

# THE POWER OF ONE



**Robin Williams** explains how single sculling can improve your overall technique on the water

PHOTOS: PETER SPURRIER

**D**epending on your view, being in a single scull is either a treat, giving freedom, independence and satisfaction, or it's a punishment to be endured, an uncomfortable instrument of torture with all sorts of technical trickery! Nevertheless, I am going to try to convince you this month that the single is a great boat in its own right and is also a means of improving your crew boat work.

**“When the boat gets heavy, it's you!”**

The main benefit of the single, in my view, is that it promotes finer motor skills than bigger boats do. Balance is the overriding problem in the single but if you can become proficient in such a skinny boat then all the other boats are relatively easy.

For instance, the single is sensitive to check at the catch so if you master this then you can be sure that you understand your own movements. You will also be able to control your mass in larger craft where things are more stable but faster. It accelerates and decelerates quickly too but with only one person aboard this gives

wonderful feedback – and the feedback is instant.

When you get the right combination of length, acceleration, glide, control, relaxation, mental focus, and all the other bits and pieces, there's a real sense of one-ness with your craft which is simply harder to achieve when there are a bunch of other people in a boat together. In short, it gives direct and honest feedback, rewards technical proficiency and you can improve quickly.

When dealing with balance, for instance, it is quite acceptable to scull with blades on the water sometimes, if it allows you to loosen off the shoulders or to work on other things like length or sequences. It's a drill in its own right so don't be embarrassed about doing it! The blades are like stabilisers so when they're down balance is not much of an issue.

Furthermore, when you ease on the run it's not too hard either to balance with blades off the water, at least for a bit. So, off course, it is the entry and exit which threaten the balance most. If the front end feels especially vulnerable, why not just row



Katherine Grainger making it look easy during the recovery

three-quarter length for a while? Once your confidence rises enough for you to keep balance on your feet, you will feel happier about going further up the slide and having the arms fully spread.

If you are a higher level sculler then side-to-side balance won't be such an issue but stern to bow control might be. Everyone finds that they can make the single go well at, say, rate 20, 24, 28, but often hit a ceiling where it just gets too heavy to



GB rowers balancing at the GB Rowing Team Senior Trials



## “The single promotes finer motor skills than bigger boats”

keep going higher. With a bit of speed work you can push the ceiling up a bit but in the end you need to look at your own mass. In other words – when the boat gets heavy, it's you!

The boat weighs the same all the time regardless of rate or speed, but as *you* move up and down faster your momentum becomes a penalty, especially around the front end. Good acceleration to the finish allows (and justifies)

clean, fast arms away which allows you to arrive quietly on the slide at the front end and on balance ready to change direction. At the 'ceiling' you may find the handles won't accelerate any more so the slide speed goes up, meaning that you will arrive with more momentum and the pick-up will get heavier. It's then harder to accelerate and you will be in a downward spiral because the rhythm will have begun to reverse itself.

The key is to stop the trunk over-spilling at the front, and the elbows over-drawing at the finish so your changes of direction stay in tune with the hull. Find your effective length or 'range' and you will be able to keep building acceleration and remain in control. In bigger boats there's enough rolling mass to keep it going but the single just gets hard work if you yourself become a heavy mover.

So the key areas where the single can contribute are balance side to side, control stern to bows, understanding your own momentum and effective range plus of course it's great physical training and makes you tough. Why *wouldn't* you love the single!

## Drills

### For side-by-side balance

A good exit drill is to sit at back stops and do dips with the forearms. The reason this works is because everything except the forearms is still, so the blades come out freely and the boat can stay sitting level. During continuous sculling it really helps if the shoulders and arms have finished moving when you tap down – and indeed, at the front that they are also still when you make the entry. The trunk and shoulders are bulky and have an adverse affect on the handles which have very little mass and are actually quite easy to control, on their own.

Single strokes to the finish is good for practising this. Feathering on the water is a good drill too because the handles are kept high and you can define the end point of the power and therefore the exit is the very next movement. It's a small step to then tap them down to clear the water.

At the front, a roll-up works in the same way. Your shoulders are still when you enter the blades, so when sculling continuously just make sure you don't go out further than in the roll-up. Allow the legs to be the moving part and everything sits still on top of them.

### For stern to bow control

Try dropping back to three-quarters slide for some strokes, to lighten up the pick-up and control the trunk, then go back to length being careful not to exceed your range. At the back end sculling with a half arm draw has a similar effect because it stops the trunk from over-balancing and keeps the pressure clean on the spoons. Then lengthen to a full draw but be careful not to over-draw. You do see people whose elbows are still splaying even after the blades are out which just wastes time and costs rate.

## 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.