

Coxing at Upton

Introduction

A good cox can make a major contribution to a crew's success, yet many clubs tend to devote nearly all their attention to instructing the rowers, and assume that coxes will find out for themselves how to do their job. These notes are designed to give coxes at Upton a good introduction to the various aspects of the art of coxing. It falls into six parts:

- 1 Steering
- 2 Commands on the water
- 3 Manoeuvring
- 4 Boat handling off the water
- 5 Coaching
- 6 Racing

None of the guidance here purports to be the last word on the subject. As with rowing, there are different views on the best way to cox, but if you can put these initial suggestions into practice you will quickly reach a good level of competence, and can then develop your own coxing style as you gain more experience.

Before you start, you will need to know what to wear in the boat. Particularly in winter, you should make sure that you are dressed warmly. It is always colder on the water than it is on dry land, and unlike the crew you don't have the benefit of exercise to keep you warm. Wear enough layers to keep the cold out, waterproof clothing if it is wet, and gloves and a hat if it is particularly cold. You must also wear a life-jacket at all times in the boat (and this must be the top layer, not worn underneath anything else).

1 Steering

How to steer

The single most important thing that a cox has to do is to steer the boat, which is done by pulling strings attached to a small rudder at the stern. Racing boats are very unmanoeuvrable, and steering them well is an art that can be perfected only with a good deal of practice.

As you sit in the cox's seat, you will have a rudder string to hold in each hand (actually, it is usually one continuous string that runs through a pulley in front of your feet). In order to turn the boat, you have to push the string forward (away from your body and towards your feet) on the side that you want to turn to. What is actually happening is that the stern of the boat is being pushed to the opposite side by the flow of water pushing against the rudder, thus swinging the bow in the direction that you want to go to; the boat actually pivots somewhere about the middle. The rudder only works at all when the boat is moving forward relative to the water; otherwise there is no flow to push against the rudder. Accordingly, you can't steer when you are drifting, nor can you steer the boat with the rudder when the crew is paddling it backwards – you

must hold it straight in these circumstances otherwise you risk breaking it because the pressure of the water may bend the rudder round too far.

The factor that makes steering difficult at first is that the rudder has a rather delayed effect. What you may find is that nothing at all happens for the first couple of strokes after you have applied the rudder. Similarly, once the boat starts to turn, it is likely to keep turning for a couple of strokes more even after you have straightened the rudder. This leads inexperienced coxes to steer a slalom course, constantly overcorrecting for each previous zig and zag. This means that you have to straighten the rudder a couple of strokes *before* you want the boat to stop turning in order to avoid this problem. With practice, however, this becomes easy to manage.

Other factors that make steering harder than it looks are the effects of the wind and the current, and also the fact that the crew may not always pull the boat along evenly so as to keep it moving in a straight line. With experience you will learn to take these in your stride, but it helps to be able to anticipate some of the problems before they arise. On a windy day, for example, you are likely to find awkward gusts as you pass through bridges, or come out from the shelter of a high bank or clump of trees. Also, steering upstream is more difficult than steering downstream, because the current tends to catch the bow of the boat and swing it round unless you keep heading dead straight into the stream.

Good coxes manage to steer where they want to go while using the rudder as little, and as gently, as possible. Violent or sudden movements of the rudder act as a brake, and they also knock the boat off balance, making it harder for the crew to row. One school of thought is that you should only use the rudder during the propulsive part of the stroke (while the oars are in the water) and straighten it during the recovery part of each stroke. However, an equally good, and simpler, alternative is to apply the rudder very gently and gradually, avoiding any sudden jerks that would upset the boat. With practice you will be able to do this by making continual tiny corrections to your course with the rudder rather than having to tug it madly every few strokes. This requires constant attention to where the boat is going at all times, and this eventually becomes second nature with experience. Keep the rudder strings tight, don't let them go and let the rudder flap about.

Where to steer

Some coxes think they have done well if they come off the water at the end of an outing without having actually hit anything. Apart from that, they are content to roam passively around the river, wherever the wind, current or crew happens to take them. However, good coxing requires much more than that.

A good cox is always thinking about exactly where the best course is, and steers actively to follow that course. In a race it is obvious what that means: the best course is the route that will get you from the start to the finish in the shortest time (without encroaching on your opponent's water). But you should be thinking in the same terms every time you go out on the river, because it is good practice and otherwise you won't be able to steer very well in a race.

The best course, whether in a race or in a practice outing, is not necessarily the shortest distance. You have to take account of other factors, such as the wind and stream. The stream usually runs faster in the middle of the river than nearer the bank, and tends towards the outside of bends, so if you are going downstream you should try to find where you will get most help from it. Conversely, when you are going upstream you should keep reasonably close to the bank to avoid

having to row against the stronger current. In either direction, you may also want to get protection from a headwind or crosswind, or avoid the rougher water that it may create, by steering closer to the bank. Weighing up these various factors requires judgement, but wherever you end up steering should be the result of your positive decision rather than mere accident.

Overriding all that, however, is the need to obey the rule of the river, which at Upton is to keep to the right (i.e. the opposite of the rule of the road). This means in particular that you must leave plenty of room for oncoming boats to pass on your left, and you should give cruisers and other similar craft as wide a berth as possible for safety reasons. If you are overtaking another boat that is going in the same direction you should pass it on the left, having made sure that it is safe to do so. If another boat is passing you, keep well in to the right bank and give it plenty of room.

A common mistake among novice coxes is to cut corners on bends. You should resist that temptation, and instead try to stay parallel to the bank in a smooth curve all the way round the bend.

Hazards

One basic problem with steering a racing boat is that you can't actually see where you are going! This is because you are sitting at the back of the boat and the crew is sitting directly in front of you and obscuring your view. This takes a bit of getting used to, and it is an obvious source of danger. The key thing you must try to do is not to allow any obstacle to get into this blind spot without having mentally registered it first and remembered where it is likely to be. Thus, as you come round a bend on to a straight, look out for other boats or driftwood and realise that, if you forget that they are there, the next time you see them will be only after you have hit them. If you are uncertain about what lies in front of you, it is better to steer slightly from side to side occasionally to find out whether your path is clear than to risk an accident.

Some obstacles are of course more serious than others. Hitting any other boat, whether a racing boat or any other kind, must be avoided at all costs, and you must stop the crew if there is any danger that this will happen. Driftwood, by contrast, cannot always be avoided and if it is small enough will cause no damage, but you should still try to steer round it if you can and stop if you are in danger of hitting a large piece. If the boat is going to miss it but the oars may hit it, you should warn the crew a couple of strokes before you reach it (shout something like 'Mind your blades, strokeside/bowside'). Once you get more confident in your steering you will find that you can often avoid driftwood without having to make major deviations from your course by steering so that the driftwood passes under the riggers, between the hull of the boat and the oars.

2 Commands on the water

The cox is in charge of the boat, and the crew should not do anything except in response to the cox's commands. When you are learning, a more experienced member of the crew may take over these commands for you, but you should take on that responsibility yourself (perhaps still assisted/prompted by stroke where necessary) as soon as you can.

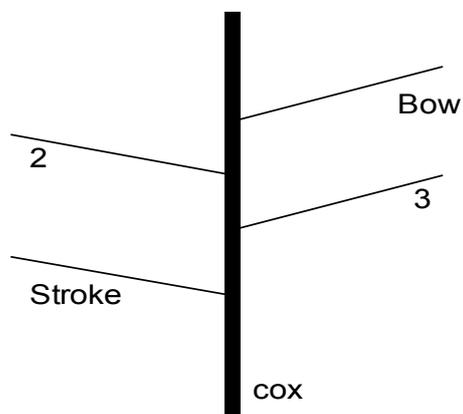
Commands must be given loudly and clearly so that everyone in the boat can hear them. For the bowman to be able to hear above the noise of the boat, this means shouting louder than you would initially think reasonable, at the risk of deafening stroke, and on a windy day, louder still. To get more volume without straining your voice, take a deep breath and expel more air when

you are shouting, rather than trying to force it from your throat. Spit out the consonants to give them emphasis, otherwise the crew will hear only noise rather than words. Try to project your voice above stroke's head rather than straight at him.

However, it is more a question of voice quality than sheer volume that will make your commands audible. The tone of your voice should be somewhere between shouting and singing, so that you vary the pitch of your voice according to the commands being given, in a way that the crew will recognise, even when the words are difficult to hear. Also, the commands should be given in a stylised, rhythmical way, timed to correspond to elements of the stroke cycle, as illustrated in the list of common commands below.

If all this sounds dauntingly incomprehensible, don't worry – you will soon get the hang of it. Listen to other experienced coxes and pick up how they do it.

Usually your commands will be addressed to the whole crew, but sometimes they will apply only to individuals or groups, and you need to know how to address them. In a conventionally-rigged four, the different members of the crew are referred to as follows.



Bow and 2 together are referred to as 'Bow pair', while 3 and Stroke are 'Stern pair'.

Bow and 3 together are referred to as 'Bow side', while 2 and Stroke are 'Stroke side'.

The same approach applies to an eight, except that the crew members between bow and stroke are numbered from 2 to 7, and it is sometimes also necessary to refer to 'Bow four' (Bow, 2, 3 and 4) and 'Stern four' (5, 6, 7 and Stroke).

Some common commands follow:

(a) Straightening the boat before you start off

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Touch her, bow' (or 2/bow side/stroke side)	The crew member(s) addressed takes one light stroke. You don't need to say 'Easy' to stop them.
'Two (or however many) strokes, bow' (or 2/bow side/stroke side)	Those addressed take the stated number of light strokes. Again, you don't need to say 'Easy'.
'Paddle on, bow' (or 2/bow side/stroke side)	The crew member(s) addressed paddles light continuously until you shout 'Easy'.

You should always get the boat pointing in the right direction before you start – having to apply the rudder as soon as you set off is bad coxing. You should carry out such manoeuvres so far as possible by getting more people to take fewer strokes, e.g. rather than having bow take 6 strokes, get bow side to take 3.

(b) Starting off

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Whole crew, backstops'	The crew take up the backstops position, i.e with their legs straight and the oars half covered at an angle in the water, and with the boat level.
(Once they are in position and the boat is level) 'Light'.	This tells the crew that they are to go off paddling light.
'Ready'	This gives an opportunity for anyone to shout 'no' if they are not ready, in which case wait till they are and then start the cycle of commands again.
'Go'	The crew starts rowing.

The last three commands 'light, ready, go' should be given with equal gaps of no more than a second or two between each of the words. This makes it easy for the crew to start off together.

(c) Stopping

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Next stroke' Say it in a clipped manner, with the 'Next' in time with the oars going in the water and the 'stroke' in time with them coming out.	Warns the crew that something is about to happen. It is not essential, so if you want to stop straight away, simply do without it. But make sure that the operative command follows <i>on</i> the very next stroke. It is pointless to say 'next stroke' if you don't really mean it.
'Easy all' Again, say it in time with the oars going in and coming out of the water, but this time stretch the first word to fill the gap: 'Eeeeeasy-all'.	The crew stops and balances the boat with the blades off the water for a few seconds, until you say
'Drop'	The crew lowers the blades on to the water.

Note that the boat's momentum will carry it on for two or three lengths beyond the point at which you gave the command to stop – and even more with a heavy crew, in a tail wind, or if you have been going fast – so take this into account in deciding where you want the boat to come to rest.

Look behind you before you stop, to make sure that there isn't another boat coming up behind you which may run into you. If there is, pull well into the side before you stop.

In an emergency, to avoid hitting something, you might need to stop in a hurry. Forget about all the 'next stroke' business and timing the commands with the stroke cycle – just shout 'Easy all' as loudly as you can to engender the appropriate degree of urgency in the crew and then shout 'Hold the boat', at which the crew will bury their blades in the water and push against them so as to put the brakes on as hard as they can. (Don't do this too often; it's bad for the crew's nerves.)

(d) Changing pace while rowing

There are three basic speeds that most crews use on a training outing:

- paddling light (not much effort, and a low rating)
- half pressure (a bit more work, and a slightly higher rating)

- paddling firm (full pressure, and a higher rating again)

The crew changes from one to another only on the cox's commands. Let's deal first with the commands for going faster, from light to half pressure, or firm:

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Next stroke' Same rhythm as before, timed to correspond to the oars going in and out of the water.	Warns the crew that something is about to happen and therefore captures their attention.
'Half Pressure' Put emphasis on the first word or 'Paddle Firm' Put emphasis on the first syllable of the first word, and also on the second word. The different intonation of these two phrases helps the crew to tell them apart even if they can't hear the words clearly. For both commands, use the same rhythm as before, i.e. in time with the oars going in and out of the water.	The crew will change to half pressure or firm at the beginning of the stroke that follows this command. An optional extra is to say 'Go' during the recovery of the stroke, immediately before the change of pace is to be made. However this is overkill, if you have already said 'Next stroke'. (For more alert crews you could dispense with the 'Next stroke' formulation and use 'go' instead, but whichever you decide on should be used consistently otherwise you will only cause confusion.)

Commands for going slower are simpler, although you will need to shout louder because a faster boat is noisier. If you are going down to light, you don't need the 'next stroke' bit, just shout

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Paddle light' (Same rhythm as before) At the end of a piece of hard rowing, you can achieve the same effect by shouting 'Wind it down', 'Unwind' or something similar.	Crew takes the pressure off and takes the rating down correspondingly.

If you are going from firm to half pressure, keep in the 'next stroke' bit to make sure the crew doesn't assume you are going down to light.

3 Manoeuvring

There are a number of common manoeuvres that are quite difficult to execute at first, and the notes that follow offer some hints. As with everything else, however, the real secret is practice.

(a) Leaving the landing stage

Our launching position in the marina is quite an awkward one, because it is necessary to execute a right angle turn as soon as you leave the landing stage. What you need to do is get the stroke side members of the crew to push off from the shore with their oars as far as possible, and then get 2 to paddle on gently to bring you round. The problem is that 2, by paddling on, brings the stern of the boat back in towards the land, so you may need to get bow to take one or two gentle strokes as well to take the boat further from the shore, but without going so far that you get tangled up with the boats moored on the other side. It gets easier with practice.

(b) Leaving the marina

The main danger is one of collision with other boats turning in to the marina or passing the entrance. You must approach the entrance slowly, and sound the horn and ‘easy’ (stop) as you come up to the bridge so that you drift gently out into the river, being ready to take any avoiding action if another boat appears. You will find that the current in the river swings the bows of the boat downstream, and if there is a strong current you should turn left and go downstream rather than try to fight against that current, and then turn round a short distance down the river if you want to go upstream. If the current is not too strong and you want to go upstream, get stroke side to pull the boat round once you are clear of the marina entrance. If you find that that is taking you too far across the river, get bow side to back down alternately (as in a normal turn – see (c) below).

(c) Turning round

The most efficient way to turn round is to have the crew members on each side of the boat paddling on and backing down alternately. Having stopped the boat, give the following commands:

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
‘Backstops to turn’	Crew sits at backstops
‘Stroke* side backing’	Tells them which way round they are to turn
‘Ready’	Allows the opportunity to say they’re not ready
‘Go’	Stroke side backs down and bow side paddles on alternately until you say ‘Easy’.

* or bow side, if you want to turn in the other direction. It will usually be stroke side at Upton, because the rule of the river is to keep to the right, so it is natural to turn round to the left. The choice of which way to turn round can also be influenced by a couple of other factors:

- how much room you have – the boat will not turn on the spot, but will move forward because those paddling on will move it further than those backing down. So you need to have enough space on the side that you are turning towards. (If you run out of space, just tell those paddling on to easy until you have enough space again.)
- where you are in relation to the fastest current. You should use the stream to help you get round, by turning the bows into the middle of the river if you are turning to go downstream, and turning them away from the middle of the river if you are turning to go upstream. At Upton, this means starting the turn from near the right hand bank when you are turning to go downstream and starting the turn from the middle of the river when you are turning to go upstream.

You should also consider whether the wind or current might carry you on to any obstacles (such as moored boats, the pier of a bridge or a weir) while you are turning, and get well upstream of them before you start the turn.

One other way to make the turn more efficient is to turn the boat as far as you can before it comes to rest (assuming you know that you are going to turn round next). As soon as you say ‘drop’, after the easy, apply the rudder to start the turn and also tell the people on that side (i.e.

usually stroke side) to dig their oars in the water by saying ‘hold her up [stroke] side’. This will take you at least part of the way round for little effort.

(d) re-entering the marina

Essentially, this is the reverse of leaving the marina (see above) and if there is no significant current or wind, it is quite easy. You should simply stop opposite the entrance, turn the boat through 90 degrees (see ‘turning round above’) so that you are facing into the marina, look to see that it is clear, sound the horn and paddle slowly in. However, it is more tricky when the current is strong. The current will carry the whole boat sideways relative to the entrance, which makes it difficult to judge the steering. What you need to do, therefore, is to stop a little upstream of the marina entrance, to allow for the effect of the current pulling you downstream while you are turning the boat. An additional problem arises while you are moving off the river and into the marina, because the current catches the stern of the boat once the bows start to come out of the stream which has the effect of turning the bows to face slightly upstream. To counteract this you will need to use the rudder and may also have to tell the stroke side members to pull the boat round (say ‘harder on, stroke side’), and if necessary tell bow side to easy.

(e) approaching the landing stage

Because of the particular configuration of the landing stage at Upton, you have to paddle slowly into the marina and stop a couple of lengths short of the slipway, then get bow to paddle on to bring the bows round (and perhaps get stroke to hold the boat or back down to assist the turn). Once you are aiming at the landing at a shallow angle you can use stern pair to paddle on very gently to bring you in. Beware of shallow water, and stay well off the bank if you think there is danger of running aground. The whole manoeuvre should be done very slowly.

Approaching landing stages on other rivers is usually easier. Where possible you should approach upstream, and aim for the *near* end of the stage at a shallow angle (say 30°). Give the commands to easy and drop about three lengths away, and then use the rudder to turn the bows away from the landing stage, which has the effect of bringing the boat parallel to the stage with the stern at the near end of the stage. If necessary, get the members whose oars are on the far side from the stage to hold the boat so as to assist with the turn and help to bring the boat to rest. Do the whole thing slowly; ideally, you should have just enough momentum to reach the stage and no more.

(f) Attaching to a stakeboat

Many regattas have a ‘free’ start, where the crews simply line up in the middle of the river and the starter gets them level to his own satisfaction. However, more sophisticated regattas use ‘stakeboats’ from which the stern of each boat in the race is held to get the crews level.

The easiest way to get attached to the stakeboat is to paddle on to the course and stop just below the stakeboat, turn the boat to straighten it up and then get stern pair to paddle gently backwards, using their arms only, on to the stakeboat. Remember that you can’t use the rudder to steer when you are going backwards – you must hold it straight to prevent damage – so the crew must steer it by stern pair varying the pressure as they back down or by one or other of the bow pair holding the boat as necessary to swing it back in the right direction.

Once you are attached to the stakeboat you must keep the boat pointing in the right direction by getting bow or 2 to take gentle strokes as necessary. Their strokes must be gentle (using arms only), otherwise they will pull the boat out of the stakeboat person's grasp and you will have to do the whole thing again.

4 Boat handling off the water

As well as being in charge of the boat on the water, the cox is responsible for it from the moment it is taken off the rack in the boathouse. The main commands that tell the crew what to do are set out below.

(a) Taking the boat out of the boathouse

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Hands on'	Crew take up position, ready to lift the boat
'Ready'	Allows the opportunity to say they're not ready
'Lift'	Crew lifts the boat off the rack.

From here the crew will carry the boat out of the boathouse, and it is your job to stop them banging into anything with the bow, the stern or the riggers. It is probably best to hold on to the bow as they walk out, from where you can see what obstacles they might be running into. Shout 'Mind the riggers' (or whatever) if they are in danger of hitting them.

Exactly how they carry the boat out depends, among other things, on which rack it was on. If it comes from a high rack, they will probably carry it above their heads and tilt it to one side to avoid hitting riggers on other boats – but watch for the riggers on the higher side hitting the top of the doorway. From a lower rack they will lift it to waist height, and if they all started on one side half of them will need to get under the boat to take up position on the other side, and then they will need to rotate the boat through 90° so that the riggers clear the boats on the other racks. To achieve all this, say:

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Stroke side holding, bow side under' (or vice versa)	The relevant side ducks under the boat and holds the other side
'On the half-turn – lift'	The boat is rotated, and the crew walks out as before. Once they are clear of the door, say
'Level off'	The crew rotates the boat back to its original position.

(b) Carrying the boat

The boat can be carried at three heights – above heads, at shoulder height, or at waist height. To get from one to another, use these commands:

From waists (with boat upside down and crew on both sides) to above heads

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Above heads'	Crew gets ready to lift
'Ready'	Allows the opportunity to say they're not ready
'Lift'	Crew lifts boat above heads and steps under it

From above heads to waists (this is done in two stages, first moving it down to shoulders)

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Out to shoulders ...'	Crew gets ready to move out, opposite their own riggers
'Go'	Crew splits to shoulders
'Down to sides'	Crew lowers the boat to waist height

(c) Putting the boat on the water

After the crew has carried the boat at waist height to the launching point, they need to turn it the right way up, then all get on one side before putting it in the water. Use these commands:

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Turning it over, towards the river'	Tells them which way it is to be rotated
'Go'	Crew turns boat the right way up
'Stroke side holding, bow side under' (or vice versa)	The side nearest the river ducks under the boat so that they are all holding it from the uphill side
'Walk out/find the edge'	The crew walks forward until they reach deep enough water to launch the boat and launches it. Make sure they are far enough out to avoid grounding the boat

(d) Getting in the boat

As soon as the boat is launched, you should hold one of the riggers (probably stroke's), keeping the boat level and stopping it touching the bank or the bottom while the crew get the oars. The oars on the near side (usually stroke side) are put in their gates first, then you say

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Stroke side holding, bow side in'	Stroke side hold their own riggers, bow side get in and put their oars in the gates
'Stroke side in'	Stroke side get in

You get in last, and then ask the crew to push off.

(d) Getting out of the boat

This is the reverse procedure. When you have arrived at the landing stage, you should get out first if you can, but at Upton this is not always possible because of the depth of the water at that end of the stage. The crew members on the land side (usually bow side) get out and hold their riggers (say 'Bow side out, and hold') while stroke side take their oars out, then say 'Bow side out'. Stroke side then take their oars out of the gates.

(e) Lifting the boat out of the water

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Hands on'	Crew take up position, ready to lift the boat
'To waists'	Tells them it is to be lifted to waist height
'Ready'	Allows the opportunity to say they're not ready
'Lift'	Crew lifts the boat out of the water and steps back

The boat is then turned over in the reverse of the way described before, first getting one side to go under the boat to the other side, then rolling it over in accordance with your commands. More skilled crews can alternatively get there by swinging the boat above their heads and then splitting to sides. Say

<i>Command</i>	<i>Effect</i>
'Above heads'	Crew get ready to lift the boat
'on three ... 1, 2, 3'	Crew swings the boat and lifts it as you say '3'.
'Out to shoulders ...'	Crew gets ready to move out, opposite their own riggers
'Go'	Crew splits to shoulders
'Down to sides'	Crew lowers the boat to waist height

(f) Putting the boat back in the boathouse

Again, this is simply the reverse of the procedure for lifting it out – see (a) above.

5 Coaching

One of the cox's main contributions is to help the crew row better by coaching them as they go along. This obviously depends on a knowledge of rowing that only develops through experience, but even a novice cox can begin to make a contribution by getting the crew to focus on particular parts of the stroke that are causing problems. A few suggested coaching calls designed to address various faults are listed below.

<i>Fault</i>	<i>Call</i>
Timing on the catch (beginning of the stroke) is generally bad	'One catch' or 'One beginning'
If a particular crew member is consistently early or late on the catch	'You're early/late, bow/2/3'
The crew is rushing the recovery part of the stroke	'Control the slide' or 'Steady' or 'Let it run'
The finish of the stroke is weak or not together	'Send it off the finish' or 'Send it <i>there</i> ' (last word timed to match the finish)
The boat is not level at the finish of the stroke	'Send it away level' or 'Draw the finishes up together'
The boat rocks from side to side on the recovery	'Balance it on the recovery' or 'Hands coming out level'

The above is just to get you started, to get you over the initial problem of simply not knowing what to say. However, don't just learn these up and repeat them continuously parrot-fashion, otherwise you will turn into vocal wallpaper as far as the crew is concerned. When you have nothing to say, say nothing – that way the crew will pay more attention to you when you do say something.

The best way of developing your abilities further as a coaching cox, is to develop a rapport with stroke so that you can pass on his or her concerns to the rest of the crew. Even if you can't yet detect particular faults confidently on your own, stroke will know if the crew is rushing, out of time or whatever and will appreciate it if you make calls, prompted by him or her, that aim to correct these faults.

Apart from that, whenever your crew is being coached by someone else, listen carefully to what the coach says so that you can then remind the crew of these points later, when the coach isn't there. In effect, you should try to become the coach's understudy and assistant. Also, listen to other coxes that you hear in other crews and see what you can learn from them.

6 Racing

The objective of all this effort is winning races, and the cox's role in this is as important as that of the rest of the crew. The cox can probably lose a race more readily than anyone else in the crew (through bad steering), but can also make a very positive contribution to winning, by getting the crew to row at its best.

Preparation for the race

The single most important thing you must do when coxing in a race is to steer the best course you can. Before you can do that, however, you will have to learn all about the course you will be racing over.

When you arrive at a regatta, find out what information about the course has been provided by the organisers and study it carefully. There may be a map of the course and/or a set of local rules telling you where to go and warning you of any hazards to avoid. There may also be a 'circulation pattern' posted, which tells you how to get to the start and get back from the finish without impeding racing crews on the course. If anything is unclear, ask until you have gained a full understanding of where to go.

Having absorbed this information, you should go and study the course itself, if possible walking its whole length along the towpath. This will allow you to see details such as:

- How crews are marshalled at the start, and how they are brought on to the start line
- Whether there are buoys marking out the course, and where you have to steer in relation to them. (Note that both the hull of the boat *and the oars* must pass on the appropriate side of each buoy.)
- Where the current seems to be running fastest
- What landmarks there are along the course which will let you tell the crew where they are during the race

- Exactly where the finishing line is (It has been known for coxes to lose a race by stopping the crew before the line)

Having done all this, you will then be in a position to plan the course that you will steer during the race, and in particular what line you will take round any bends. This will also depend on which lane you are drawn in. Your task is to steer the course that will get you to the finish line fastest but without encroaching on your opponents' proper course and thereby risking disqualification. If you are in doubt as to where you should steer, discuss it with other members of the crew before the race.

Getting to the start

Get your crew on the water in good time so that you can get to the start comfortably without any panic. There may well be boats going all over the place, so proceed with care, but also try to find some clear stretches where the crew can warm up properly by some half pressure and firm pieces. If you are able to, go at least a couple of hundred metres beyond the start, so that you can turn round and do one or two practice starts before the race (it is best to do these in the same direction as you will be racing). Then wait until the marshals call you on to the start. At this point you should remind the crew to check their gates and stretchers to make sure all the screws are tight.

It is natural to be nervous before a race, especially if you haven't raced much before. The best antidote is simply to focus on the essentials of the job in hand. Your particular task at this stage is to bring the boat on to the start line smoothly and efficiently, so think out each manoeuvre that is required and give the necessary commands as confidently as you can. Getting on to the start without fuss is a good way of settling not just your own nerves but also those of the crew.

Unless it is a stakeboat start, the starter will want you to paddle gently on to the start, on the right station, and not so close to your opponents that there is the risk of a clash. Come up to the line slowly and follow the starter's instructions – he will usually ask one or other crew for light touches from bow pair to get the boats level. Your job at this point is to make sure that the boat remains straight, by using the rudder, by getting bow or 2 to take a stroke, or by getting 3 or stroke to hold the boat or back down.

When you are lined up, hold your hand up until the crew is ready, i.e. they are sitting forward and the boat is straight and level, then put your hand down. Put it up again if you get blown significantly off course, but don't keep putting it up without good reason, otherwise you will be sitting there for a long time, which is undesirable. Technically, once you are under starter's orders, putting your hand up does not prevent the race being started, so you should be always be ready to go. However, the starter is there to provide a fair start, so he unlikely to start you if you make it clear that you are not ready. Once he is satisfied, he will say 'Attention!' and then 'Go!' and the race is under way.

The race itself

At this point, some inexperienced and nervous coxes relieve their tension by indulging in a frenzy of excited and incoherent shouting. This does little to help the crew, and a cooler head is needed because you have two immediate tasks to attend to. The first is to make sure the boat goes off straight, because a racing start is the most likely occasion that one side will pull the other round, so you may have an immediate need for gentle course correction with the rudder –

but it must be gentle because otherwise you will knock the boat off balance just when the crew most needs the boat to be stable.

The second, equally important task is to guide the crew through whatever start sequence they have planned, up to the stride. This will vary from crew to crew, but you could say something along these lines during the first dozen strokes or so:

<i>Stroke</i>	<i>During stroke</i>	<i>During recovery</i>
1	Squee-eeze	
2		Pick it up
3		Pick it up
4		
5	Build it	
6	Build it	
7	Build it	
8	Reach longer	
9	Reach longer	
10		
11	STRIDE	
12		Let it run, [etc.]

This is just an example, and you should work out with the crew in practice starts what actual words to say. Remember you are not trying to wind them up – they will be wound up enough already – but to make sure that they focus on the key elements of their start sequence, and you should deliver it in a firm but calm tone of voice.

After the stride, the crew will settle into the main work of the race. Your main duty is now to steer them over the quickest route to the finish. Having planned your course in advance, be sure to stick to it now, and don't be put off by whatever your opponent may do. Their cox may try to intimidate you by crowding you in the hope that you can be pushed across the river; so long as you are on your proper course, don't move over. However, if the umpire tells you to steer away to one side or the other, do so. (He will raise a white flag and say something like 'Upton, move to port (stroke side) / starboard (bow side)').

As well as steering, however, you can also help the crew a great deal by what you say. This falls into several different categories, to be mixed together as appropriate:

- **Information:** Tell them from time to time where they are along the course, particularly in the second half of the race and as they approach the finish. (Say things like, 'Coming up to the bend', '300 metres to go', 'last 20 strokes' or whatever.) Make sure this is accurate – the crew won't like it much if at the end of the 'last 20 strokes' you say 'another 20 to go'. Also tell them where they are in relation to the opposition, and whether they are gaining on them. (Say things like, 'one length up', 'half a length down', 'we're pulling back' etc.). You must tell the truth about this. It may seem like encouragement to tell the crew that they're only a length down and gaining, but it only destroys your credibility if the crew becomes aware that it isn't true, as they soon will. Having said that, you should obviously be as encouraging as

circumstances allow, and if the truth is too ghastly to reveal, focus what you say on the crew's own rowing – don't keep shouting 'You're five lengths down and dropping back further'.

- **Tactical instructions:** The crew may have a preconceived race plan that you need to implement, such as putting in a burst round a particular bend, building to the finish, or whatever. (Say things like, 'Ten on the legs, next stroke, GO!', or 'Let's take it home, building to the finish, NOW!') Alternatively, stroke may decide to lift the rating in response to a challenge from the opposition, and it will be your job to pass this on to the rest of the crew when he or she tells you to. (Say things like 'Rating going up 2, next stroke, GO!'.) Some coxes spend a large proportion of their time during races counting out loud from 1 to 10. However, the benefit of this quickly wears off if it is overdone. It may be worth doing once or twice in a race during a burst, but even then it is not essential to shout the number of every single stroke. Also, never get into the teens or above – go back to 1 again if you must. There is something deeply depressing about rowing along while your cox intones '22, 23, 24'.
- **Coaching calls:** Coaching calls are just as important, if not moreso, during races as they are in training outings. The cox can help the crew go faster by drawing their attention to faults as they develop, as discussed in section 5 above.
- **Encouragement:** This is self-explanatory. As the crew tires, you can help to spur them on by calling for extra effort in a focussed way. (Say things like '*Drive* with the legs', '*Accelerate* through the water', '*Send* the puddles away') This should be combined with encouraging messages about how far there is to go, catching the opposition, etc.

As with everything else, with experience you will develop your own style of mixing the above into the most effective blend. Don't feel that you have to shout all the time throughout the race; what you say will be more effective if it is well chosen and well timed. And don't let it distract you from the primary requirement to steer your chosen course.