

# The Coxswain's Motivation in Winter Training

by Linda Léger

*"Indoor training?  
My favorite  
season."*



Winter training. Uugh. Say those two words around a boathouse and you are bound to be greeted by a sound chorus of groans, heavy sighs and high pitched whines. "No way man, winter training stinks." "But it's so dark out." "What if it snows?" "Eeww, it's no fun."

But, say "winter training" around a coxswain and you hear a different response: "Winter training - this is where we make progress." "Indoor training? My favorite season." "Great, finally inside where it's warm."

Why would such a small group of athletes (yes, athletes) respond to the same phrase in such a positive manner? I asked myself this question and decided it warranted further investigation.

We all know what it feels like to be on the water, and how great things feel when everyone works towards the same goal, but what do you have in the winter? There are no head races, no sprints, no wind in your hair and no sunshine. Why?

To understand the coxswain's motivation, the first thing I had to do was research the definition of "coxswain." What does it really mean? According to the dictionary, a coxswain is defined as, "one who steers or who has charge of a small boat or racing shell." Well, this much I know. Let's look up "swain." Ah ha! "swain: a youthful rustic, a young gallant." What's a gallant? Dig deeper - "gallant: possessing spirit

and courage, intrepid, brave." Of course. Now I know why I'm a coxswain. With this information in hand, I decided to go straight to the horse's mouth and ask a few coxswains just what motivates them during winter training.

"My greatest motivation during winter training? I think it's stimulating to help individuals improve." This was the sort of answer I expected from a finals contestant at a Miss America pageant.

"I go through winter training because I'm a part of the team." A widely known yet often overlooked fact - yes Virginia, a coxswain is a member of a team. The cox is the "+" in a 4+ and 8+.

"My own insecurity drives me through the indoor season." WHAT? An insecure cox? Hard to believe, but coxes go through the same self-doubts and questions that any oarsman goes through. Will I have a boat? Can I finally get that varsity eight? I want to show the coach how much I've learned and improved. Remember, in most colleges and schools, a cox must be selected for a boat just like any oarsman, so he is also thinking about his performance as well as the performance of everyone else.

"Winter training allows me the time to search and push the individuals, so I know just how much I can ask for on the water." Believe it or not, there are actually folks out

there who won't hesitate to tell a cox "no" on the water, so it's best to duke it out in the tank *before* getting on the water.

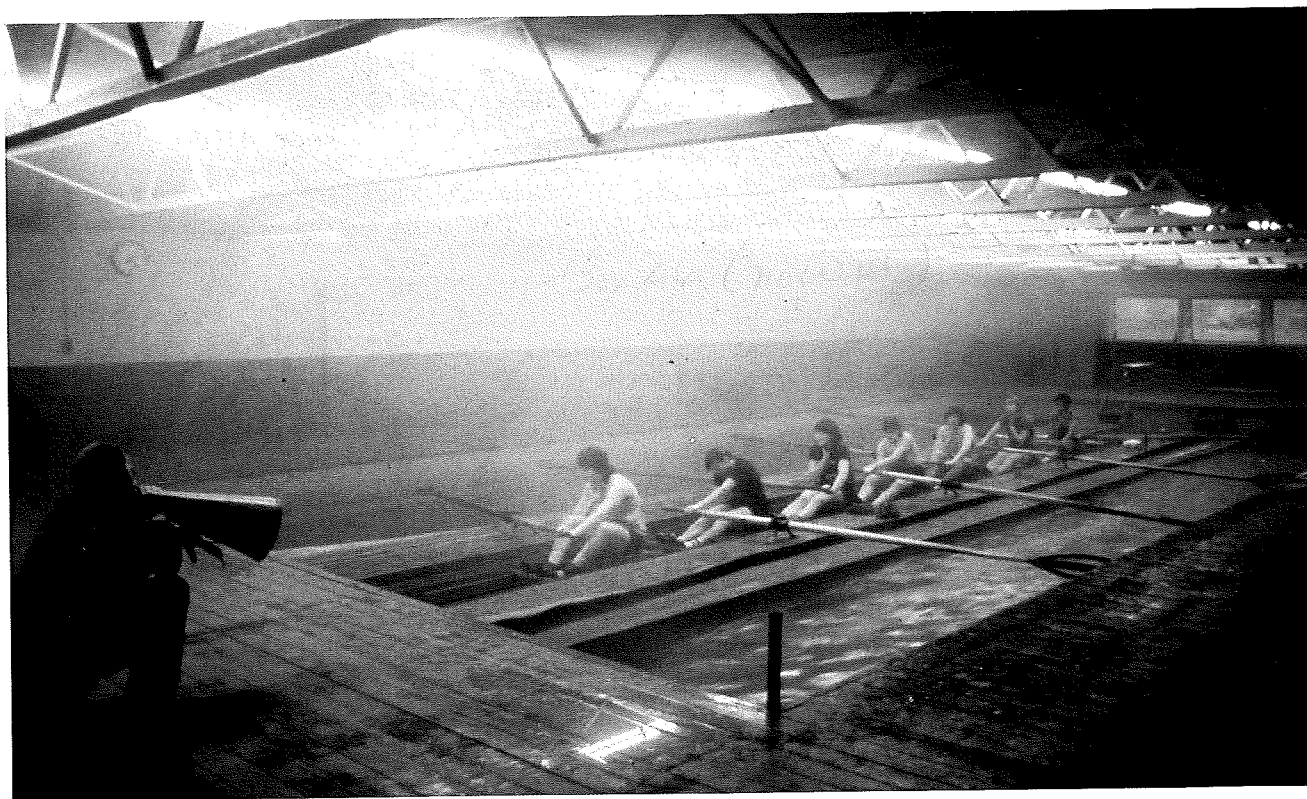
"I gain credibility with the oarsmen if I can work out with them, side by side." This is the heart and soul of the coxs' job, making sure the oarsmen believe them and believe in them. Every cox I talked with stressed the importance of participation in the activities. This means no matter how gruesome it sounds, running hills with your women's four or stadiums with the varsity men's eight or "jumpsies" with the novice eight, your stock will

improve and you get the bonus of a solid workout.

"Winter training puts the athletes within slapping range." Although this sounds radical, if you read between the lines it makes sense. Being able to climb all over your oarsmen (physically and verbally) and actually move their hands on the oarhandle, tilt their shoulders to the proper angle, adjust the handle heights and get two inches from their face to stress concentration will make all the difference both for the next tank session and on the water. And you can always slap them if they don't respond.

Of course, not all coxswains are alike. Just like not all oarsmen are alike. But remember the origin of the word "coxswain: intrepid, brave, courageous." Think about it - anyone would have to be brave to push a 6'4" 180 pound man to the breaking point and then ask for 10 more. That takes great courage. But if you take some extra time this winter and watch your coxswain, the benefits will pay off "big time" when the ice finally breaks and you're back on the water. —

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Brian Hill