

REACHING

OUT



The pair is about matching and counterbalancing each other. Could this be the greatest technical challenge of them all?

Robin Williams explains

PHOTOS: ROBIN WILLIAMS

It is often said that a sculler can turn his hand to rowing but the reverse is not necessarily true – the implication being that sculling is the superior discipline, demanding higher skills so that a sculler converting to sweep will find it easy. Well, despite extolling the virtues of both the single and crew sculling in recent issues, this month I am putting forward the notion that it is actually the pair which holds the greatest technical challenge.

In a pair you are limited by your partner – you can only row as long as the other person; you can only row to your side if they are going to the opposite. The hand heights need to be matched or it will sit over, the pressures need to match or the hull will corkscrew rather than go straight – plus slide speeds, entry shape, movement sequences and extraction all need to be synchronised.

A mistake by one will cause a compensatory movement from the other, although it is true that a pair can also go well if they do it 'wrong' but the same. For instance, you see pairs where each person crosses the boat at the finish so they are both leaning away yet the boat remains balanced. Of course, both have lost some of their drive by doing this and they'd go a lot faster if they did it 'right' and together.

So what makes a pair go well?

Balance again, I'm afraid, is the number one.

Create a good platform together and you can row long and with confidence, which means breaking down the various recovery movements and making sure each one is correct.

I am not just talking about beginners here: many clubs do pairs testing to select their bigger boats. Hence you may find yourself with a new partner, a race in 20 minutes, and a wobbly boat just because you haven't rowed together before!

The finish is the best place to start. Some tap-downs to get the right blade extraction movement from the forearms first, then the arms away. Because their mass is small it shouldn't take long to get the back end balanced. The 'body over' is where it becomes a sweep movement rather than sculling because your weight moves towards bow-side or stroke-side. Here most people talk about 'turning' or 'rotating' but I personally avoid those words because both often produce a *shift of weight on the seat to the outside leg. I find a simpler mental picture is to 'bow' towards your front stay and then leave the rest to the slide. This can really help balance* because your weight is orientated early on towards your inside leg and, as you both slide, the boat automatically divides your weight further. There's no late twist for length – you just let the knees rise up to meet the chest and maintain a rectangle between the handle, chest and arms. **See picture sequence below.**

Standing up, try 'taking a bow' forwards with hands on stomach, then to your left (bow-side),

Robin Williams

The former Lead Coach for GB Lightweights, 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.

then right (stroke-side) – if you then let your arms hang down and bend from the knees you are in your catch position. **See pictures opposite. Next repeat the drill in the boat as below.**

I've laboured the importance of creating a good platform together because arriving over the feet balanced and poised is crucial in a pair. You are about to release the handle weight to allow the blade to enter, so if you are depending solely on the handle for balance then you are bound to lose control at this moment. You might get away with it in a four or eight but in a pair you need balance on your feet, poise in

Helen Glover and Heather Stanning demonstrate the balance sequence described above



Setting the rock-over position



Arms out in front



Knees rise to the chest

“A mistake by one will cause a compensatory movement from the other”



Women's pair world silver medallists Helen Glover and Heather Stanning reaching out

your trunk, and relaxed arms to deal with the entry.

Once you've got both blades down in the water there's instant stability and putting some work on is now not a problem. You can picture yourself planting your leg pressure happily on the spoon and tensioning your back well against the handle, body weight suspending nicely. However, in reality it takes a lot of trust in your partner to fully commit to this – if he or she happens to mis-time their own slide, entry, or initial pressure, the boat will lurch under you and you will feel as though you're heading for a swim or a pulled muscle!

At the finish, I mentioned the common fault of falling away to your partner's side: this happens because people *think* they are going to get stuck in or because they've *already* lost the bend on the oar before they've reached the finish.

Perfect pair!

The pair requires a total reliance on each other and complete trust. You can't row anywhere without your partner counter-balancing you and matching you in every component of the stroke. Sculling – tougher? I don't think so!

Drills

For aiding balance

1. Air strokes to the front to get slide poise and platform in the feet.
2. Air strokes plus a roll-up (entry) to practise the release of handle weight.
3. Air stroke, plus roll-up, plus leg grip to bend the oar.

For the drive sequence

1. Rowing in circles is great if you've got room because each person has responsibility for their own rigger, so try to produce horizontal force and support your own side without pushing it over to the other or dropping it on yourself. Your partner will get a good sense of how you apply and build your power.
2. Legs-only rowing is also very good for building up the drive sequences, adding trunk, then arms.

Try the drills on your own first, then both together and with some confidence and trust in each other it's not too hard to row off well – at full length, and with balance.

For the finish

1. Some inside arm rowing should cure the common fault of falling away to your partner's side. Another useful remedy is feet out work – in both examples they keep you connected to the face of the spoon until you've finished moving so you can recover off your own blade, not your partner's side of the boat.
2. Some tap-downs to get the right blade extraction movement from the forearms first, then the arms away.

Helen Glover demonstrates the same sequence (as left) on land



'Bow' forwards



Drop your arms



Squat to the floor