

There comes a time in every oarsman's life when pulling an insane erg score is not enough. Or maybe the 50-year-old me is ready to make excuses.

At any rate, when my high school alma mater sent out word that it was on the hunt for an assistant coach, I decided, rather uncharacteristically, to give it a shot. The fact that I'd never coached before and had spent the better part of the past 30-plus years behind a desk were minor details I'd do my best to ignore.

Lo and behold, as I pulled up to the boathouse for my interview, there was my old coach, the very same man who had introduced me to the sport, working on a boat in the repair bay. The man hadn't changed. Same ready smile, same laser eyes that missed nothing, same wiry build clothed in his ritual Carhaart work pants and hooded sweatshirt. When he extended his hand, I was immediately 17 years old again. The only thing keeping me from believing I hadn't fallen into a time warp, was the fact that the boathouse in which we stood was unrecognizable to me. Where was the dirt-covered floor? The flimsy metal sheeting that did its best to keep out the elements?

As it happened, the crew program had just moved into their gleaming new facility that very week. The building only marginally reflected its former life as a trucking repair shop. Compared to the tin house we had called home, this was the Ritz.

Clearly I had much to learn about a sport I thought I knew, and for which I had the well-worn calluses to prove. The view from outside the boat is different. And equally instructive as sitting in a seat and being yelled at through a megaphone.

The program director rightly assigned me as novice coach, with novice being used here as an adjective more than as a reference to the 9th and 10th graders I'd ostensibly be enlightening. Three seasons in, I believe I still learn more from the kids versus the other way around every time we go out on the water. What follows are a few of my observations as a novice among novices.

Let Them Flail

When first confronted with kids who had never taken a rowing stroke, my instinct was to correct them from the beginning, to give them helpful instruction while they were trying to wrap their heads around this new and unusual motion. With eight kids in a boat and one or two boats, it was a lot of talking: Gustav—don't pull up on the oar; Miles—start with the legs and back, then draw the arms in at the finish;

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Henry—watch the guy in front of you, not your oar; Will—keep the head up, don't bob it around, and on and on.

After about three minutes of this, I quickly realized that I was just confusing them. So instead I just said, "Sit up tall, keep that head up, and try to follow the guy in front of you." It was hard to watch, but I kept telling them they were doing great. And then I looked the other way and tried to concentrate on the fall scenery along the river. On the ride home, I felt a pit in my stomach imagining the weeks ahead.

A day or two later, a funny thing happened. They started to figure it out—all of them—and much faster than if I had continued to bombard them with instructions.

Let Them Teach Themselves

So my first observation basically says that novices learn faster without a coach. My second one is about the same: let the novice rowers periodically row behind an experienced rower. It's amazing how good kids are copying something they can see, and how hard it is for them to understand some joker in a launch yelling things at them through a megaphone (or maybe that's just me).

Roll With It

Coaching the lower boats means that any missing people from the upper boats ripples right down to me, so I don't know what kids I'll have until it's time to go on the water. I'm literally making lineups right before we go out. If there are extra kids, then they ride with me in the launch. This kind of freelancing is not my normal mode of operating—I like lists, you know? It stressed me out: the clock is ticking and these young faces are all looking at me to do the right thing. Right?

Not so much. The kids that rode in the launch as spares seemed to be having as much fun as the kids that were rowing. They'd sit on the back deck of my wakeless launch and have a little party—the other coaches thought it was the best thing going. The point is to make sure novices have fun and come back. That's really the goal.

Trial and Error

"OK, so today we're going to do some longer pieces: 10 minutes." After my two eights had done their warm-up. I start them off, and for maybe 20 strokes they're working pretty well. Then, well, I'm not sure just how to put it, but they looked to me like they were pretty much on the paddle.

So nine minutes to go, what do you say? "You guys aren't even trying"—no, too negative. "My mother could make bigger puddles"—no, sounds too much like

something my college coach would have said. Lesson learned. Novice rowers just don't get 10-minute pieces. They love to race, they love to pull hard for a couple of minutes in practice, but they can't wrap their head around 10-minute pieces, yet. So—"on the paddle." Let's try something different.

Better to accept reality than beat your head against a wall. I remembered riding in the launch with the head coach when I first started out, and he had the crews do leap frogs: one crew "leap frogs" the other at full power, and then paddles while the other crew does the same. The kids love rowing through the other boat, and the interval is shorter, so they pull. After a few miles of this, it's real work. At the time, I thought, "This makes no sense. Why not just line them up and have them do a 10-minute piece?" Now I know.

Be Surprised

So I'm standing there doing my lineups at the last minute, while I watch all the other crews shoving off the dock, and I'm guessing at how well the boats will do. "Wow, this boat is going to be great" or "bummer, these guys are going to get killed." I quickly stopped guessing. I was so often wrong.

A good example: In the beginning, I picked the kids that I thought would be good strokes, to try to get the boat as a whole to do better. Pretty soon I stopped that too, as I realized kids who didn't look like they would be strokes turned out to do great. Instead I started asking, "Who wants to stroke" to make sure I saw everyone in the stroke seat.

Everything Breaks

There are, of course, a number of important repairs and adjustments that I've learned as a novice crew coach. I'm proud to say that I have one of those nifty little tool bags, and I even have my own 3/4 wrench and a couple of 7/16s. And although

we don't row Empachers, I do have my own Rigger Jigger, a gift from a much wiser coach, who, given my name, felt it only appropriate.

Out on the water, my most practiced move is probably the foot-stretcher fix: leaning off the bow of my launch with my

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butt up in the air, trying to get some guy's foot stretcher attached after he slid it too far into the stern or bow. What is it about that bottom T-bolt that is so hard to get back on the track?

As a college rower I was lucky to be on a team that had a real boatman. I have a whole new level of respect and understanding for how much they bring to a program.

Mr. Tough Guy

I was brought into the coaching job in the fall, helping out during the "instructional crew" season. It was beautiful: warm sunny afternoons, flat water with

little or no wind, colorful river banks with blazes of red, yellow, and green. Heaven on Earth.

Then I was asked to come back and coach during the spring "racing season," but nobody said anything about the weather. Spring rowing in New England is different than it is in the fall. I rowed in New England; I should have known this. There was ice blocking my launch. I had to use a torch to warm up the throttle cable so

I could get my motor running. And what happened to all that flat water?

Most days were like a puzzle to figure out how to position your crews on the river to get just a little flat water. And I think many other crews had it much worse than we did.

And those funny looking survival suits you see and think, "It's not that cold—a real man doesn't need one of those things." What's that expression again: older and wiser?

Ya Gotta Smile

Our boathouse is about 15 minutes from the school, and the kids get there on two standard issue yellow school buses. One is driven by a coach who went and got his bus driver's license, and the other is driven by a legend.

Bob is a retired, veteran bus driver who's been around the block many times and who has been driving our kids to and from our boathouse for years. Once at the boathouse, Bob serves as the dock master, helping to launch and land boats. In this capacity, he's also seen enough to last a lifetime in the way of unusual landings, skegs being rearranged, and so on. Bob has been around these kids a long time, and I trust him.

Bob is also one of those great Massachusetts characters that speaks his mind, and does it with a rich Boston accent. For me, he has this to say: "Jigga—ya gotta smile—with that frown, you're scaring the kids!" So lighten up. The focus is on having fun. Ya gotta smile.

Don't Mess with Mother Nature

Most of the boys I work with are 9th and 10th graders. When I came back for my second season, it was remarkable to me how much many of them had grown in a year. This also should not have surprised me, since I have teenage sons of my own, but when I watched these new versions row and pull erg scores it kind of hit me differently.

For example, last year, one of my guys was a little solid for a rower, but he had a really nice steady rhythm. This year, he's at least two inches taller, has leaned out, has moved up a couple of boats, and is a real boat mover. I can't wait to see what he looks like next year, and the year after. It's not always easy to predict how these kids will grow. So don't mess with mother nature—all the kids deserve the same time and attention.

Life's Adventures

Early one Saturday morning this spring, I was out with one of the other coaches setting up our race course. It was rainy and really cold. We were hooking up stake boats to their anchors when my fellow coach got a little off center in one of those tiny little Jon boats, and in a flash the gunwale went under and he was in the water. I turned to go help him, but before I could move he was back in the launch. Now this is one of those wakeless jobs with high freeboard, and my fellow coach is a tall guy, but he popped out of the water like he was Jesus.

Like I said, it was cold, and he was soaked. "You want to go back and change?" I ask. I was cold just looking at him. "No, I'm fine, let's keep going." Personally, I'd be racing to the showers. I know hypothermia takes a while to kick in, so I assume he's still thinking clearly and we keep going, and he

keeps at it with his usual positive attitude and attention to detail.

About 30 minutes later, he turns and points down river: "Hey check it out—looks like some guy in a single just went over." We're finishing up the stake boats and we head over to see what's going on. Sure

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enough, there's an experienced guy in a racing single that had a collar on his oar fall off. We haul him out shivering in his skimpy rowing outfit, and he and my fellow coach lift the single out of the water.

So now I'm driving the wakeless launch with my two swimmers holding the single up on their shoulders. We drop off the guy with the single at his club, and then, finally, we wrap up our morning adventure and head back to dry off and warm up.

I've been surprised by how much happens outside of coaching on the water to make a program really work. Some of my best memories are in these off hours, working with great people to get it all done.

Perfect

Again, I'm out there doing lineups at the last minute and I find myself with two coxes and 15 boys. Perfect. We've gone out in a seven and they hated it. We went out in a six and they hated that too. So maybe I can borrow a girl for the day and still make it happen. I take a walk over to the girls' bay and luckily they have an extra.

So now I've got 16 oarspeople, and I'm doing my usual "who wants to stroke?" One of the boys offers, along with the girl who is filling in, so I have two strokes for the two boats. We've got a race in two days, and I'm thinking this is a bad idea to put in a novice girl to stroke a race, but I keep my mouth shut. We do our workout: the boat with the girl stroking has real trouble with the starts, but once they get past that, they actually look pretty good.

Race day comes and she gets the nod. The guys want her to stroke. As they take the boat down, the coaches from the competing schools take one look at my novice boys' crew stroked by a girl and give me a knowing smile, and say "Perfect." The race goes off and the eight stroked by the novice girl battles its way down the course and finishes well—rowing through a crew in the last part of the race. They come in to the dock all smiles.

Sometime later I see the novice girls' coach, and I thank her again for helping us out. She says I have it all wrong: the stroke had had the time of her life; that race was the highlight of her season. Perfect.

In Rowing, as in Life

Although coaching crew is new to me, I have been around long enough to get my fair share of reality sandwiches. And as I look through this collection of observations, I see some familiar themes that I've seen before. I bet you do too.

I'm still pretty much a novice, but I share at least one trait with my most seasoned fellow coaches. I know that even a bad day on a beautiful river still beats sitting behind a desk all day long. ▣