



**THE NOVICES' FIRST WEEKS
OR
NIPPING IT IN THE BUD**

During the first weeks and even months, because rowing will afford little conditioning, land training should begin immediately but gently: light weights, absolute minimum of pull-ups, push-ups, sit-ups, 1/2 miles to 1 1/2 miles of running. It's a challenge to devise a program which won't win the scorn of the experienced athletes and overwhelm the total novices; success here depends upon the coach's ability to lend encouragement where and when needed. Because most novices are also newcomers to their schools, individual attention from the coach is likely to outweigh unavoidable inequities in the program. After the first two weeks the land training can accompany individual abilities and enthusiasms if minimum-maximum levels are assigned for each exercise, such as posting a run of at least a mile and not more than three. It encourages the good runners without discouraging the turtles, who might be able to max on some other exercise.

Resist the tendency to find out who's good by testing them early and centering on what appear to be real gems — too many things can happen to people in one year — mononucleosis or a sudden accumulation of 20 lbs. of beef — to warrant such early culling. Encourage them all and let them decide who's going to stay with it.

Put them in the boat, barge, tank or whatever with an oar in their hands, and remembering that they want to *do* something, let them spend more time rowing — much more — than you spend talking.

Because the hands are the most difficult and the feet the easiest to control, go through the body in that direction, starting with the hands, after defining your terms and equipment parts.

For the first week or so, row on the square. Nothing screws up the hands, the catch and release as much as feathering. The little finger of the outside hand should stay on the edge of the oar-end, the back of the outside hand parallel to the water always, especially when feathering, and a line through the large (middle) knuckle should be straight through the wrist to the elbow until the arm begins to break. The inside hand should be around six inches from the other hand, its back also parallel to the water. Without using any slide or forward body angle, let them paddle, watching to see that the hands stay flat and that they allow the oarhandle to pivot in the outside hand at the finish end so that as the elbow drops in bending and the outside wrist flexes and breaks sideways, the hand itself is still pulling straight toward the body. Let them practice some with just the outside hand; make them be their own coaches. Emphasize a definite downward motion to lift the blade from the water.

When the last half of the stroke seems acceptable, position them at full reach at the catch, arranging the inside knee vertically between the arms, the outside knee as close to the outside shoulder as possible and not wildly splayed out. Check the hands again to see that the wrists are flat and straight with the oar handle having pivoted on the crook of the middle finger, then adjust the inside elbow's bend so that the inside shoulder isn't forced up into an ear. This is difficult stuff; by emphasizing relaxation and adjusting each individual, however, you might eliminate the hunch-shouldered tightness that could plague them for years. Don't worry excessively about other parts of the stroke until they *understand* what is right for the hands, the arms, and shoulders, etc., then go to the coordination of the back and legs. Advice on a quick catch, explosive power, power curves, the third 500, etc., is all wasted and counterproductive. They have to learn to hold the oar before they can pull it, and how to move with it before they can stress themselves.

A good way of teaching athletes how to move sometimes is to teach them how *not* to move; the back-leg coordination is a

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perfect example. Have them sit at the catch and drive their legs, holding the oar but not moving it. Say "No-no." Then have them sit at the catch and lean back without moving their slides, and say "No-no" again. These two extremes of over-accentuating the back and shooting the slide for some reason are never forgotten. Tell them that what is needed is somewhere in between; just where that is is still being contended among coaches, but most good oarsmen seem to drive only the legs in the first few inches after the catch, transferring that pressure through the back and arms to the oar, before beginning the back lift through the stroke. What finishes where and when is also up in the air — some gold medal crews finish arms, legs, and back together, while others finish the legs before anything happens in the back lift at all. A style that isn't going to slow a boat is a straight-armed (but not rigidly so) catch, initial legs, back opening smoothly through the continuous leg drive, arms breaking just before the knees, legs down, back finishing and arms bringing the handle in the rest of the way.

Control the extent of their forward reach, using the inside leg in the middle of the chest as a front stop (which they shouldn't *hit*, but touch, controlling their upper body weight). Don't allow the upper body to pivot around the leg, either, but maintain a good upright relaxed posture with both shoulders low in their sockets, level, and facing as directly aft as they can — this too, requires flexibility in the inside elbow, which straightens on the drive as the oar comes back over the toes, then with the outside arm begins to break over the knees.

Control the layback, too, and make them keep their shoulders back as the oar comes in toward their sternums, and as it goes away on the recovery. If the crew appears to be doing abbreviated sit-ups, they're laying back too far. Practice strokes one at a time out of the back end (finish) to emphasize the priority of arms out, then the shoulders, and then the slide. Then start them with their arms already extended so that their first motion is with the shoulders.

When they can row along pretty nicely, thinking about their hands, keeping their shoulders level and low in their sockets, their heads reasonably over keel and high, you are prepared to throw it all down the drain.

Feathering for the novice is like Ice Nine to Kurt Vonnegut's ocean: one little bit and the whole thing freezes up. Knifing, late roll-up and hanging, late body angle, outside hand slipping off at the catch, lousy finishes, hitting the water over the knees, skying, lunging...my God, it's no wonder they tried to design automatically feathering oars around the turn of the century, and that Conn Findlay sanded his handles smooth and

squared by pulling his feathered oar into the water and feathered by pushing his squared oar out. Or so they say. Unfortunately, he only won two golds and a bronze.

The inside hand does all the feathering and squaring. The outside hand does just what it used to do, except that now that the oar rotates as well as pivots inside it. When the oar is feathered, the inside hand's fingertips remain in place on the oar, but the palm comes away, releasing tension in the forearm and allowing the oar handle to be carried lower over the legs (see Mike Vespoli's article *The Oarsman*, Jan/Feb. 1977 for photographs and detailed explanation). To assure the preservation of the outside hand, have them row one stroke feathered, the next squared; to preserve the inside hand, insist on an outrageously early square-up over the knees if necessary, but at least by the ankles. It's always easy to square later, later in the season, if they're holding their oars properly.

Don't be discouraged when after the first day of feathering they revert to Day One.

Get miles under them, as many as you can, but make sure they're concentrating — address them individually and if that doesn't work, stop the whole boat and try it again. Drills are great focusing devices if you don't talk too much. A brief quick word to one or two and another when they've corrected themselves is all that's necessary. And prefix what you're saying by the name of the person or people you're talking to. Groups don't listen when there are ducks and trees and other boats to look at.

DRILLS

Hands — One stroke square, one feathered. Bow four and stern four can do this together, alternating out of sync to keep the boat stable. Also, because people always have better catches when they're rowing square, it's a good catch exercise.

Recovery — one stroke at a time from a) the release, b) arms extended, c) arms just beyond the knees.

Catch — one stroke at a time starting a) feathered, just before ankles (first motion is to square), b) squared, ½-slide, just after toes, letting arms rise as the slide finishes.

Early body angle — one stroke at a time, starting with last 8-12" of slide left, oar squared, moving only the slide and lifting the arms in approaching the catch.

Release — rowing square. Nothing forces an oarsman to press his hands down more than fear of getting it stuck.