

GET READY; ATTENTION...



Developing fitness is relatively simple to measure, but what about technique? **Robin Williams** suggests practical ways of monitoring technical progress for junior and senior rowers

PHOTOS: DON SOMNER

A traditional question from athlete to coach is often: “is this a training session or a technical one?” And of course the coach invariably answers that every session is technical!

Last month I used the slide variation drill to help show how you can work on both aspects at the same time, or at least within the same session but there is an interesting next step to look at too. If you are rowing at school and have limited sessions, or are a senior with a busy job then you need to *maximise* the effect from your technique and training, not just to time manage them. Training is the easy bit because, in a way, as long as you turn up and work hard you will get fitter. But is it possible to measure technical progress like this? And, if so, how can you speed up the learning?

Making technique *competitive* is one possible answer. Training is often competitive and stimulates people to try hard and improve, so why not technique too?

Steve Gunn runs the GB Rowing Team’s Start programme which, as you probably know, essentially takes people who have never usually rowed but who have athletic and physical potential and prepares them to enter the GB Rowing Team trials system. Start embraces competition early on – and that

includes technique. It is an interesting model which has certainly had some good results judging by the number of athletes who have made GB teams and won medals. So could it work in domestic clubs too? We’d love to hear from clubs who are already using similar ideas – but for those who don’t, here’s how it works.

Athletes start off at the bottom level – E. The aim is to work your way up the levels over time, through D, C, B and finally to A, which means you are international material. Athletes are assessed periodically and not only have to hit certain speeds in the boat and fitness marks in the gym,

“People will only change if they see a benefit”

but also have to pass the technical ‘exam’ too. Moreover, if you cannot pass, you are not allowed to move up to the next level, no matter how good you are physically.

This means that you have to take technique seriously, although tasks are simply initially and are based on making you safe on the water, have control of your boat, and be confident. Many domestic clubs will do something similar, starting with a swimming test progressing to a check that you can move the boat forwards / backwards / turn / stop etc.

This is sensible and objective – but after this point the pace of learning often slows, and becomes very subjective and open-ended. With few specific targets, no time limit and no further ‘exam’ to pass, an objective measure of technique is suddenly missing.

However, the Start programme continues this process of measuring technique much further and begins to include more challenging skills. So, for example, ‘standing rigger dips’ might be a task with a target number to be completed against the clock or perhaps it could be timed 360° turns to test manoeuvrability.

Technical efficiency is rewarded but so is having a ‘can do’ attitude.

But not all the technical elements are against the clock. Some are assessed in terms of the quality of their execution. So two coaches might judge you doing a roll-up to the catch, and then score you based on your slide control and balance, trunk position, feet / hands timing, blade depth, relaxation and so on. This gets coaches communicating – and athletes like being set tasks like this because it is fun!

You can also video the drills so you can see your improvement over time.

The key thing is that you will be able to measure progression, because something as subjective as technique is now a lot more objective. You will be competing with others to achieve the technical



Core stability, confidence, coordination



Rigger dips against the clock!



TECHNIQUE!

“How can you make technique competitive and quantifiable?”

A Start athlete shows excellent balance by 'stand-up paddling' with one blade!

proficiency level, which means you will be taking on a greater responsibility for technique than you might do normally.

During my Boat Race days the 26-week programme gave everyone an urgency to get better quickly – and, as with Start, your place was at stake should you miss your targets. For many

clubs the answer may not be to copy Start, but even so, thinking how to use these principles may be very useful. Mike Spracklen once said that people will only change if they see a benefit. If not then it is human nature to carry on in the same way because it's more comfortable to coast along and get keen nearer regatta time, which is too late!

So, how can you make technique competitive and quantifiable? I suppose you can use the carrot or the stick... Losing your place is the stick: taking pride in your technique as a club is the carrot. The old Notts County Rowing Association lightweight crews adopted this ethic very firmly with strong peer pressure to row *superbly*, not just fast.

For youngsters the stimulus can be fun in the shape of games. Try things like sculling around collecting as many floats as possible, passing a relay baton from one boat to another, waterborne orienteering, treasure hunts, leapfrogging, bumps, prizes, and other ways which disguise the training load being completed!

For seniors, 'games' may appear frivolous – so competitive technique needs to be built in to the normal training. With crews side-by-side it's easy: one crew goes square blades and is tasked to keep the same speed as the pace boat. Feet out, double feather / square, single strokes and more

can be done alongside another boat with the aim of keeping hull speed. Under-rating, slide variations and others can also be added.

Plus, once a month, why not do a formal technique evaluation? You can come up with a few exercises and grade individuals or crews accordingly. People will want to turn a 5/10 score in to a 9/10, so see what you can think of. Crews need to have technical goals, a desire to improve – and a benefit associated with it. After all, your racing status (IM3, 2, 1, etc) should represent your technical level as well as how many races you have won.

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.



Boat control, pick up floats task