit.**

Coxing a crew is a difficult thing to do well; it take's confidence, intelligence, technical knowledge, practice and empathy. If you do it well, you'll get much more out of it then you would just sitting in the boat and pointing it left or right! But to do that, you need to approach it with the right mindset – it's a challenge and a responsibility that requires just the same commitment as rowing.

Safety

This comes first and foremost at all times. NEVER take it for granted that things are in order. Check, question, prompt your crew. **Be sure not sorry.** Take responsibility. Use your common sense.

- ! **Equipment:** Is the boat fit for purpose? Does it need any repairs? Is your coxbox charged? Do you have your tool kit to fix anything mid outing? (You won't always have a banksman to help so get into the routine of bringing your toolkit in the boat). Do you have high vis or lights? Do you have floatation aids? Are all the hatches working and closed? Is the bow ball secure? Are the feet properly secured?
- ! **Weather:** Always a big issue in rowing. Has everyone got enough kit when it's cold? What about sun cream and water in the summer? Is it safe to go on the water? Do you know when you can't go out – high flow on rivers, tides. Did you know not to go out in lightning? Can you go out but maybe adjust your outing to avoid the exposed stretches or bridges where the river tightens and the flow gets stronger.
- ! **Cox** – always make sure you are warm and safe. Always have your lifejacket. Plenty of warm layers, make sure you can swim in your layers. If you can't swim you shouldn't be in the boat. Nobody should. Hoodies are an absolute no. They can get

caught on the boat or can act like a sail in a current pulling you down or away from the boat.

- ! Capsize drill: Has your crew done this? Do you know the protocol if you flip? If you don't know this then ask. But the number 1 rule is to get your body as far out of the water as you can, as quickly as you can by climbing on top of the boat and then NEVER to leave your boat. Don't try to swim to the side, cold water paralyses you very, very quickly. Shout as loud as you can. Someone will hear.

Lastly, the most important rule of coxing – if in doubt, chicken out!

It is better to stop, turn back, take a wider line, abandon an outing, etc. than it is to put yourself and your crew at risk.

Steering basics

1. How to steer: You always steer the boat by looking at what is happening *at least* three or four boat lengths away. Looking as far in advance as you can let's you plot a course and make small steering changes to get you there. Remember that it takes an eight a boat length to implement a steering change. So, if you need to move over, you need to know it in advance.
2. Rudder: When you put the rudder on you create resistance. This slows the boat down and knocks the balance off. So you want as little rudder as possible. *Little taps to one side over a few strokes is better than one big correction.* Big corrections cause oversteering and you'll crisscross your way down a course. Coming back to point 1, big rudder movements tend to be because you haven't had time to position yourself and have to make a last-minute change.

As you get more and more experienced, you learn to see the signs that something is coming your way – for example a cross wind that might push you out, a crew that is going to push you out to get a better line, a current pushing you faster down a course than you were prepared for. And your eye will start to automatically look for corners and hazards, just like driving a car. What will seem like a lot of mental effort to begin with will become second nature with practice and understanding.

And it is generally held that the rudder should be applied on the drive phase when the impact on balance will be minimised. I have seen some debate over this but I stand by it. Again, small taps each time the blades are in the water rather than one full rudder movement through the recovery and drive. You'll feel the boat dip down when you apply too much rudder. And your crew will feel it and won't thank you for it!!

Remember that over the course of a head race, the steering and rudder can have just as much effect on the time as a poor rower can have. So never think what you do can't help win the race even when you have no coxbox.

3. Know the water: Whenever you row somewhere new, get a map and understand the course. (ALWAYS go to coxing briefs at races. They will inform you of the hazards, especially those that are temporary and may not be on the course map or weren't there last time you rowed that race.) Even going to Runcorn to train could throw up something new to deal with.
4. Remember that you can use the crew to steer. If you're not going to make a corner or need to move out of the way of something quickly, call bow or stroke side to row

harder and help you. Everyone makes errors or misjudges a line know and then and unexpected things happen. Remember safety comes first. So even in a race this is a last resort option.

Weather conditions

This may be self-evident but as you get more experienced, you'll have more time to look for the tell-tale signs that there are weather conditions to contend with. A few easy ones are below;

- Wind: Wind will cause the surface of the water to ripple. So in calm(ish) conditions you might see ripples across the water in the direction of the wind. It should alert you to change in conditions so you can adjust your course to anticipate it. If its very choppy then you're going to see white horses on the river and its going to be tough going. Let your crew know what you're going so they appreciate that a change in the boat or line out of the racing line is necessary.

A tailwind will be great as it make a row feel easy but don't let that fool you! Yes, steering a tail wind is easy but it can cause a crew to loose power on the catch and they need to get on the legs faster in order to feel the pick up in water. The faster the boat moves under them the lighter the catches feel but remind them that *its not them its the conditions and every other crew has the same advantage!* So quick catches is a good calls. Watch the blades and make sure they get a full stroke at the catch. Blade straight down into the water not over a 45 degree angle! Also be mindful that if you're approaching a corner that tailwind could become a tail/crosswind and push you out. Be aware.

A headwind is every rowers nightmare! But it isn't too bad for steering. Mostly it will make a boat sluggish to react as the boat speed drops more quickly on the recovery. For this, late squaring is better. The less time the blades are squared, the less wind resistance you have. And keep the finishes strong! I would take the rating up a couple of pips even if you shorten a little on the front end.

The side wind is the coxes biggest problem. Again, watch for signs of this. The surface of the water, trees leaning to one side, other crews ahead of you suddenly moving out for no reason. A bad steer will angle the boat so the bows point in the direction the crew is turning, a bad wind will simply push the whole boat sideways.

In a side wind point your bows into the wind a little. This gives the wind as little surface space as possible to grab the boat with and as the wind does catches you, it will push you back onto the course you're aiming for. This is much easier than steering ahead then trying to get back onto a course having been pushed off it.

- Flow: Tidal water is a key feature of a head race and this is where the cox can make or creak a race. The general rules are below but each river is specific and you should check the course and plot your course before you get on the water.

Water is deepest in the middle of the river and therefore the flow is quickest here. So if in doubt aiming for the middle shouldn't do you too much harm if you're completely unsure.

However, many rivers have sand banks on one side, maybe have walls on one side and a natural edge on the other, etc. so again, check and be aware of your surroundings.

Corners – now this is a big one for racing. The flow is generally faster 2/3 over the way into a bend. So if the river bends to the right as you face it, then you want to edge the boat two thirds *away from the right hand bank* as you approach it. Why? Because the water wants to flow in a straight line. It does know there is a bend ahead! So it all hits the left hand bank before being forced around the bend to the right. So in a race you might think cutting a corner is a good plan as taking the shortest route and that makes sense, right? Rarely! Coming into a bend wide can keep you in the flow and allow you to come out of the bend on a tighter, better line. Keeping tight round corner can put you in slow water out of the stream and mean you have much more rudder on to make the corner, the cumulative effect being a much slower time!

There are exceptions to this – if a bend is very, very long for example and you're adding 500m of rowing and the flow is weak then it might well be that shorter is better. Another common one is an S-shape in the river. You probably won't be able to take both bends perfectly so you might take the first bend tightly so you can position yourself correctly for the second one and come out of the turns with the best racing line. Also, the first bend isn't a full bend as it will immediately turn the other way so there is no need to come out of it straight in the middle. You actually want to come out of it on the other side of the river.

Turning and positioning

Turning should be done in a way appropriate to a crew's ability and the circumstances. You can't tap turn in a current, you'll be half way down the river before you know it. You might need full slide in tough conditions or you might use just bow and stroke. Practice by deciding with the coach how you'll turn and thinking about the calls before you get on the water. *Remember that the boat should be sat all the time including during manoeuvres.* Going back to the first section – if it's off balance when turning or the timing is poor. Stop and start it again. Think of it as another exercise. Do it right or don't do it at all.

Positioning is a much harder art to master and takes on the water practice. I would recommend get the crew to spend five minutes a weekend trying one or two new things when it's calm, sat and you have plenty of room. That will help you understand how a command moves the boat and when it is useful. So when you need it, the commands will come straight to mid. So examples are:

- ! Getting 7 or 8 to back the boat to straighten it – could be useful on a regatta start where 2 and bow tapping on would take you over the start line and the starter then has to move you back.
- ! Getting a rower to pass their blade forward so the person in front can tap on – can be useful when you're trying to keep straight on a stake boat without pulling forward.

So think through eventualities in your head and think what calls you would make. Practice them so when you need a different option you can recall it quickly rather than having a mind blank! And don't just let the coach do this for you otherwise you'll never learn for yourself. That's like using a satnav to get somewhere and then realising you haven't learnt the way.

Getting a crew to respond

This can be one of the toughest parts of coxing and it is when empathy really comes in handy. Understanding your crew, what motivates them, what makes them listen, what makes them confident, all helps to win races. And makes for good training sessions. So pay attention, listen at debrief, note when the boat responds. Try different things, in different circumstances.

Also accept that a crew can always blame the cox. That's easy – you didn't make the right calls, take the right line, your timing was off. Don't take it to heart. Accept and improve it if you think it's fair and constructive but if it's just an excuse for a bad row, then let it go. If it becomes a regular thing, tell the coach or captain. If you still don't feel happy, then

remember that coxes are like gold dust and you can go to another squad so remind them all of that fact!

There are some technical things you can do to help with this:

1. **Vocal Inclination:** You will be surprised how much this can affect a boat. This is difficult to set out in writing but imagine that the crew will row in time with your voice. So in steady state you might have a softer tone, more relaxed delivery whilst in a piece you'll be sharper, cleaner in your delivery, use less words, be more aggressive.

Match your voice to the call – so 'quick catches' would be sharp and delivered quickly. Try getting the call in time with the part of the stroke you're aiming to improve. So you might use 'spear the catch' to improve back splash and it would best to say the 'SPEAR' sharp and quickly as the catches go in and then the rest of the sentence less aggressively once the catch is done. Take a minute now to think about it.... SPEAR. The catch..... SPEAR. The catch....The same goes with calming calls. Imagine 'realaaaaaaxxxx the recovery' is exaggerated and drawn out as the crew comes forward.

Another way to think of it is to replace every call with 'Bob the Builder'. If you were trying to speed something up or make a crew push harder, how and when would you use your voice to do it not the words. Try it in your head. Visualise the part of the stroke and think about how you would use Bob the Builder to get the crew to respond. The crew will almost mimic the call so make it sound like it looks, if that makes sense!

2. **Repetition:** Keep at them. Try to use a call three to four times in a row so the crew really focus on it. And if they stop, then come back to it again and again. Never let them have an easy ride if they're just being lazy and if it's a new element never assume they'll get it straight away – ive hear it be said that it take 100 perfect strokes in a row to commit a technical point to muscle memory. So even if that's no entirely true you can see that 2-3 good strokes is not the big win you might think it is!!
3. **Count them into it or give them a prompt word:** Sometimes repetition just gets depressing if things don't change! And in races, you don't have time to waste 3-4 strokes to get it right. So another option is to say 'sharp catches, next stroke, NOW!' Or 'Legs back on, over three, two, one, NOW!'

Calls

Now that you know the principals of coxing you can think about the calls. The main thing I would say about any call is that **you** need to understand it! If you don't really know why you're making a call or exactly how its meant to be properly executed then ask your stroke or you coach. Otherwise you'll use it incorrectly and your crew will be learning a bad habit not a good one. So below I will give calls and a brief explanation of what they really mean.

Make the calls on the right part of the stroke. Mostly at the catch is best. But learn the exceptions.

General Calls

1. Taking a crew off from a standing start. Now this can be literally standing still or slightly moving – say in a heavy flow or you eased but the took off again quickly. That is why we've been taught to do a 45 degree angle at ready not to dig the blades in. The three things you need to tell them are:

1. Who
2. What
3. When

All Eight (Who),
Full Slide, Feathered blade (What),
Ready, GO (When).

This should be your mantra. Who. What. When. Every call should be consistent.

Bow Four (Who),
Square blades, arms only (what),
Ready. Go (When).

Full crew (Who),
Fixed seat turn, stroke backing (what),
Ready, Go (When).

Wait for the crew to show you they're ready by turning their blades by 45 degrees.

It seems easy but the consistency is vital. *It shows the crew that you know what you're doing and that they can trust you.* They will expect it and it sets the standard – if you're lazy, they'll be lazy.

2. Other starts. So we'll just do head races starts at the moment. Generally, you need to set off and could have 200m to row up to the start or you could have 10m. You won't know till you're off. You want to be right on the crew ahead so you can take them as quickly as possible but you also want enough room to be going race pace over the start line. So you'll have to make a judgement call on the day but the below outlines the principals for building to firm straight off the start. You can just row on the call into the race pace over five. I have

included some at limited rating which would obviously be for training not a race!

Full crew.
Building to firm, rating 24/ Building to firm, rating 32/ Building to RACE PACE, over 5 strokes
Ready. Go
In five (call at the catch of the first stroke)
In four
In three
In two
In one
RACE PACE (on the recovery) NOW! (at the catch)

The pressure and rating should increase a little with each stroke so you're only at race pace at NOW! So on the cox box it might look like 18/20/26/30/32 or 16/20/24/28/32 As long as it is gradual then its right. You want to build in order to find the balance, find the lift together on the catch, find the timing so that **on the start line you're full legs, perfect balance and perfect timing.**

You can also make calls on the recovery as you get more practiced. Reminding them what you do as they wind up.

Full Crew
 Building to race pace over 5
 Ready. Go.
 In five (catch)
 Rock over (recovery)
 In four (catch)
 Build the pressure (recovery)
 In three (Catch)
 Control the balance (recovery)
 In two (catch)
 Lengthen and relax (recovery)
 In one (catch)
 RACE PACE (recovery)
 NOW! (Catch)

You can alternate your vocals so the recovery calls are relaxed and long but the catch calls are sharp and loud (with the expectation of race pace which should be a loud and aggressive). Let your voice mimic the rhythm of the boat. You can add in rates during the wind so the crew knows where there are in comparison to where they need to be.

Once you're off the start, the hard work begins. Always, always go for controlled power. Big legs, yes but your crew will have adrenaline running through them and they'll be pulling their balls off regardless. So if you do a call for legs, then also do one that controls those legs. So say;

Big on the legs. Next stroke. Now!
 Followed by or more of the following:
 Looooong (recovery) and STRONG (catch and through the drive)
 CONTROL THAT POWER.
 Sit back on the finishes. SIT (Drive). BACK (Finish). SIT (Drive). TALL (Finish). Rock (Drive).
 Through (Finish).

Everything else is in the table below.

| EXERCISE | CALL | OBJECTIVE |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Square blades warm up | Full crew. (Who) Square Blades. Arms only. (What) Ready. Go (When) When moving the calls should be made in time with the catches. You're telling the what they do next stroke not this one so they warning. At this stage you can take a couple of strokes as you don't have much time. Bodies over (at catch) Next stroke (at catch). Go (at catch) The next call can be neater as you have more time between strokes but | -Look for posture and position issues – can you see anyone leaning out the boat? Is the crew sitting up tall? Is anyone bringing the back in? -Look for eight blades moving together. You'll be able to see whether the oars all move at the same time not just if they are in and out together. Every should move their hand at the same speed. - Look for bent arms at the catch. Arms should be out and straight before the catch which gives a rectangular shape if you look at the spoon of the blades. A round shape means there is no definition in the tap down and catch - Are the arms and bodies over two separate movements? - Is the body position held until after the catch is taken? - Arms should be straight then the body comes in. Imagine the arms are |

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| | <p>you can take three catches if that's comfortable for you.</p> <p>Quarter slide, next stroke (catch). Go. (catch)</p> <p>Half slide, next stroke Go. $\frac{3}{4}$ slide, next stroke Go.</p> <p>Feather blades, next stroke. Go.</p> | <p>a piece of string that pulls the body forward. If the string is bent you can't pull the body.</p> <p>-Is there now three distinct parts to the movement? -Everyone should rock over before the legs break. -The $\frac{1}{4}$ should be very gentle. The speed should slow once the body is rocked over.</p> <p>-As above, separation at the finish followed by a slow glide up the slide. -If balance isn't there then call it. But remember that it might be posture not hand heights. So call to sit up. Lean back. Rock over. Hold the finishes.</p> <p>Look for eight blades moving together – fast round the hands, then slowing through the recovery more and more as you go through the exercise.</p> |
| Single strokes | <p>Come forward to row (means come to frontstops)</p> <p>All eight (Who) From frontstops, Single stroke (What) Ready. Go. (When)</p> | <p>-There are several aims to this exercise and no matter that the coach is working on you should demand all the elements are done.</p> <p>-Power. All eight should put the legs on together lifting the bows up out of the water. You can tell if they get this by the pressure on their saddle bones. If they lift their bums, they're getting on the legs. -Are they getting their heels down to the footplate? This engages the glutes. -Are they holding their frame? No bodies should come in. No shoulders taking the strain. No slouching. No bent arms. -Are they pushing through both feet evenly? - Are bodies central at the beginning and through the drive? - If you lose the balance on the drive then it's a sign that one of the above is going wrong. Look at the spoon of the blades in the water. They should draw through in a straight line – not wash out or dig in up the loom as the blade makes a V shape in the water. If you see that tell that crew member. They need to be aware. Tell your crew if the balance when down during the drive. Tell your crew who was late or early.</p> |
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