

# Rhythm, power and recovery



GB men's eight at Sydney



What is rhythm and how can you get it? **Robin Williams** explains

**R**hythm is everyone's favourite rowing topic - TV commentators praise the leading crews for having it, criticise losing ones for not, and crew debriefings amongst the rowers and coaches themselves often centre on rhythm. But what do we really mean by it, how is it created, and if you lose rhythm can you get it back again?

A good rhythm obviously feels good! The boat feels part of you and moves willingly for the effort you give it. You have a sense that time is available during the recovery but there is no pause at the entry or catch - you can just do it. You feel that your movements are composed, powerful and relaxed and if you're in a crew, each person feels that all of the phases of the stroke happen at the same

800m of a 2km race working and 1200m gliding between strokes. So total hull speed is the combination of both work and rest phases and rhythm comes from both as well. Whether novice or Olympian the simple basics that we need hold true:

1. Strong boat acceleration in the power phase.
2. Lots of boat glide in the recovery.

“Rhythm is *generated and defined* – you don't stumble across it”

## 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.

place and same time for everyone. It's a truly shared experience, man! Conversely, a boat with poor rhythm feels heavy and rushed; it's difficult to appreciate acceleration or run and hard to sense where people are working. A nightmare!

Where do we start the search for rhythm? Well once again it's a question of getting a few mental concepts going: let's say we are in the water for approx 0.6" and on the slide for 0.9" that means we'll spend roughly

This gives a good ratio of work to rest but there's also a third area which helps considerably:

3. The athlete changing direction skilfully at either end of the stroke.

Being clumsy getting connected and disconnected can make the rhythm feel pretty ropery, but if all three elements are present the rhythm should be good in simple mechanical terms.



PHOTO: SIMON WAY

Relaxed at Kingston Regatta

Aesthetically speaking, top sportspeople often talk about “seeing” their performance – almost being able to detach the physical process from the mental one. Your body is just a bunch of bones and pulleys but your brain controls the whole apparatus, so good rhythm is also about having thinking time and making small adjustments even while racing hard. In a poor rhythm everything happens too fast, is a panic, and crews often row a whole race like that

a ‘push down onto rhythm’ can strengthen up the rhythm really well because the hull speed stays high and the rate is pushed down rather than eased off, so time is created not taken.

In training terms there are many ways to work on rhythm. It can be based on the mechanics: acceleration drills, power strokes etc. Dropping down to very light pressure occasionally can be good to get things relaxed, feel the hull speed, and then

## “It’s a truly shared experience, man!”

because they feel they don’t have time to find a solution.

A concerted decision to change something is needed to break out of a poor rhythm. A push can work and you can ‘power out’ of a weak rhythm to restore the ratio that way. The trouble is that you’re probably already over-working, are probably tense as well, and a push can finish you off physically!

The alternative is to calm things down in the recovery first, hold the finishes better, sit still for longer, let the handle move away without chasing it, rock over together, steady the slide. This is often counter-intuitive because the rate may drop as a result and it takes a lot of courage. However, it’s much worse to blow up completely or to just carry on rowing badly! After just a few strokes with better control you can increase hull speed again with a good push of effort and then have both phases back intact.

One place where a push can work well is after the start. If it’s too much of a scamper

build up the rhythm by adding back the acceleration and retaining relaxed, fluid movements at the ends.

But you can also work on the feel of the rhythm. Here are a few ideas; auditory, visual and kinaesthetic...

- **Music** can help (via an iPod or similar) but it can be hard to find the right piece in terms of beat.
- **The cox** can speak with rhythm and choose types of words or extend their pronunciation to create an effect on the rhythm: e.g. “L-o-n-g finishes”.
- **Listen** to the slide / wheels for a sense of time forward and acceleration back. Also the sound of the puddles building a crescendo finish.
- **Breathing**: counting breaths, reducing your number of breaths, consciously steadying it down helps; breathing deep rather than panting.
- **Counting** or chanting as a crew during the drive phase (‘1... 2.. 3...’) and making the recovery last twice as long.

Visual cues help too. In an eight, in particular, it is harder to feel rhythm because it’s complex to get eight people moving in sync, but the back-swing (acceleration) and rock-over (recovery) are major clues as to how the power is being fed in. Watching the outside shoulder of the person in front at the beginning (it should stay forward and be still) is another.

## “If you lose rhythm, can you get it back again?”

If you are in the bows you can see the spoons of the crew, especially at the finish. Paradoxically eyes shut and night rowing can be great for feeling rhythm too.

Hopefully in your boat you can actually feel the rhythm of the hull itself as it rises and falls under your seat. The bow seat of a fast eight is a great place to row for this sensation, and of course the single scull too because it’s just you and your boat.

Whichever way you go about it, Martin McElroy who coached the GB eight to a gold medal at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, stipulated that rhythm is *generated* and *defined*. You don’t stumble across it, it’s not vague and the whole crew shares a responsibility for it. ▀



PHOTO: GERARD BROWN

Keeping the rhythm going at Wallingford