

SEATING PLAN



This month **Robin Williams** tackles seating arrangements in smaller coxless boats. Where to start and what should you consider?

PHOTOS: **PETER SPURRIER**

The seating order in coxless boats needs a bit of thought and some common sense. An eight, by comparison, is quite easy – see last month's article on pages 60-61.

At 17m long, 60cm wide and weighing just under 100kg, and with nine people sitting in it, an eight is pretty stable so a few waves and a bit of wind are not going to bother it much. It's a good environment for improving technique, and when it comes to seats there is plenty of choice so you are likely to find a position to suit everyone.

However, in quads, fours, pairs and doubles it gets trickier. Balance is harder because the

Size matters

A few basics to start off with: are your crew weights, heights and powers similar or do you have some differences to accommodate? A heavy person at stroke or bow might make the boat run bows-down or stern-down. Likewise, a really tall person at bow might cause the boat to twist during the stroke or knock it round off the start and send you into the booms, buoys, or other crew. With wing-rigger boats you can compensate a bit by moving the mounting point of the rigger: you could move stroke a couple of centimetres towards the bows and move bow the same amount sternwards, leg-room permitting. This can reduce

“ Give people a chance to feel what other positions are like ”

boats are lighter and narrower. Plus, compared to the eight, these boats pick up and lose speed more easily. The bows are twitchier, the sterns check more easily, plus somebody needs to replace the cox when it comes to making calls, not to forget having a clever foot to steer with. So if you put a clumsy person in a delicate seat like bow, or an inconsistent person in a key seat like stroke, then there might be some problems.

the twisting effect in fours. In pairs you might move both people one way to achieve an even trim and sometimes coaches use tandem rigs in fours to get the right person in the right seat.

The sterns of quads and doubles should go straight, but weight distribution can still matter. The tall athlete can be accommodated by changing the span and scull length if the arc lengths are different, but it's usually best to start adjusting the 'human gearing' – i.e. sit up a bit,



PHOTO: SAM DAWSON

Different sizes: James Foad and Moe Sbihi at the recent GB Rowing Team Senior Trials

adjust the leg compression or perhaps the amount of sit-back. Another factor, especially in quads with all those blades, is water being flicked up at the finish which can be really irritating for those in the stern. So it might be good to avoid sitting a messy finisher at bow! Plenty of square blade drills should help keep it tidy, while rigging them to the correct height helps reduce washing out.

Strong suits

After considering physical size, there's the question of mental and technical suitability for each seat. Who is going to steer and make the calls? Both of these jobs are additional to sending down a strong puddle, so some multi-tasking is necessary. Usually the two seat in a quad or four is best positioned to be heard by both stern pair and bow, while stroke is best to steer on a straight course. However, on rivers bow is better for steering because it offers a clearer view of what's ahead.

Meanwhile stroke needs to be a decision-maker, confident in rhythm, and able to notice what's going on with the race, the umpire and boat-run



A tandem-rigged Cambridge University 1, pennant winners in the 2008 Fullers Head of the River Fours



whilst still holding a technical pattern. Three can keep eyes in the boat more, work hard and focus on really backing up everything stroke is doing. Two has to have many of the qualities of stroke, needing to hold good technique while making the calls to keep the crew working on the right points and executing the race plan. Bow may be steering and looking ahead but also has considerable influence over the balance. So if, for instance, the boat feels like it is going to go off balance at the finish, bow can hold on to the puddle a moment longer and often prevent a dip, then release the hands freely and not get behind the recovery movement.

Skills training

That's all very well, but how to practise some of these skills? Well, steering is made easy when the crew rows well together so perhaps experiment with loosening off the steering or temporarily disconnecting it and seeing if the boat goes straight, based on even length and pressure. Everyone takes some responsibility that way. Try doing a start like this and see if the boat is pulled round one way or not.

Switching seats is an obvious one: give people a chance to feel what other positions are like. For instance it is interesting that it feels easier to move from bow to stroke in a pair than the other way, and probably in a double too. The bow seat feels slightly higher, the boat narrower, the balance more of a responsibility.

I mentioned tandems in fours, and this can be a way of getting the right person into the two seat to make calls and/or keep the boat straighter. Or maybe you have two big, tall rowers on the same side who need to be at two and three?

Discuss your calls too: sometimes race pushes disrupt the rhythm if people go on different strokes or interpret a different meaning. Decide who is keeping a lookout for safety hazards and who is 'coaching' and implementing the outing plan.

Seat order

At the end of the day seat order is never perfect. You can bet you've got either no stroke material at all or too much choice, too many of one side, a tall stroke-side and short bow-side, or all manner of other variables.

With some plan for how you'd ideally like to seat the crew and a bit of common sense you can normally get a workable compromise. Even if someone doesn't quite meet the anatomical criteria of a perfect oarsman they can work on 'bringing something to the boat' in plenty of other ways. That's how best to secure a seat!

Robin Williams

Robin coaches the GB women's pair who won silver at the 2010 and 2011 World Rowing Championships. He coached the lightweight men's four to gold at the 2007 Worlds and to 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.