

# Posture, balance, control



PHOTO: PETER SPURRIER

Mark Hunter demonstrating good posture at the catch position



## Robin Williams explains why it's worth striving to achieve good posture during the stroke

I have mentioned before that when coaching or being coached it is useful to understand whether the technical point is one of mechanics or feel. Well posture is largely a mechanical issue since it's about position, shape, and angles, yet you have to have great inner control to have visibly good posture. Balance and control are more about feel, but still trainable, and you can certainly see a crew with these attributes versus one without.

Two good reasons for working on posture are 1) to make your back the best lever it can be and 2) to prevent injury. Good posture doesn't mean wandering around with a pile of books balanced on

your head or having a dead straight back. It means making sure you use your back the way nature intended, curves and all, but it's usually the lumbar area which needs attention in rowing terms.

### Alignment

Take a look at the pictures of the spine on the opposite page. One is with a back slumped, discs bulging in a worrying manner, the other is the back correctly aligned. It still has curves but each vertebra is sharing the load evenly which is a better way of transferring force.

Posture is often lost at the entry and finish because people are off balance in

those places. At the finish a phrase I like is 'recover off your finish pressure'. In other words, your legs can only push you away from the footboard; your back can only pull you away from it; but your arm draw can keep you in contact with the feet (as with feet out drills). So if you pull the arms too early in the stroke you probably won't have enough arm draw left when it's needed. When athlete posture is lost at the finish the blade often 'pancakes' on its back instead of leaving the water square and in a continuous movement - a tell-tale sign.

At the front end, posture is lost for two reasons: 1) if people rush the slide the momentum usually drags their upper body

out of shape at the front causing over-reaching and the mis-timing of entry; 2) if they lack flexibility, particularly in the hamstrings, then after about three-quarters slide they lose their forward pelvic tilt (as in the picture) and 'tuck under'.

### Good exercises for posture...

- **Sit at back-stops**, arms straight and practise rocking back and forth, getting the feel for pelvic anterior / posterior tilt
- **Feet out work**, because it makes your handle pressure stay connected to the footboard at the finish
- **On the ergo**, sit with both feet on the floor – it's easy to get good forward pelvic tilt; then put both feet on the board and slowly move up the slide seeing if you can maintain the hip angle without tucking under
- **Then do some 'nudges'** if you can, where you practise moving off the first few inches of the front, 'engaging' with good posture.

A useful concept in the boat is that you set your posture in the early recovery and, once sliding, your trunk angle stays the same (*i.e.* in the 'catch' position) all the way forward **and** as you initiate the stroke itself. Nothing changes in position terms.

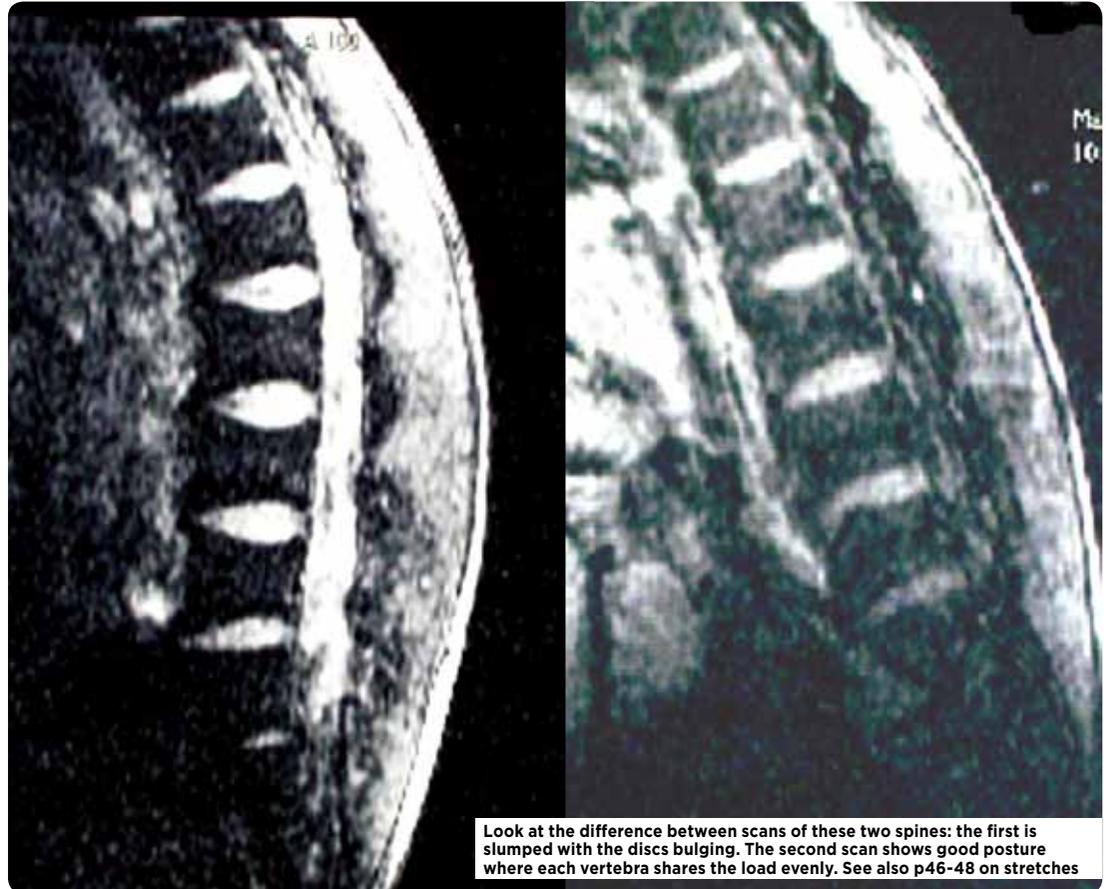
If you can achieve this then your back becomes a major source of power in the mid-drive as it joins to the existing leg push. This powerful movement also makes the rhythm feel very strong because of the acceleration it brings.

### Balanced movement

Coming on to balance. I am not referring to stroke side / bow side balance but balance of movement. If you do a squat jump on the gym floor, you don't drop down and collapse – you control your drop with the feet and change direction with a spring. You start with your feet and calves, then quads, hips, trunk, shoulders and finally arms. Just like in rowing. So at rate 38 balance of movement becomes really important. Assuming you have given the boat plenty of acceleration there will be enough momentum to take your handle around the back turn, draw you out past your knees and initiate the first couple of turns of the wheels. But then you can sit still and allow the boat to carry you up the slide. This means that even at high rates your mass is relatively still at the front but if you slide faster than the speed of the boat (rush) then you lack control of your mass when it's time to change direction and kill the boat speed.

### Drills for balance

- **Air strokes** because no work goes on the oar but you have to maintain posture



Look at the difference between scans of these two spines: the first is slumped with the discs bulging. The second scan shows good posture where each vertebra shares the load evenly. See also p46-48 on stretches

PHOTO: DR ALISON MCGREGOR

“Two good reasons for working on posture are 1) to make your back the best lever it can be and 2) to prevent injury”

against the momentum of your own mass at either end of the stroke. As you get better try them at higher rates

- **Quarter-slide rate work** – allows you to practise the balance of movement off the finish, full use of trunk and arms but only partial legs. Try doing six minutes at quarter-slide rate 34-36!
- **Front end nudges** where you hold your catch position throughout

It is important to develop a strong trunk for the catch position (especially via land training) because your legs can only connect as much pressure to the handle as your trunk can hold.

### Useful exercises for control...

- **'Cutting the cake'** or double finish movements
- **Length pyramids** – *e.g.* five at full length, three-quarters, half, a quarter, a half, three-quarters, full
- **Low rate** rowing (R10) / very light pressure

- **Square blades**
- **Legs only**
- **Eyes shut** rowing

### Summing up

Posture, balance and control allow you to row long, transfer your leg pressure to the handle via your trunk, have useful back angle to use against the legs mid stroke onwards, maintain contact with the oar at the release and recover your mass efficiently, prepare for the next stroke early, and to do all this under all conditions including rough water. ▀

## 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 1995-2005, 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.