



## COXSWAIN GUIDE

### Coxswain

As the voice of authority in the boat and the link between the coach or session manager and the rowers on the water, the coxswain is a key figure in every rowing session. All rowers will be called on to cox. Rowers are encouraged to sign up in advance to cox in order to be prepared mentally and with the appropriate clothing. In addition, rowers may cox groups (i.e., competitive, newbies or general) other than their own in order not to lose any of their rowing opportunities.

This Coxswain Manual is available as a guide and a coxswain clinic may be held early in the season to help develop skills and give rowers the opportunity to ask questions. For your first time on the water as a coxswain, we will try to have someone familiar with coxing in the stroke seat to assist you, and if that is not possible, the coach or session manager will maintain regular communication to assist as needed.

### Purpose

The purpose of this PLRA Cox Manual is to make the lives of our volunteer coxes a little easier. Anyone who has ever coxed knows how complex the job is even for experienced coxes – there are so many factors to process at the same time. And for those of us who have never done it before, it can be pretty intimidating.

This manual tries to simplify the coxing process. It is designed for use by PLRA coxes on the Portage Lakes. It does not necessarily address all the skills you'll need to cox elsewhere, nor does it attempt to teach you how to cox a race.

Since club policies now require that everyone coxes, we hope you'll approach this manual with an open mind. Remember, a coxswain is a valuable part of practice and if you are more prepared to do the job right, you and your boat will have a better row!

A coxswain can make or break a crew. From the coach's standpoint, the coxswain is the most vital member of a crew. Without a good coxswain, the boat does not steer straight, the crew may not be properly relaxed and focused for workouts or races, and most importantly, rower safety may be compromised. A good coxswain has safety in mind as a first priority, steers straight, can motivate the crew to row their best, provide some humor when it is most needed, and keep his or her head in difficult situations. A good coxswain will also make the workout more efficient by anticipating and starting, staying and stopping next to the other crews. The success of rowing at PLRA depends upon a group of coxswains who are just as dedicated to their coxing as to their rowing. Without them, we don't go anywhere, much less anywhere fast.

### When Will You Cox

Significant efforts will be made to distribute coxing fairly. Our poster board lists all members and it is your responsibility to add a circle in the first blank column to the right of your name after you serve as a coxswain. If no one has signed up in advance, the session manager will review the poster board to see who has not coxed and make their selection. So, if you'd like to take control of your own coxing, sign up to cox when it fits your schedule and do it early in the season. In this way, you can keep the number of sessions that you cox above others and are therefore less likely to get surprised (i.e., picked to cox) at a session when you'd hope to row. Since we take out fours and eights with about the same frequency, that means one coxswain is required for every six rowers on average, so you would expect to coxswain one time for every six rows. However, this frequency is reduced by the full-time coxswains (bless them) and rowers who also cox regularly (bless them, too).

Recognizing that we have nowhere near the number of coxswains required, PLRA operates under an "everyone coxes" approach in order to enable us to get as many rowers out on the water as possible and to distribute this responsibility

fairly. At the same time, we all know how important coxing proficiency is to both safety and a productive rowing session. Accordingly, we plan to continue our efforts to ensure all coxing members are able to cox satisfactorily.

We do not want you coxing if you are not comfortable in the role, so please let a member of the Board of Directors know this and we will find an alternate way for you to contribute to the club. It's fine to be nervous coxswain the first time and we will guide you gently through the process. In some ways, a new coxswain is better at avoiding incidents and someone who is experienced might not be as alert watching out for other boat traffic and obstacles.

All experienced rowers are required to attend a coxing clinic or watch a video of a previous clinic before June 30 or rowing privileges may be suspended.

All members are urged to do all they can to prepare themselves for this important activity; e.g., review the Coxing Manual available on our website or pay special attention to what the cox is doing during your rowing sessions. Knowing how to cox will make you a better rower.

## **Safety**

Your primary concern as cox is to maintain the safety of the people and equipment in your charge. It is your responsibility to see that no one is hurt getting the boat in or out of the water, and that the boat is not damaged in the process. On the water, even if you remember nothing else, you must give steering first priority. If you see a hazardous situation developing, do not hesitate to bring the boat to a stop ("Weigh enough! Hold water!") if that is the only way to avoid a collision with debris, the shore, with another boat, or with a launch. Do not count on other boaters knowing the rules of the lake or respecting our shells and understanding our lack of maneuverability. Always make the conservative decision and do not assume anything..

Please review the PLRA Safety Guide before you cox. It is lengthy, but in an emergency, you, the cox will be responsible for directing your crew out of danger. If you believe a crewmember or a piece of equipment is in trouble, immediately "weigh enough!" to stop the boat and assess the situation. Be prepared to radio the launch for further help.

Weather conditions can change suddenly, even on our small lake. If you have started out on a practice and run into fog, turn around and head back where it's clear to wait for instructions from the launch. Dense fog will not only hide other boats from your view, but muffle their sounds as well. If you are caught in fog, follow the shore on your right and row by pairs only so you will be able to stop quickly if needed. Return to the boathouse as well if there is lightning nearby. In all cases, follow the instructions from the launch.

## **Communication**

After ensuring the safety of your crew and equipment, your biggest task as cox is to communicate effectively. You play several interlocking roles. You are the ninth (or fifth) member of the team. You are also in charge of your boat, giving the rest of the crew directions. Occasionally, you will need to act as their coach as well. And you are the only means of communication between the coach and your rowers out on the water. The more you cox, the better your communication skills will become.

- **CLARITY:** Be sure your commands are decisive, loud and easily understood. Before giving commands start by saying "In two, do this ... one, two." If you do not say "in two" rowers may not be prepared to take action in unison. Also, prepare your rowers for a starting command by hesitating after saying "Ready all?..." Make it clear at the start of the practice which position you want the rowers to stop at when you say "Weigh enough!" Be clear when explaining drills and make sure YOU understand what the coach wants you to do before you proceed. If you are in doubt about a coach's instructions, raise your hand and ask him/her to repeat the commands.
- **TONE:** Everyone responds to an upbeat, encouraging tone of voice. Be firm when necessary, but above all, keep a sense of humor. Misunderstandings are going to occur, and you can choose to get on with the practice with a cheerful response. Although you are in charge, be part of your team; let your rowers know you'd welcome their help and are prepared to admit your mistakes. However, since you are in charge of the crew, it is important that you do not let your own nervousness take over the boat. Perhaps Douglas Adams (The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy) has the best advice: Don't panic.

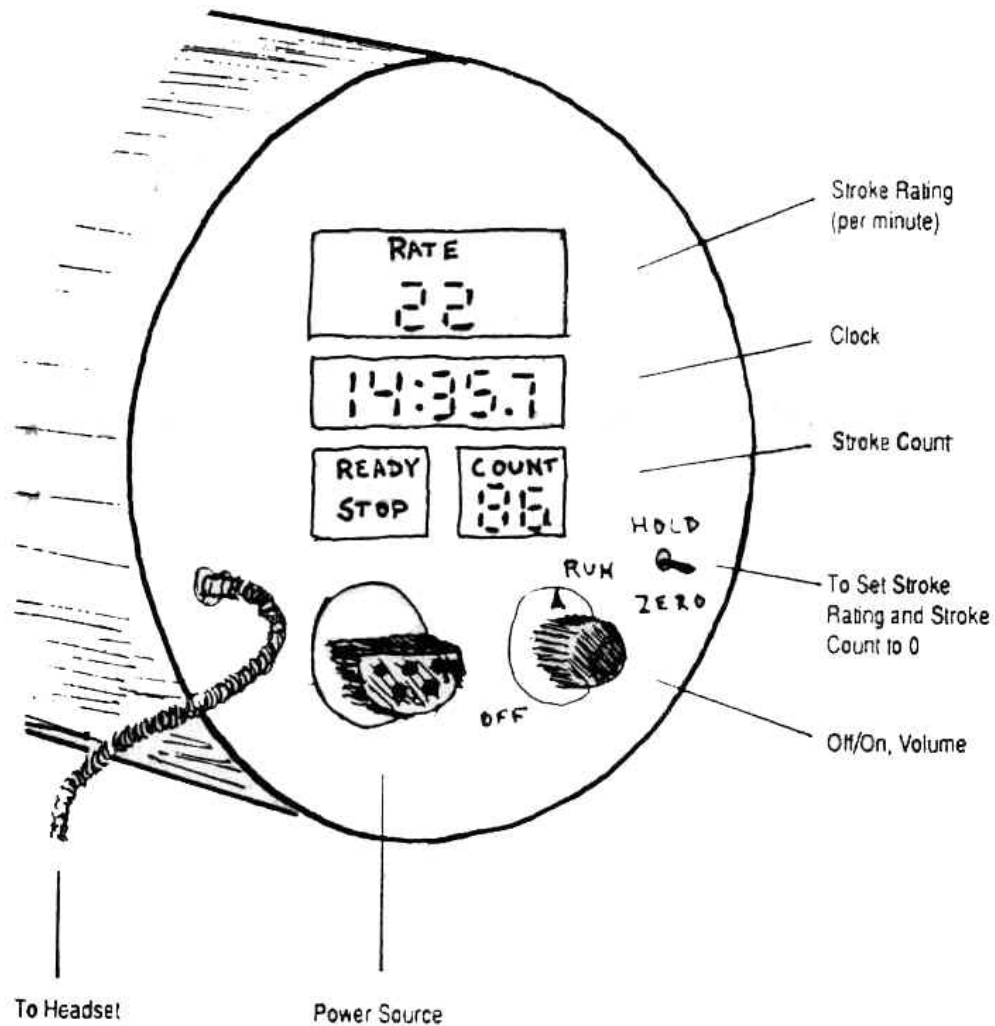
- **COACHING:** Don't be seduced by the sense of power that comes with giving orders. The coach or session manager is ultimately in charge. You have a very important job to do, but you are not the coach. No matter how much you think you know about rowing, you don't know as much as s/he does. Except in an emergency, don't talk while the coach is speaking. Especially in the beginning, stick to giving directions, with only an occasional comment to a rower to adjust a flagrant mistake. Nobody likes to be constantly criticized, so let your rowers row in peace, even if you see mistakes. They'll figure out a lot of it on their own, especially if you remind them to relax. We're all tempted to tell someone what they're doing wrong – remember to tell them when they're doing something right. Phrasing corrections in a positive way is more helpful to your crew. For example, instead of the negative “Don't sky your blade,” say “Raise your hands at the finish.”
- **SILENCE IS GOLDEN:** Sometimes it's tempting to talk too much as cox. Remember it's helpful to let your crew row in silence. You have a lot to think about to do your job well, and so do your rowers. Try to find a balance of talking and quiet times. If it's not essential, don't say it. You'll only distract your rowers.
- **ROWING TERMS:** Most commands are universal to rowing, but obviously you will need to be flexible in determining what commands to use in any given situation. Our guide to Rowing Fundamentals has a list of commands that all members should familiarize themselves with. If we have a visiting rowers or new experienced member, it is a good idea to introduce them to our primary commands.

## Equipment

When you've confirmed that you will be coxing, collect the gear you will need to take with you. Cox box, microphone, radio, wrench, seat pad, and possibly plugs for the boat you'll be taking out.

- **EXTRA CLOTHES:** It's always colder than you think out on the water. So when it's cool, take an extra jacket (preferably water-resistant), hat and gloves. A foam seat pad can also help. Don't hesitate to make yourself as comfortable as is practical, since you will be able to concentrate better if you're not shivering or constantly shifting in your seat.
- **COX BOX:** Unplug one of the boxes in the lockers. Your cox box should have a headstrap on the coxswain table. Boxes without headstraps can still be used, just tuck the mike into your hat! Once in the boat, slide the cox box into the circular holder and plug in to the hanging wire. Make sure that the plugs inside the connector line up with the holes in the cox box. Test for sound and adjust the volume so that the whole boat can hear you. Be considerate of the ears of those rowers sitting next to the speakers: don't shout. But remember to speak loudly enough so that 7 seat (who doesn't have a speaker), can hear you. Cox boxes should always be carried by their white handles, never by the microphone cords. Any broken boxes should be reported to the session manager. Always plug a box back in upon its return to the rack.
- **RADIO:** Take a radio from the lockers and make sure it has a good charge. Turn the volume all the way up to ensure you'll be able to hear necessary instructions from the coach or session manager. Put the radio in a dry bag and loosely tighten the strap around your neck so that you would not lose the radio if you were to go into the lake. Before shoving off the dock, you must test radio communication with the safety launch.
- **PLUGS:** Most of our boats have their plugs attached on a little string to hang with the boats when they are not sealing off the bow or stern compartments. However, some plugs do not have a string and can be found on the coxswain table. Be sure to bring down a plug for your boat if it's needed. If you're unsure if you need one, ask the session manager after you receive your boat assignment. Before shoving off the dock, you must confirm that both bow and stern plugs are securely in place. Also, before taking the boat out of the water, all plugs must be removed.
- **KEY:** Every coxswain should have a key to the boathouse with them. If other shells have already launched and the safety boat is on the water, but you forgot to bring down your microphone, you will need to be able to get one from the boathouse.

## Illustration of Cox Box



### Getting the Boat off the Racks

Once you have your equipment in hand, get your crew together near your assigned boat. Make sure they have taken the correct oars out first. Place oars on the shore near the dock, but not in the path of carrying the boat.

Take a minute to figure out the best way to get the boat off the rack. This will depend on which rack the boat is located.

Overhead:

- Have the tallest and strongest rowers at each end.
- Have the shorter rowers reach up, even if they cannot touch the boat.
- Carefully lift the boat slightly and move it off the rack.
- Side step slowly away from the rack.
- Down to shoulders, splitting opposite the riggers.

Shoulder high:

- Carefully lift the boat slightly and move it off the rack.
- Side step slowly away from the rack.

- Down to shoulders, splitting opposite the riggers.

Waist high or lower:

- Each rower reach across the boat and grip both gunwales or sides of the boat.
- If rowers are able to get to the other side of the boat between the racks, they should do so, but no one should ever step over a boat especially when carrying another boat.
- Carefully lift the boat slightly and move it off the rack.
- Starting at bow, every other rower ducks under the boat, one at a time, and grips their side of the boat.
- Each rower should now be holding only their side of the boat, at waist height.
- Side step slowly away from the rack.

Important Things to Remember:

- You will stand at the bow while coxing the boat out of the boathouse.
- Watch the riggers on the boat on the rack above yours. The most common accident is scraping the bottom of your boat against the riggers above.
- When coxing the on or off the racks, remember that some rowers may have switched places to accommodate heights. To give commands based on “ports” and “starboards” might be confusing. Use terms such as “lake side” or “parking lot” side. Also, using “towards the boathouse” or “away from the boathouse” is easier understood instead of “towards the bow” or “towards the stern”.

### **Getting the Boat in the Water**

Don't start swinging the boat towards the dock too early. Stay with the bow of the boat, even keeping your hand on the bow ball, making sure that the boat will not hit the racks when swinging. Tell your rowers to slow down if they are moving too quickly with the boat.

When taking the boat down to the dock, walk it out so the stern deck extends past the end of the dock with just enough space for the coxswain to load at the end of the dock. In October and November when the lake level is lowered, the coxswain will need to load first, then the stern pair, then continue walking the boat off the dock until the bow has enough water to float in when fully loaded.

The rowers will stand at the edge of the dock, take the boat overhead and then roll it down into the water. Remind them to bend their knees as they lower the boat rather than hold the weight of the boat in their lower backs.

After the boat is on the dock and before it is put into the water, you must move from protecting the bow to protecting the stern. As the boat is rolled down and onto the water, it is your responsibility to hold the stern away from the dock. The skeg must not touch the dock or it will break off.

### **Getting into the Boat**

When the boat is placed in the water, the rowers whose riggers are on the dock side should hold the boat and the others rowers should each get two oars from the nearby shore, one of each side for them and their pair-mate holding the boat.

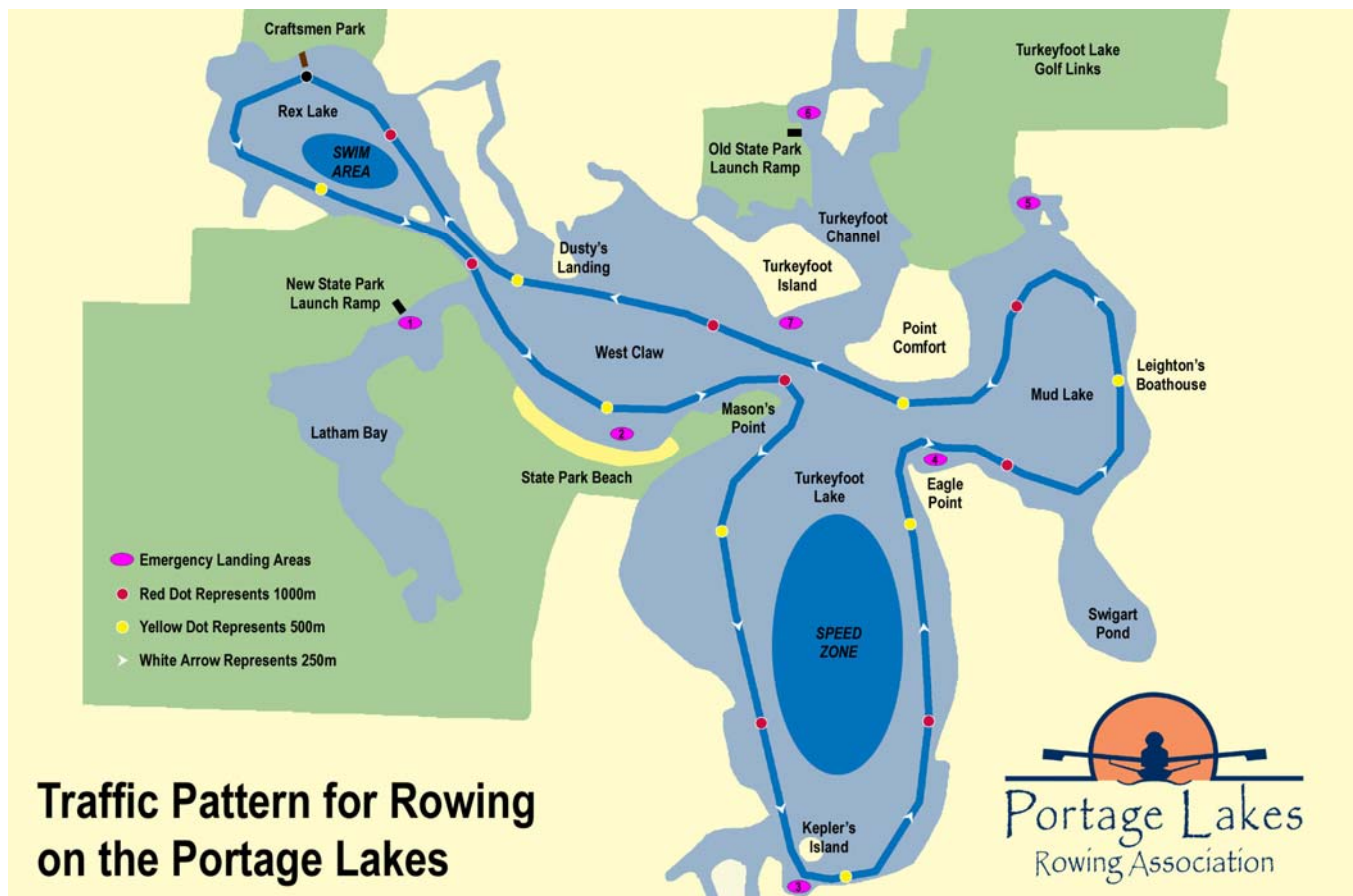
Boats should load with the rowers whose oars are on the lakeside getting in first, then those whose riggers are dockside second. The coxswain should load last.

Before shoving away, the coxswain should ensure that 1) all plugs are in, 2) the radio is in a dry bag snugly fitted around their neck, 3) that the radio works by testing communication with the launch driver, 4) the safety launch should be on the water or it can be tied to the dock if the launch driver has already started it once and is on board, 5) test that the cox box is working, and 6) count down from bow to ensure all rowers are ready.

## Traffic Flow & Illustration of the Portage Lakes

- Follow the rules of the road on the Portage Lakes – travel in a counter-clockwise direction, staying to the right. Imagine the lake as a highway, with an imaginary line down the center. Do not cross into the oncoming lane. Also, stay off of the imaginary "shoulder" on your right side, where it's very shallow.
- Stay alert for the following hazards:
  - Wakes: Alert your crew to stay relaxed as they row through a wake. Tell them which side it's coming from. If it is a significant wake or waves, drop out a pair of rowers to set the boat.
  - Debris: Steer around it. If you get close to a something floating in the water, tell the rowers on that side to “watch your oars.”
  - Fishing boats: Don't expect them to move. We share the lake with others, so please be considerate of them. But it is you who must get out of the way.
  - Sailboats: They have the right of way and are less able to maneuver than we are.
- To help the coaches, follow their instructions of where you should steer your shell. You have to work with the session manager to ensure that the safety launch maintains visual contact will all the shells at all times.
- To avoid collisions and confusion, remember to communicate often with the coach and other boats.
- We do row up Turkeyfoot Channel to West Reservoir on occasion, there are several tight turns that need to be made in the channel, and it is not part of our regular traffic pattern, so you will be less familiar with it. If you are not comfortable with your steering skills, tell the session manager and either a different route will be determined or a different coxswain will be found.

## Traffic Pattern for Rowing on the Portage Lakes



## **Steering**

Once you're away from the dock, the workout has started, and you're calling the shots (following the coach's instructions, of course). Your most important job on the water is to steer clear of any hazards, and to maintain as straight a course as possible.

- To steer: grasp the cords at your sides with both hands. Push your right hand forward to turn right. Push your left hand forward to turn left.
- It takes practice to learn how a boat will react to steering. Usually we all oversteer, and over-correct, as novice coxes. Remember that the faster a boat goes, the greater the effect of the rudder. In other words, at high speeds, a small steering correction is all that is needed. When the boat is going very slowly, you won't be able to steer with the rudder and will have to have the rowers adjust your direction by pulling harder.
- Ideally, you will steer only when the oars are in the water, not on the recovery. This means that you will turn a small amount in "pulses" with each stroke, rather than by holding one hand forward throughout the turn. Steering this way takes practice, but it will affect the set of the boat less. If a significant turn needs to be made, do not steer in pulses as that will have you turn more slowly. Also, novice coxes should wait to steer in pulses until they have several practices under their belt and are comfortable with the basics of steering and coxing.
- It is also possible to ask for more pressure from either ports or starboards to help get you around a corner. Remember to ask for equal pressure again when you are headed correctly.
- Many novice coxes also seem to dislike wearing the cox box headband. Please wear the headband to keep your hands free. Your hands need to be on your rudder strings, not holding your microphone.
- Warn the rowers when it's your steering which is causing the boat to go "off keel." They will appreciate knowing what's causing the change in the set of the boat.
- To steer a straight course, set a point. Look ahead of the boat and pick a target, such as a tall tree or other easily distinguishable feature. By keeping that point ahead of you, you will avoid carving serpentine down the lake. Always make sure you are aiming correctly before giving the command to row. At a standstill, you can adjust your line up by asking the bow or 2 seat to "touch it," which means to take a light stroke.

## **Warm-up**

As you begin the practice, it is important to let the rowers loosen up. Spin the boat to follow the traffic pattern and row away from the dock by fours at light pressure.

Warm-ups should be done by half of the crew at a time (bow four, stern four in an 8+ or bow pair, stern pair in a 4+). The warm-up for each group totals five minutes. It starts with hands only for 30 seconds, add in the back for the next 30 seconds, add in quarter slide for the next 30 seconds, add in half slide for 30 seconds, add in three quarter slide for 30 seconds, add in full slide for 30 seconds. This is now 3 minutes into the warm-up and you should focus the crew of maintaining proper stroke sequence and ratio for the next minute. With one minute to go you should have the crew do a power ten at a low rating and then paddle it out until five minutes is reached. Once one half of the boat completes the warm-up, repeat for the other half. For less experienced crews, the coxswain can eliminate the quarter slide and three quarter slide portion of the warm-up.

Shells are not allowed to leave visual contact with the safety launch without permission, and due to this, the first boat to launch may have to do their warm-up while circling Rex Lake while the last boat to launch may head directly for the channel to West Claw. Allow rowers to take off extra clothes and remind them to drink some water.

- When rowers are not rowing, remind them to set the boat for their teammates by keeping a steady upward pressure on the under side of the oar handle.
- If it's cold, you can modify the warm-up so that no one sits shivering for more than a few minutes. Also if wind or other conditions dictate you can modify the warm-up as needed.

## **Drills**

The coach may call for a series of drills during practice or they may communicate them before you launch. Listen carefully for his instructions. If you didn't hear or don't understand the drill, be sure to raise your hand and ask. You might also get some help from the stroke. If you do understand, be sure to wave your hand, nod your head, or otherwise acknowledge the fact to the coach. The coach may say, "on my command" when he announces a drill or the start of a workout piece. Listen carefully. Begin the drill immediately, and stay even with the other boats. In all drills, be sure the rowers do not rush the slide after a pause. And remind them of the required pressure frequently. In counting power 10's and 20's, make your diction crisp and sharp. In 20's and 30's, count by series of 10's.

Drills will not always be asked for depending on the interest of the rowers. Competition boats are more likely to do drills than novice members, so if you would like to avoid coxing a crew through drills, volunteer to cox a novice boat.

## **Turning Around**

Turning should usually be done in the same counter-clockwise direction as the traffic pattern. When giving the "weigh enough" command you can also ask for ports to "check it down" or "hold water" while starboards are feathered. This helps to start the turn.

The boat should be completely stopped and you can call on the stroke seat to give backing strokes and alternate with the bow seat to give forward strokes. This will help turn the boat basically in place. To turn more quickly you can have 6 and stroke to do the backing and bow and 3 to do the forward strokes. This whole time your left hand should be forward on the steering cable.

If you do not need to turn in place you can eliminate backing strokes and simply have some or all starboard rowers row while ports are sitting easy with their blades feathered.

## **Racing Starts**

In preparation for races the coach may add in a longer, more intense workout. Sometimes a "friendly" race will be a part of the session. You can help your crew get the most out of a tougher piece by encouraging them with a dynamic tone of voice. Psychology comes into play here: Remind the rowers of good technique and to "hang in there" by using positive self-talk. Remember to set the timer on the cox box if necessary. Keep track of time carefully if the piece is a timed piece. Keep track of distance if the piece is a distance piece. At regular intervals, tell the rowers what their stroke rating is and how much further they have to go. And listen to any suggestions from your stroke, since he or she will often know what corrections need to be made before you do.

- **RACING START:** The coach will begin a race when all coxes' hands are down. So, keep your hand in the air until your boat is pointed and all your rowers are ready in the three-quarter slide position. Then tell rowers your hand is down. You must let your rowers know before the start what the beginning stroke sequence will be. It will usually be: half (slide), 3/4, 3/4, full, full, 10 strokes at a high rate, then dropping to a slower rate (the "settle"). The rowers start on the coach's command

## **Landing**

Bringing the boat into the dock can be a nerve-racking event, even for experienced coxes. Don't hesitate to get some direction from your stroke to help. There are a few things to keep in mind.

- When you're 100 meters or further away from the dock, all rowers should be dropped out aside from the stern pair. They will bring you slowly towards the dock at no pressure for absolutely minimum boat speed. Be ready to ask one side or the other to add pressure or to go light.
- The stern pair should always be used when approaching the dock at those in the bow can no longer row once they have reached the dock. When docking, you only need to get four or six seats into the dock and those rowers can grab hold and walk the boat the rest of the way down the dock.
- The prevailing wind is out of the West, so it is easier to land on the left side of the dock so the wind will push you into the dock rather than pushing you away from it.

- If there are any obstacles on the dock that will interfere with your approach, notify the safety launch to clear them away and circle back for another attempt. For example if the fold down cleats were not folded down it is easy to get a rigger caught on them.
- Approach the dock slowly, but with some momentum, at about a 15-20° angle. At a point which you will recognize as you become more experienced, stop rowing and ask the rowers to lean away from the dock. This action will turn the boat parallel to the dock, and your momentum should carry you close enough for a perfect landing.
- If you are going in on the left side of the dock and the bow is going to hit the dock first, ask the stroke seat to check it down if a major adjustment is needed or simply drag their blade if only a minor adjustment is needed. If you are on that same course (bow going to hit first) but you do not have enough momentum, ask the seven seat to take a light stroke.
- If you are going in on the left side of the dock and the bow is pointed away from the dock first, ask the seven seat to check it down if a major adjustment is needed or simply drag their blade if only a minor adjustment is needed. If you are on that same course (bow away from the dock) but you do not have enough momentum, ask the stroke to take a light stroke.
- When approaching from the right side reverse the commands in the previous two steps.
- Tell the rowers whose oars are on the dock side to drop their handles to their oars don't hit the dock. They should also be told to be sure the concave side of the blade is facing the dock so as not to scrap the paint off.
- Always be conservative when dock, aim to have the shell parallel to the dock, but a couple feet away, aiming to have it a couple inches away leaves little margin for error. If there is wind, and you chose the proper side of the dock, it will push you in to the dock at the end.
- It is strongly recommended that unless you are very experienced at docking that someone should be on the dock to catch you as you land. The person on the dock has a better view of where the bow is headed and how close it is to the dock. If they are familiar with docking commands, allow them to direct the rowers.
- After docking, you get out of the boat first.
- The rowers whose riggers are dockside should exit first and the rowers whose riggers are lakeside last.
- To ensure the boat doesn't flip, no oars should be pulled in until everyone is standing on the dock.

### **Getting the Boat out of the Water**

Once everyone is on the dock, the rowers whose riggers are lakeside should take two oars off the dock, placing them away from the path that will be taken to the racks. Those whose riggers are dockside should stay with the boat so it doesn't move away from the dock. They should take out the bow and stern plugs.

The coxswain should direct the boat back to the same rack they took it from unless told otherwise by the session manager.

As with carrying the boat to the dock, the best alignment is not always with everyone standing near their seat. Make sure there is equal strength at both ends of the boat.

Take a minute to figure out the best way to get the boat back to the racks. This will depend on which rack the boat is located and whatever else is going on in the area.

Command everyone to get an inside grip or strong grip on the gunwales and have them take the boat up and overhead in one motion. If the boat is filled with water, it will be heavy and more assistance may be needed. Also, if filled with water you may want to tell the rowers to pause with the boat not fully overhead to let the water spill out into the lake and not onto them.

### **Getting the Boat onto the Racks**

The boats are all marked with yellow tape (green for Undaunted which has a yellow hull) to indicate where the boats should be placed on the racks. Use this to line up the boat before giving the command to walk it into the rack.

Boats only need to go 2-3 inches onto the rack, not slid all the way into the center.

Before dismissing the rowers, make sure they have put away all the oars, tied down the boat and wiped down the boat

- Once the boat is safely put away, check that the plugs have been removed, and put your radio and cox equipment back into the lockers, plugging the cox box in to the power source and putting the radio in its charging cradle.
- You must check carefully as the boat is put on the rack to see that there is no pressure on any riggers or the deck of the boat. Also check that both gunwales along the length of the boat are supported on the racks.
- Watch, too, that riggers on the boat above don't scratch your boat as it's moved onto the rack.

### **Conclusion**

Congratulations! You have just completed a short course in coxing at PLRA. Because this is just a quick summary, do ask the coaches and more experienced coxes to help you learn even more.

It's also helpful to ask your crew for comments about what worked and what didn't during your practice. As rowers, we all have pet peeves and favorite coxing styles. Think of the ways that certain coxes have helped you to row better.

We're all in this together, and if you solicit your crew's ideas, we'll all support each other through this reaming process.

And thanks for coxing. We all appreciate your effort.