

OUTSIDE THE BOX



Taking a different approach, Robin Williams shows how learning from other sports can help improve your technique

I find it pays to approach technique from different angles. In the Jan / Feb R&R I suggested making technique competitive to drive faster progress, and this time I want to look at experiences outside of rowing altogether which can help you in the boat.

I sometimes say to beginners in their early forays into rowing that “you already know all the movements you need to row – you just don’t realise it”, and there’s some truth in that. What I mean is that the movements you use in rowing are present in other areas of life. By the time you start rowing you probably have most

even have a sense of timing and rhythm. Cycling is great for learning about gearing versus cadence, while driving a car is an example of multi-tasking because each leg and arm does different things as you watch, listen, and operate switches! These experiences all lay down useful neural pathways which can transfer to rowing.

Let’s take swimming, for example. The mechanics of swimming are useful for rowing because your arm is the oar, your hand is the spoon and it has to enter the water before you can propel yourself forwards so the first principle of “lever yourself off

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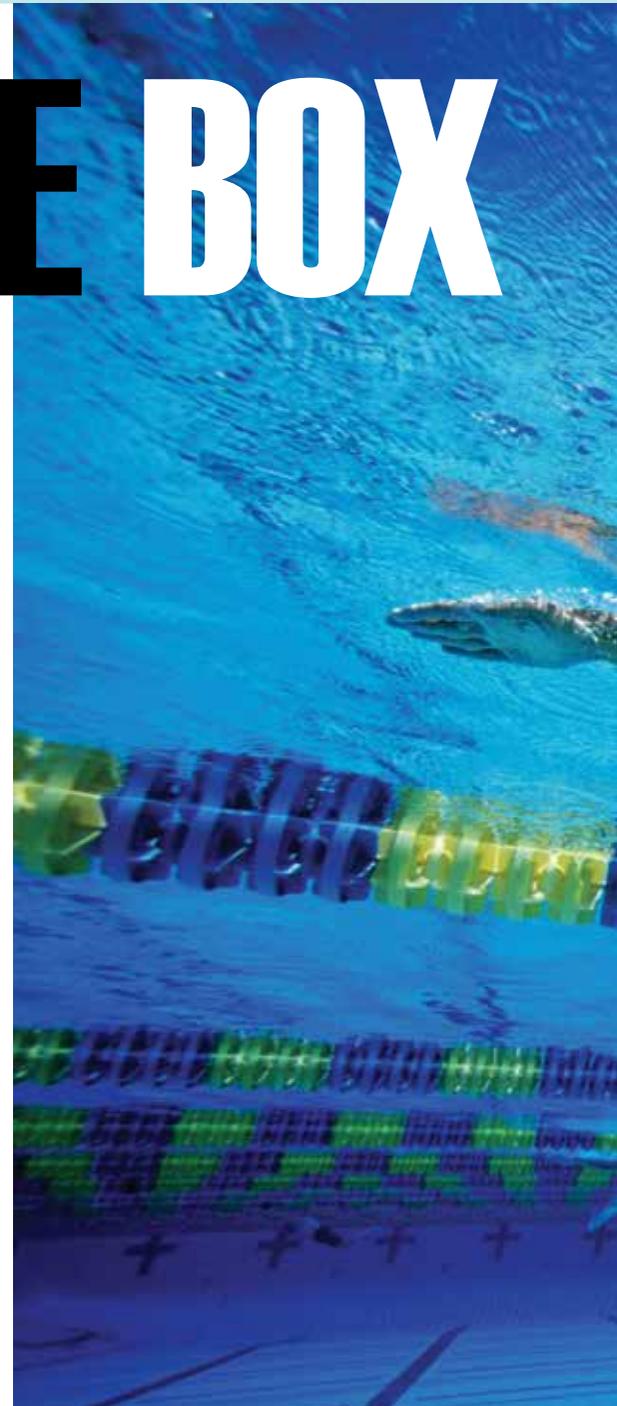
of the ones you need, but just aren’t practised at putting them together in the particular way that a rowing stroke is structured.

For instance, you can do a squat jump which is a similar action to the leg / back drive of a stroke; if you’ve ever pulled the starter on an outboard engine or lawn mower then you will have naturally used a sequence of legs / hips / back / shoulder / arm. If you can swim or canoe then you will have some idea of leverage and moving yourself past the water, rather than pulling through it. If you’ve ridden a bike, skateboarded or skied then you’ll understand what a centre of balance is and will

the ‘puddle’ rather than rip through it” is the same as rowing. Swimming is great for breathing control too, because with the front crawl your face is in the water much of the time and you need to time your working movements and breaths in a rhythmic way. Gliding is paramount, especially in the longer swimming races where economy of effort is important. Many rowers could take that point on board a little better! Gliding accounts for 60% or more of your total stroke cycle. Swimming is also about lots of tiny margins of technique adding up over thousands of strokes to create a winning time.

Canoeing is another interesting example. In a kayak you are on top of the water, just like rowing,

Skiffing is excellent for feeling how the drive develops from your heels, glutes and lower back



but the fact that you face forwards makes the catch much easier to understand. Your boat is going forwards and your paddle goes into the water forwards. You don’t try to swipe back at the water because it doesn’t make sense – why would you want to miss any water, any more than you would when swimming?

In rowing you face the other way, which seems to create a short-circuit in the brain with people often hanging over the catch and swiping at the water after they have changed direction rather than before. You can’t move the boat unless your blade is in the water, so the sequence should be ‘Arrive ... Enter ... Catch ... Leave’ when often it is ‘Arrive ... Leave ... Enter & Catch [together]’.

The tug of war may not be such a common sport these days, but it is great for learning effective mechanics with big loads. You anchor your feet, push hard with your legs, lever your trunk, and – last of all – pull through shoulders and arms. Sounds like rowing? You also need tactics: do you

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.



In swimming the first principle of 'lever yourself off the 'puddle' rather than rip through it' is the same as rowing

go for short aggressive pulls or take more length on the rope? Can you synchronise your body weight together and can you time your drive? Some GB athletes do sledge pulling with ropes as part of their training – it's hard!

Meanwhile skiffing is a bit closer to home – rowing without a slide! Like the tug of war it is excellent for feeling how the drive develops from your heels, glutes and lower back, and, mechanically speaking, shows you how the second half of the rowing stroke works when your legs are nearly flat. Our heavyweight and lightweight women's Olympic champion doubles both had a go at skiffing in 2012 and found it very educational.

One of my favourite analogies for the finish in sculling is the medieval longbow – shot from the feet! Imagine your feet against the giant bow, then tension the string firmly with legs, hips, back, shoulders and elbows until you've reached the full extension before 'firing' your puddle dynamically past the stern of the boat.

So other sports are all very well, but what about skill transfer? This analogy is a bit obscure but years ago Nick Howe and I used to go 'fly fishing' in the tank at London RC. That's to say, we'd do high speed roll-ups with the idea of making a feather-light blade entry at maximum speed and with minimum disturbance to the water.

Legendary New Zealand coach Harry Mahon used the analogy of pushing a kid high on a swing to describe the rhythm of the stroke: "gather-squeeze-accelerate then catch the speed as it comes back to you again". The follow-through movements of tennis and golf also create a certain picture for the finish in rowing. Racket sports in a training context promote agility, core

stability, fast reactions, balance, and anticipation. You can use all of these to describe attributes you would like to have when rowing.

Years ago I remember a coach once getting me to sit at home with a tennis racket in each hand to practise a sculling feather movement with them. This was much more practical than trying to fit two oars through the door at home, and I could do hundreds of movements while watching TV until I had it right. That's easy training!

Why not think a little outside the box with your technique and see what you can take from life around you to make your boat go faster?

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE DRILL?

Why not send in your favourite technical exercise to R&R? Each month we will publish the one we like best with photos, and if you want to video it we can print a link so others can view it too! Get in touch via magazine@britishrowing.org