TECHNIQUE SERIES: PART 3

THE RELEASE

Story and photos by Ed Moran
For the past 10 collegiate rowing seasons, Claire Martin-Doyle has coached the lightweight women’s team at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her crews are always ranked at the top of the seasonal coaching polls, and this year, her varsity eight reached the grand final at the IRA Championships for the first time in the program’s history, finishing fifth.

Going fast and rowing well for Martin-Doyle means having an effective, efficient rowing stroke—and that is a process that she begins teaching at the front end, or the catch, and works down through the drive cycle. As the racing season nears, Martin-Doyle shifts the focus toward “the back end,” or the release.

The release, or the finish, is the final push of the drive and the initial movement toward the recovery, the process of letting the boat glide and setting up to begin again. In this third piece of the technique series on the rowing stroke, we look at how the finish is taught and the part it plays in the overall stroke cycle.

For a quick view of how it is broken down, reference the USRowing Level 2 Coaching Manual, which describes the way the finish works:

“The release from the water should follow the last push of the boat, which creates a small cavity behind the blade. This cavity is a guarantee that the pressure has been kept to the very end of the stroke. The rower employs a quick, fluid, semicircular, mostly outside hand motion down in front of the body. The blade ‘whips out’ or ‘rebounds’ out of the water toward the bow. The blade should not travel to the stern after release from the water. That would mean decreasing pressure or losing connection (washing out) towards the finish of the stroke.”

To get a coach’s perspective of what that means and the importance of the finish, Martin-Doyle, Cornell University lightweight men’s coach Chris Kerber, and recently retired Temple University men’s coach Gavin White describe what they see as the critical parts to the finish, what it is meant to accomplish, and how they teach it to their crews.

What is a good release?

No part of the stroke cycle can be overlooked. Each of the segments contribute to the overall success of a fast crew. If the catch is where the rowers first engage their oars in the water and the drive is the portion that lever a boat forward, then the finish is the part of the stroke that ties it together.

“The finish is vital. It's vital for pushing the boat away. It's vital for releasing all the work you put in. It's vital for the stability of the boat and for that initiation of relaxation, which is really, really key.”

— Chris Kerber, Cornell Lightweight Men’s Coach
“The finish is vital,” said Kerber. “It’s vital for pushing the boat away. It’s vital for releasing all the work you put in. It’s vital for the stability of the boat and for that initiation of relaxation, which is really, really key. It’s about your efficiency. You have to be a high efficiency rower so that you can go fast, and the finish is a very important piece of that.”

Martin-Doyle agrees and explains that a good finish means clean, smooth blade work.

“If you’re not clean at the finish, you’re not going to go anywhere,” she said.

What Martin-Doyle means when she talks about being “clean” is getting the blade out of the water—or releasing at the right time—not continuing to pull past the target point of the body, and then keeping the blade at a height over the water that it does not hit, or skip, on the surface and slow the boat down.

“What I’ve seen in a lot of my crews is, if they’re finishing clean, and they are clean and clear at the finish, then they are much, much faster and much better set up for an aggressive drive sequence.”

When Kerber talks about teaching the finish, he brings up White, his coach in college. White taught that the finish was second only to the catch in its importance to the stroke cycle.

“There is a certain level of fear in the finish,” White said. “We try and dispel that because the finish is very important. And there are only a few guys every year that finish the right way. In the entire program this year, there were only two.”

What are the critical parts of a release?

There are two key parts to a finish that determine if it is effective—holding onto the last part of the drive to “send the boat” and releasing the blade from the water without causing any interruption in boat speed, while setting up the rowers for the beginning of the recovery.

“A lot of the problems I see at the finish are related to being disconnected, especially through the mid-drive and the back end,” said Martin-Dolye. “What we talk about is being connected through the last part of the drive, having pressure on the foot board as you draw the handle to your body.

“The second part we talk about is being clean and clear out of the water. That seems to resonate well with people. What that means, basically, is get your blades enough off the water so the boat can run, not disturbing the boat and setting yourself up for a good recovery sequence.”

To White, the most critical portion of the finish is holding the blade in the water until the drive is completed and keeping the oar buried.

“You want to try to eliminate the look and feel of stopping at the finish,” White said. “Guys drive, then stop, and then bang and crash the oar into the body and into their lap to try and keep from catching a crab. It looks like they are trying to survive the stroke rather than excel. We try to teach that the hands are like the chain of a bicycle, they go around without stopping. I want them to have their hands go up and around with a perfect...
The rower’s head and chest are behind the oar handle, without slouching. The arms continue the last few inches of the draw. The rower continues to put pressure on the footboards.

Here, the rower has finished the drive with the legs. Their legs are flat and they swing back to a position of about 10 degrees past vertical.

The rower’s head and chest are behind the oar handle, without slouching. The arms continue the last few inches of the draw. The rower continues to put pressure on the footboards.

Teaching the Release

Rowing for White at Temple meant rowing with square blades and by sixes for long periods of the fall and working on the finish during spring training. He had a variety of drills to improve the finish, including one with an exaggerated layback.

“Most guys tend to finish and rush the blade out of the water while the blade is still traveling to the stern, even though it’s out of the water. We want them to lift it out, and we work on that a lot,” he said. “We do body work, rowing with outside arms only. It takes a lot of miles.”

Kerber said he also uses a number of drills.

“I do a whole mess of different drills depending on the crew,” said Kerber. “At Cornell, the lightweights focus in on the finish a lot. It transcends how we row the stroke. The most notable thing we work on and teach is releasing the blade clean. And what that looks like when done right is like a big puddle that implodes.”

Martin-Doyle doesn’t start focusing on the finish until she has had time to polish the catch and the drive, right about the time the racing season begins. She focuses on releasing clean, without “whitewater,” and on blade height off the water. But a main part of the focus is on proper connection.

“In terms of staying with the work through the back end, the final couple of inches as you draw through give the boat more push through the drive. Then as you release the blade, you don’t want to slow the boat down. We talk a lot about letting the boat go, letting the boat do the work once you take the blade out.

“We do quarter-feather drills, and then we do a lot of short-slide work, quarter-slide work, and half-slide work. A lot of that we will do at higher ratings. As we get more into the racing season, using the short-slide work tends to get people rowing more clean around the back end and moving better together.

“I think it’s fairly simple, for me it is at least,” she said. “If the blade is staying covered fully in the water through to the rowers’ target point on their body and is coming out without a lot of splash or white water and coming out and not hitting the water, that’s primarily what I am looking for at the finish.”

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