

ARE YOU SITTING



How do you decide which rower to put in which seat? **Robin Williams** delves into the mysteries of the racing eight

PHOTOS: IAN WEIR

With the Boat Race and the Head of the River upon us, it is interesting to ponder how the coaches decide who sits where in their crews and why people are suited to certain seats. In fact, given that all eight people are in the one hull rowing in time at the same rate and same intensity, how is it that each seat feels different – and does your technique need to take this in to account?

Part of the answer is in the trim of the boat. The load you experience at stroke feels a little heavier and flatter than at bow where it feels fast and there's more rise and fall.

Bow

The bow pair, in fact, have a key job in an eight because while at stroke there's a risk of over-working by picking up too much load, in the bows the risk is to under-work. Here, the bow pair need to be really skilful to catch the water as the bows rise and to produce the leg drive quickly. Not only that, but because the bows are thinner than the rest of the boat, you don't want fidgety people there or the balance can feel dreadful. Indeed, if the boat is going off-balance a good bow pair can sometimes hold the finish a moment longer and preserve the stability for the crew without getting left behind in the recovery. They can also make a verbal contribution and, when racing side-by-side, they have the advantage of **seeing** everything that's happening when sometimes the stern pair is **feeling** like they've lost contact with the opponents. Between the cox at one end and the bow pair at the other you can keep everyone on their toes and no-one needs to feel isolated.

Stroke

In a good eight everyone is stroke in a way because you don't follow one person so much as all follow the hull and make the

rhythm together. Everyone should row the boat together, making the rhythm as one.

However, stroke is a key seat because here you can't see anyone else but you can feel everything – is it heavy or light behind you? Is the boat accelerating and running well? Do the seat movements feel together or do they feel like random bowling balls? Stroke also sits in front of the cox so is most able to communicate the things that need adjustment. All-in-all there are some particular skills required and not everyone has them, nor wants the job! Stroke is the custodian of the technique and rhythm if you like: he or she needs to feel how the hull is moving and understand how it can be fine-tuned along the way, working with the cox to make it happen.

As an individual the stroke person does not need to be the strongest or biggest, but does need to be aggressive and decisive – and technically speaking they need to be skilled movers, rather like the bow pair. Whereas the crew has someone else's back, head, slide or blade to use as a visual reference for timing and movement, stroke just has empty space in front. It is quite easy to row too long, over-reach, go off balance over the stretcher and mis-time the pick-up. So a good tip for this seat is to row an effective length rather than the maximum possible: not biting off more load than you can use and making sure you keep really good

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timing and flow around the catch.

Having made your entry and become connected, be careful about driving unless you feel the others are there with you – especially in less competent boats because someone is usually late!

Anyone who has done some stroking knows how much trust is involved in those behind. When



If you were the coach, which seats would you give to which rowers?

the starter says ‘go’ you have to believe that the others will go with you, but it takes trust because you cannot see them, only feel them.

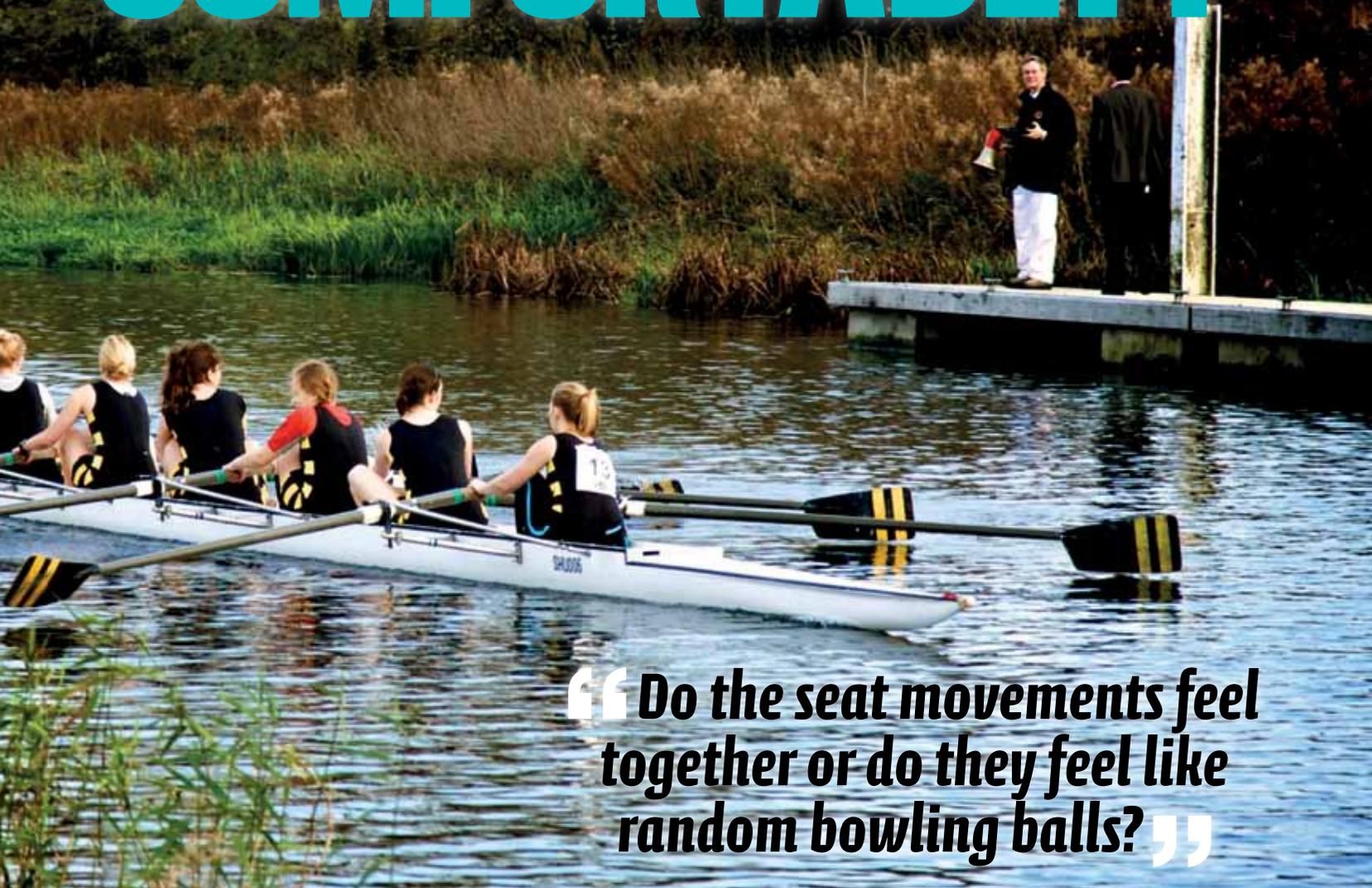
7, 6, 5, 4 & 3

The seven and six seats are therefore key in this process. If stroke can be given a little ‘discretion’ with his length and power in the interest of setting and maintaining a strong and continuous output, the ones sitting behind him need to guarantee length and physical delivery to create the trust that stroke can go as hard as he wants.

Six also needs to be technically strong with a simple legs-on, back-through movement which the middle four pin their rhythm around. When you sit in the middle of an eight the back swing is highly visible and communicates the part of the stroke where everyone is accelerating hard so if the middle four cement that basic drive then the whole eight can feel dynamic and well ‘glued together’.

The four seat is roughly where the trim of the

COMFORTABLY?



“ Do the seat movements feel together or do they feel like random bowling balls? ”

see-saw has its mid-point so is generally stable. Although, arguably, three and four are the easiest seats technically, it is also true that there's less feedback from the hull with the stern dip / bows rise so these rowers need to tie in well to the body movements around them. It is an old-fashioned schoolboy fallacy that the 'best' person goes at stroke and the next best sit in order behind with the bow being the 'worst'. Everyone matters and

has a job to do – and, of course, if one person moves out of sync with the others then the boat is split at that point so these seats are vital to avoid the bow rowers being cut off from the stern.

Which seat?

So you just need a bit of understanding about the hull movement to appreciate the technique required in each seat. But there is more to it than that.

You may be physically suited to a particular seat but do you have the personality for it too? Do you complement the people directly in front and behind? Does the way you use your back or hold your head encourage the one behind to relax and move with you, or does your body language make them row tight and weaken the rhythm? Does it need your verbal input or are you better keeping quiet? Such are the mysteries of racing eights!

When the starter says 'go' the stroke has to believe that the others will go with him. Cambridge get underway...



Robin Williams

Robin coaches the GB women's pair who won silver at the 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.