

JOIN THE CREW!



A combination of single sculling and crew work can give you the best of both worlds on the water, writes **Robin Williams**

PHOTOS: **ROBIN WILLIAMS**

I have previously mentioned two aspects of technique: the mechanics (length, positions, angles, sequences) and the feel (timing, rhythm, relaxation, synchronisation, etc). Mechanically speaking, the single, double and quad are the same – or very nearly. Certainly the rig will differ a bit because the single is the slowest boat and the quad the fastest, but the basics of what you do to move the hull are the same. Yet step from a single to a quad and it feels dramatically different, so this month I'm looking beneath the surface of crew sculling.

The benefits of the single are that it gives instant feedback, and because there's just one person in the boat you get very good, honest training. It makes you tough, independent and responsible for your technique – if you make a mistake it tells you. The trouble is that sometimes 'telling you' can involve a violent lurch or even falling in! The other snag with the single is that people customise their technique to what suits them and you see some very

interesting variations of the British technical model. So a combination of single sculling and crew work seems to be the solution.

Probably the most useful benefit of crew sculling is that you can have one person sculling while others sit the boat. This lets you work on things that are hard in a single. For instance, you might want to practise some roll-ups to front stops to improve the entry movement and to get the

timing right between the slide and the handles.

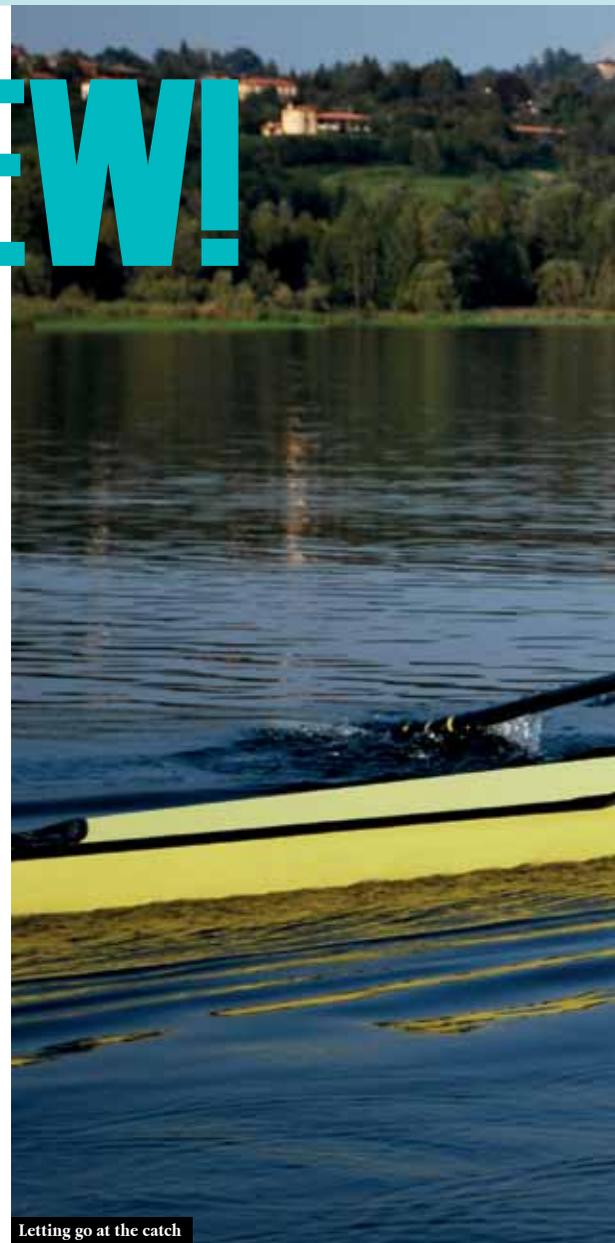
This is easy in a quad or double but is more precarious in a single.

The other mechanics are easier to sort out too – athletes learn very quickly if they've got a good role model in the boat and can easily see

“The rhythm of a quad is wonderful”

the organisation of positions, movements, length, etc. From a coaching point of view, crew sculling is pretty efficient compared with herding lots of singles on the river whilst keeping an eye on technique and hazards; instead you can share out the jobs of stroking, steering and calls.

But let's look at the *skills* and the *feel* of a crew boat. Arguably, the slide, entry and connection are



Letting go at the catch

the same as the single. The spoon is the same size in all boats, so the size and shape of the entry movement needed to cover the blades is the same. However, once you've connected up to the blades the crew boat will move off that load much sooner and faster than the single. Good as the single is, you can end up a bit 'ploddy' because the speeds are lower, but in a double or quad a more dynamic production of force and power is required – and of course, this is good training.

Having a feel for the speed of the hull is important in a crew boat. Do plenty of dynamic quarter-slide



Two sculling, one balancing, one sitting the boat level

Robin Williams

The former Lead Coach for GB Lightweights, Robin is currently coaching the GB women's pair. He coached the lightweight men's four to gold at the 2007 World Championships 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.



“A double, however, is the ultimate boat”

work with a focus on using the legs and backs well to produce speed, keeping the elbow movements simple and not over-drawn. Over-drawing in a single is common for various reasons, but not good: in a fast boat it is very unhelpful because it kills the momentum much more. The key is to pull powerfully with the trunk and shoulders – this will produce at least half of the arm pull required to bring the handles to the body. The arms themselves only need a bit of a pull and the stroke is finished. Try to keep hands relaxed on the handles and let the work come from the upper arms.

The rhythm of a quad is wonderful; lots of front end length gives plenty of initial leverage then followed by a huge increase in handle speed as the hull accelerates, and a fluid follow-through to first recovery position (quarter-slide) on to a long glide forward. I often try to get coxless fours to imagine a quad rhythm. Likewise get a coxless pair to imagine a double scull rhythm.

A quad is fast and stable, so it's a great boat for clubs to work with on common technique. You can accommodate people of different body shapes and they can all scull together quite happily. A double, however, is the ultimate boat – only a bit wider than a single, longer by about four feet but faster over 2000m by half a minute. It rewards skills like the single but encourages a more dynamic movement like a quad. When settling in to a new double partnership, keeping the shoulders relaxed can be key to making things comfortable, especially if you are both coming out of singles. It is common to feel that you are competing with each other for a level boat at the cross-over, so try to let the sculls track at their designed depth. The hands-off exercise is good for this while you can also scull with hands down the handles.

So, are you a loner or is a crew for you? It's your call...

Drills

For handles and hull speed

This is my favourite drill in a quad (courtesy of Rob Morgan, GB coach), although not recommended for beginners: get the boat moving and ask one person to let go of the handles just after the entry and to catch them at back stops! Keep time with the other crew members and because three of them are still moving the hull, the hull speed will bring the handles through the same arc and to the finish for you. The drill shows you how the handles behave and relate to the hull speed. They don't move much initially, but they really accelerate from the mid-point to the finish! You can do this in a double, but with one person sculling rather than three, he or she needs to be quite competent. It can even be done in a single scull, but all I would say is do it in the summertime when the water is warm!

Finish drills

Medium to high rate quarter-slide work, half arm pull, 'cutting the cake' (double finishes), feet out, rock over at backstops.

Letting go at the catch

