A smooth rowing stroke and moving a shell through the water efficiently can be like spinning a bicycle wheel and keeping it moving with light taps of the hand. The trick is to judge the exact point at which the wheel is about to slow down and then move it forward again without stopping it. That’s the analogy Sara (Hendershot) Lombardi was introduced to as a novice rower, years before she rowed the women’s pair to within a heartbeat of a medal at the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

After leaving the sport briefly, Lombardi is back in training and hoping for another chance at an Olympic medal this summer in Rio. During a long April erg workout, her thoughts went back to the image of the turning wheel and the part of the rowing stroke that is used to keep it moving without slowing it down.

It’s called the catch. In an Instagram post, Lombardi shared her most recent thoughts on the subject:

“The catch of the rowing stroke, it’s a beautiful and EASY thing when done correctly. But when done incorrectly, (it) leads to a lot of inefficiency and pain in your (back, ribs, butt, legs). The trick about taking the catch properly is anticipating the weight you are about to move. On the water, that’s the weight of the other rowers and your shell.

The bicycle wheel is an analogy that was first introduced to me as a novice, and it stills rings true today. Misjudge the speed of the wheel and you’ll stop it with your hand when you try to spin it. Keep the contact light, quick, and in time with the increasing wheel speed, and you’ll find a simpler, more efficient way to get the wheel to top speed. Anticipate a patient change of direction and your body will thank you when you’re 1,500 meters into a 2k race.”
This description of the catch is not only a vivid image and clear explanation of what the catch feels like to her, it is a perfect way to begin a discussion of the various segments that make up a complete rowing stroke—the catch, the drive, the finish, and the recovery.

Beginning with this issue, and continuing over the next three months, there will be an examination of the rowing stroke guided by some of the best coaches and teachers in the country.

Natural Style and the Catch

USRowing Director of Coaching Education Kris Korzeniowski is a teacher of what he calls “the natural rowing style,” used by many American coaches. The whole rowing stroke and movement of the boat is dictated by the suspension of the rower’s body on the oar handle, almost without the rower’s involvement. Some coaches call this passive suspension, lazy suspension, or “letting bodyweight do the work for you.”

“It is easy to see that securing the blade in the water to allow this suspension to happen depends completely on the entry of the blade into the water, the so-called catch. That is what makes a catch the most important and the most challenging part of the stroke in the opinion of a majority of the coaches,” said Korzeniowski.

In teaching the catch, Korzeniowski says the most frequent questions and discussions center on the concepts “quick catch,” “back splash,” and “locking the blade behind the post.”

For this discussion, three prominent U.S. rowing coaches—U.S. head women’s coach Tom Terhaar, arguably the best international coach currently in the game with 10 years of consecutive world or Olympic titles to his name; Yale University men’s coach Steve Gladstone, who has led four of the country’s best rowing programs to prominence and a string of national championships; and U.S. men’s coach Luke McGee, a former national team athlete who made his name as freshman coach at Brown and Washington and now coaches the U.S. men’s program—all give their thoughts and suggestions on what makes a catch good and how they teach it.

Teaching the Catch

One important concept that is repeated throughout these conversations is the idea that the catch, while a distinct portion of the stroke, is best taught as part of the recovery—the period when rowers release their blades from the water and move up the slide to bring the oar to its full length before placing it in the water. It’s not that the catch does not require a very specific technique, but that without a smooth recovery, the catch will ultimately suffer.

“(The rowing stroke) is a cycle,” said Terhaar. And in teaching the mechanics of the catch, he said, “I would just keep it to really simple, basic terms. Make sure that the hands are working around the turns properly, that they go up and around, and that the blade engages at the farthest point.

“Think of the handle as being on a conveyer belt the whole time. It’s really, really simple if the mechanics are correct. If the...
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mechanics are off at one part, then you’re just going to spend a lot of time out there working on something you’re just not going to be able to apply when you want to. You’ll be able to do it in a drill situation, but not in a rowing, racing situation.

“One critical factor in a good catch is rhythm,” Terhaar said. “Coming up from the release and up the slide too fast or too slow results in missing the correct point of entry. Too fast and you can miss, too slow and you’re chasing it. A lot of it has to do with using rhythm and teaching the right amount of relaxation to let the blade go in, then to self-time to catch the boat.”

Like Terhaar, Gladstone views teaching the catch as an extension of the recovery.

“Form follows function,” Gladstone said. “If the coaches begin to think of it in those terms, that it’s not a separate entity, that it’s the final phase of the recovery, then they’ll get the idea of it being a fluid action. I think people can get into trouble if they start thinking of the catch as a separate thing or separate motion. And that’s where you can get into (driving the blade into the water),” he said. “Instead of pounding it in, it just flows.”

When McGee sees a young crew struggling, he focuses on what is happening “at the front end” of the stroke where the catch takes place.

“It helps to teach them to be patient, to give themselves time to get their blades in at the right time, and not to rush it. The most common mistake I see is athletes trying to be too fast or too hard on the front end before the blade has had a chance to get into the water.”

What does locking the blade behind the post really mean?

“In order for the blade to enter the water, it has to displace water. People can argue all they want about it. If you have an object entering the water, if someone throws a pebble into a pond, there is going to be a jet of water that goes up and on all sides of the blade,” he said.

Gladstone also said, however, that having rowers create a backsplash can be useful as a drill to help teach blade placement.

“Perhaps as a drill, someone might want to do that. But most drills are an exaggeration of what you want to achieve,” he said. Terhaar agrees.

“If you don’t teach back splash, then (the rowers) start driving the blade into the water. And if you’re driving the blade into the water, you are no longer catching. You’re just hammering. You don’t want backsplash in a race,” he said. “You want even splash on both sides of the blade. But you use backsplash to teach people the path of the handle, to put the blade in the water at its farthest point. Once (rowers) start to see the way the hand is supposed to go up (for the catch), then you start to see splash off of both sides of the blade, not just the back.”

To Splash or Not to Splash?

B acksplash, or having water splash into the air off of the back of the blade when going into the water at the catch, is a controversial part of the rowing stroke. Some coaches insist water shooting into the air means a perfectly timed entry. Others argue it only interferes, and can actually slow a boat down. So what is Gladstone’s view?

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What is a Quick Catch?

T he most common mistake McGee sees is athletes trying to be too fast or too hard on the front end before the blade has had a chance to get into the water.

“Power is important, but power applied early can slow a crew down,” he said.

Gladstone doesn’t think of a catch as being quick or not. To him, quick means being light.

“I wouldn’t use quick. I would say light. You can’t (drive) the blade into the water. The hands have to be light. The blade has to square on its axis, and squaring the blade on its axis will bring the leading edge of the blade to the water directly.”

By axis, Gladstone means the natural motion the oar travels from the point when the handle is pushed down and the blade is released from the water to when it moves to the furthest point, or extension, is squared and then placed into the water for the next stroke.

Terhaar said catch timing can be different from boat to boat and from situation to situation.

“The catch is when you’re catching the water to push the boat forward. And speed—quick, not quick—all depends on the type of boat and the speed of the boat. It’s got to be at the appropriate speed of the boat class, and it has to be the appropriate speed as far as the workout goes, or the race goes.”

What does locking the blade behind the post really mean?

“In terms of having the blade positioned behind the post, Gladstone said to him, that means, that the rowers “are deep into the stern, behind the pin. You want the work to come on when the slide is well through the pin,” he said.

“It’s about application of the body weight to the footboard to the feet,” Terhaar said. “That just means how quickly do you get body weight on there. There are different ways to emphasize it. You can be really aggressive in getting the blade in, but if the legs aren’t ready, it doesn’t matter.”

For McGee it means adding power at the right time, when the blade and the rower’s body are in the correct position in the boat to effectively apply power.

“As rowers, we want to be powerful at the catch, and it is this power that can really work against us. Adding power too soon will only exaggerate the problem of missing water at the catch. I will move on to adding power after I feel that they have a solid timing foundation.”

Check out usrow.us/TechVideo for USRowing’s latest technique videos and coaching education tips.