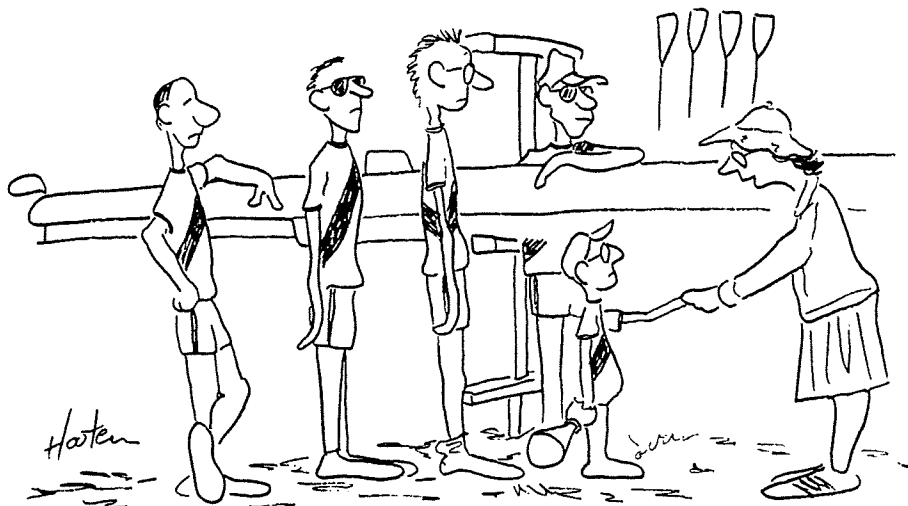


The Making of a Coxswain

by John Hooten



"... and you must be the little man who sits in the back and yells."

In high school I wanted to be an athlete. At 5' 4" and barely 100 pounds, and therefore unlikely to be another Wilt Chamberlain or O.J. Simpson, I set fairly modest goals: make a team, any team, and earn a varsity letter.

Being something of a runt with only a trace of athletic ability, I ruled out football, basketball and baseball, and tried out for the cross country team (where no one gets cut).

Only with a great deal of restraint did the coaches refrain from making an exception in my case. Of the swarm that started the races I was lucky to beat anyone. In fact, before one race my coach urged me to beat the first person in the next race.



The author checking the pitch.

To earn a letter in cross country you had to be one of the top five finishers in the team in half of the meets. I had trouble finishing the course before the team bus returned to school. And though I knew every senior earned a letter regardless of ability, it would be a charity letter, and four years away. There had to be a better way.

In the spring of my sophomore year Tom Kealey, a classmate, had turned out for crew. He came to class with strange tales of driving 15 miles to the boathouse, rowing in leaky boats that had to be emptied halfway through practice, of getting very cold every day and never returning home before 7 or 8 o'clock. But he seemed to like it. It all sounded very weird.

But there was a position on this eccentric team, called a coxswain. Being small and having a big mouth, I satisfied all the requirements. Of course I had to learn to steer what looked like a 90-foot boat, and there was all that stuff about being cold, but it had to be better than racing the first guy in the next cross country race.

At the boathouse Tom showed me how to get in the boat without putting my foot through the hull, and the basics of steering: "When you want to go to your right, you pull on the right rope..." Some mention of port and starboard, was decidedly too technical at that point.

The coach told me to watch the varsity cox take his crew out. I was to learn the commands he used, and after his boat was in the water, to report to the coach's launch to watch and listen in preparation for my first ride in the coxswain seat. I spent the day bailing the launch, which leaked faster than I could bail.

The next day I was given a megaphone with the news that I was the Number Six Coxswain ... just five heartbeats from a letter. A marked improvement over number 32 on the cross country team!

Parroting my instructor Tom, I had the oarsmen count down when they were ready, then told them to take the boat off the rack and out of the boathouse. As they carried the boat out I held onto the bowball as instructed, without understanding why. When the boat was out of the bay, the crew, uncommanded, swung the bow around, whipping me along with it. The bowball came off in my hand. On the dock I squeaked commands to put the boat in the water, where, once settled, it began to leak furiously.

John Hooten, a coxswain and former international women's coach, is a member of Vesper Boat Club and a professional cartoonist.

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I discovered the complexity of steering as we rowed from the dock. The boat easily drifted off-course, and bringing it back called for much pulling on a rudder that seemed only to shoot water vertically into the air. I swerved from side to side up the river, caroming off faster traffic (everyone else on the river), but somehow always yawing toward the very crews I was trying to avoid.

Rowing as practiced by our last boat was a tangled affair. The coxswain's job, I learned, is to tell the rowers when they make mistakes. Even to my unpracticed eye mistakes were obvious and abundant. What was I supposed to do about it? Questions from the stroke about whether so-and-so was out of time (he was) or rushing the slide I answered with puzzlement. This was going to be tougher than I thought.


But as the weeks rolled by, my understanding of the job became clearer:

- the coxswain should be more than a glorified cheerleader

- he doesn't yell "Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!"
- he functions as an assistant coach, identifying and trying to correct mistakes
- maintaining a straight course requires skill, concentration, and anticipation of pressures from the rowers, waves and winds that push the boat off-course
- in a race the coxswain helps motivate the crew and keep their rowing together
- the cox must also compensate for unexpected circumstances, taking a "power ten" to make up for a crab or to take advantage of an opponent's mistake.

A good coxswain is more than a little man who sits in the back and yells. He has to be smart. Though he doesn't move the boat by pulling an oar, a cox can help a crew be all it can be.

Like a good jockey, a good coxswain can make all the difference in the world.

And a good coxswain can earn a varsity letter, as I did. 

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