

On the day



Race day will put all the practice you and your crew have done to the test. **Robin Williams** explains how to maximise the experience

We have looked at separate aspects of technique over the last few issues, but this month the subject is racing so it's time to bring all of those elements together. You can do a certain amount of technical thinking during racing but things are happening fast and so it has to be

is how you get the upper hand in racing.

Racing technique can also be visualised so I get crews to paddle over the race track several times, mapping it out in different modes: once thinking about the *technical* reminders (e.g. clean blades, good hand separation and rock-over, breathing, etc) , once acknowledging the *physical*

perhaps one last trip to reproduce the whole race plan using a combination of these cues.

Which technical calls work best? Well, they need to be discussed in advance so that they mean something to **you**. A call for 'toes', for instance, might be a reminder to approach the entry with good slide control, to time the entry to the toes, to be balanced through the feet and therefore not dipping with the shoulders, to initiate the pressure from the toes - not the handle - and so on. 'Toes' also implies a skill movement, whereas 'legs' suggests a powerful drive from the quads, so the choice of words can work on a subtle level as well as being a direct command. The point is that this will all have been agreed well in advance of the race, so that, come the day, the crew will intuitively respond to the call the same way.

“**The faster we drive the boat the more challenging the recovery becomes**”

simple. The sensible thing is to have just a few calls which act as reminders and prompts to ensure that the focus is on the right thing at the right time. It doesn't matter whether you are coxed or not - even a single sculler needs to think about the calls, because being proactive

challenges (e.g. the sprint strokes, distance per stroke in the middle, working the third 500m, pushes, etc), and once thinking about the *mental* and *tactical* scenarios (e.g. own boat focus off the start, what if we're up / down / level, staying focussed, rowing well when behind, etc). Then

Drills

- ▶ **To appreciate control:** try doing air strokes at low, medium, and high rate and see how much harder it is to control the ends of the stroke.
- ▶ **To improve the finish:** include bursts with feet out, then back in, to establish the right finish point. Also, square blades, or both together. Half-arm draw finishes can be good too and quarter-slide pieces between 10 strokes to several minutes – at race rate – is a favourite drill because you are using a full back swing which creates plenty of power and handle speed, plus a strong rock-over with fluid hands together creates a great rhythm. It's not hard to rate 36 at quarter-slide but it helps you work out how to get a balance between power, release and movement.
- ▶ **For practising control through the pick-up:** try legs-only drills ('picking drills' or 'nudges') at low, mid and high rates.



World Champions Anna Watkins and Katherine Grainger demonstrate perfect posture at the finish

Robin Williams

The former Lead Coach for GB Lightweights, Robin coached the lightweight men's four to gold at the 2007 World Championships and fifth at the 2008 Olympic Games. From 1995 to 2005, Robin was Chief Coach at CUBC, achieving seven wins out of 10 in the Boat Race against Oxford. After learning to row at Monmouth School and then representing the University of London Boat Club, he gained his first GB vest in 1981 when he was selected for the Worlds.

We are covering racing starts next time, but let's look at the technical challenges of racing once underway. The concept is to sprint off at full power to get the boat moving and then to hold on to as much of this 'free' early speed as possible by ensuring really accurate technique and rhythmical movement. It's all about minimising fade and if you've ever tried flat pacing it actually feels like you have to work harder and harder just to maintain the average. It's important to get into a good

technical pattern while the speed is high and you are still fresh. Once it's gone it's very hard to get back.

Minimising fade is largely about control of mass: we deliberately drive ourselves backwards as fast as possible but we have to then return while the boat keeps going so our changes of direction at high rate become critical. An ergo only rewards the drive phase whereas boat speed comes from both drive and recovery (thankfully!). The faster we drive the boat, the more challenging the recovery becomes to get the mass in control again.

Two faults materialise at the finish during racing: some people work too far back and go off-balance, find their trunk has collapsed and the blade gets caught or messy at the extraction. Others pull back on to the handle, hunching forward at the finish to combat over-balancing but then give away some length and power! There are some good drills to get this right – see the box above.

Once this bit is practised, the rest of the recovery is easy, because the momentum in your upper body is finished but the momentum in the hull is sufficient to move your legs for you, ready for you to pop the spoon in at the front and change direction on the blade.

Legs-only drills ('picking drills' or 'nudges') at low, mid and high rates are good for practising control through the pick-up. Indeed, the whole essence of the turns is to make it like a fluid baton change in a running race: the handle makes the entry, the feet take over and catch the

“Being proactive is how you get the upper hand in racing”

spoon to make the instant pressure. At the finish your body finishes driving against the spoon and the hands take over the movement again. This can all be summarised by the idea that the front end is for the feet, the back end for the hands; the hands are quiet at the front, the legs are pressed and still at the finish.

Given the need to always improve, take notice of where the weak links happen in racing. Which bit of you fatigues first? If it's your back you might need more strength training and posture work there or look at how much forward lean you are taking; if it's your legs, check you aren't over-driving the front end when the knees are still steep; if it's your arms you probably haven't built enough speed from the legs / trunk.

All in all, racing technique is about allowing what you've practised to actually happen and using those important calls now and then to keep everyone's brains engaged on the same themes! ▀



Sit back at the finish, but not too far!

PHOTO: GERARD BROWN