

EVERYDAY TECHNIQUE



This month **Robin Williams** turns his attention to a junior schoolboy crew to see if still photos from their training session can throw light on technique PHOTOS: DON SOMNER



The Eton College four showing good posture. The crew went on to successfully represent GB at the J16 GB France Match last month

Still photo collages can be a useful technique tool, as mentioned previously, but the commercially produced book or poster is different to your own home-produced one. Not in terms of quality – just because when you take your own you know all about the crew, what improvements they have already made, what the sticking points are and the general context of the pictures. With the poster version they are taken by someone else of another athlete, so you have to take the images at face value and interpret them in your own way. That's why it's so hard to choose the right shots and the

brief descriptions that accompany them.

It therefore struck me that it might be useful to get hold of some pictures of club rowers and see what challenges arise in analysing someone else's crews. Will they display recognisable traits of the GB model? Will they reveal faults in enough detail to be useful? Will they convey what is really going on with the crew in question? Well, I am grateful to an Eton College junior coxed four for being willing guinea pigs – and to Don Somner for providing the photos. A lot of them!

First of all, you can see some *good* things. In pictures 3 and 4 (the drive and recovery), the boys are all

sitting pretty well and none are sitting in a slumped posture on the seat. To my mind this is a really great technique point to instil with youngsters because backs can be vulnerable to injury and good posture will help avoid this.

It helps with the basic organisation of the stroke as well because the hands away / bodies over slide sequence will be easier to follow if the person in front of you has a good trunk position. The amount of trunk angle also looks good: no-one is outside their range – i.e. they look like their trunks will be strong enough at that angle to hold the leg drive when it comes. They row off the legs, and keep arms long so even a few single photos selected from the stroke cycle suggest that they have been taught this and it is evident in the drive and recovery. So it is not an accident; the basic mechanics are good.

There are some individual points such as bow pair's inside knees drop to the side at the catch (see pic 5) and stroke side are in before bow side (see pics 1 & 2) but the coach will decide how and when to address these. It may be a conscious decision to work on crew things, especially on a windy day such as this.

To underline the importance of prioritising, knee splay is interesting: correcting it might be as simple as saying "please keep your knee in" and the youngster may be able to change it. Most likely, however, there are other reasons. With juniors we have to consider growth spurts and quite often the bones have lengthened but the soft tissue hasn't caught up so hamstring and hip flexor tightness could be a reason. It might be rig: rowing long is important but it needs to be in a usable range so I would check the stretcher position, feet height and rake, then span and inboard and just make sure that the junior can achieve the position I am asking for. Feet which are too high, for instance could cause the thigh to block the trunk at full compression, but in this



“Make it easy to get it right then add difficulty to improve the skill”



image that does not appear to be the case. It might be to do with rhythm: if you slide too quickly then you can become off balance and the upper body ‘falls over’ at full leg compression. Whatever the reason we often observe that the last movement you make on the way into the water is the first one you will make as you start the stroke, so dipping between the knees usually correlates to lifting at the entry. Let’s see.

Pictures 2 and 3 confirm this. The last frame of the recovery looks about right, but they slip out of position during the process of covering up so they are in effect missing the water. The legs are being applied so it’s not a problem of slow legs, but

they’re not quite timed between the entry and connection. Lifting the trunk is a much bigger, slower movement than simply using the hands so is certainly part of the cause.

What ways would you correct this? Well, I would have three stages. Firstly do some roll-ups to practise the theory of the movement. With a stable boat and a stationary hull they can practise rolling forwards and timing their entry to the arrival of the seat and keeping the trunk still. Rowing blades flat is quite helpful because you feel the spoon skim the water as you slide and when you reach front-stops the spoon stops skimming, so you can see that is where you want to be in the water. Blades flat means

there is no reason to lift the trunk to cover it because it’s already close to the correct height.

Next, I would see if they can row in pairs continuously and get it right with a moving hull. And lastly see if all four can do it, eventually doing it at higher boat speeds. There are hundreds of catch exercises to address and the process is the same – make it easy to get it right then add difficulty to improve the skill.

Conclusion? The crew are well coached and the mechanics of the stroke has structure. Positions are generally good and they use the correct sequence in the drive. It looks like they need some mechanical drills to improve the entry / catch connection and then neural drills to increase the skill element. This would yield more boat speed.

So still sequences do allow some analysis and you could certainly compare positions against the national model. But that’s the easy bit – working out how to get the necessary corrections is where the coach comes in!

ROBIN WILLIAMS

Robin coached the GB women’s pair who delivered Team GB’s first gold at London 2012. 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.

