SPRING CLEAN UP
By Marlene Royle

Spring is here; college racing now shifts into high gear and clubs return to the water to get ready for the sprint season. Now is the time to get back to some fundamentals of bladework. Rowers work hard to make their boats go faster and being a successful competitor takes the right combination of fitness, skill, and motivation. Every inch of boat runs counts when you want to cross the finish line ahead of the shell in the next lane.

Most rowers agree that getting the blade out of the water cleanly is an important part of the stroke cycle. It is. If we look at the diagram of the analysis of a competition rowing boat on page 49 of *Be a Coach*: *FISA Coaching Development Program Handbook-Level 1,* we will see that the velocity of the boat is increasing from approximately the first third of the drive until the mid-point of the recovery; noting, "a good crew has less variation from the average velocity while the characteristic of the curve does not vary." The acceleration curve shows the boat increasing just after the entry, rising until the final third of the drive then tapering off through the release. After the release there is a second slight rise in acceleration in the first half of the recovery, then it drops until the next entry. A clean release from the water will facilitate maintaining the velocity of the hull through the mid-point of the recovery and gives you the benefit of the second minor rise in acceleration during the first half of the recovery. Essentially, you preserve your speed and are able to stay closer to your average velocity within the stroke cycle. If two crews have equal power on the drive, the crew that does not lose speed on the recovery travels faster and more efficiently. Getting caught at the release is a major interruption of flow in the stroke cycle, mastering this technical element deserves priority attention.

Here is one presentation of a problematic sculling release. The blades are too deep in the water. As the sculler's hands approach the body the wrists bend, forearms drop, and hands rotate the handle to feather the blade. But since the handle height has not changed the blade is feathered while it is still in the water. It gets stuck in turbulence, throws water, and some momentum is lost. Another presentation is the sculler pulling the handles too far through the plane of the body, staying in the water too long without any pressure of the water on the blade, and the blade is feathered under the water.

First improve blade depth. To get a sense of where the blade rests naturally, sit at the release, blades squared, and hold the oar using the thumb only on the end of the handle. By keeping contact against the oarlocks, you have control of the handle. Allow the blade to rest where it wants to in the water. Then, lightly place your fingers on the blade without disturbing the height in the water. Do a drill called *rowing in circles*. With one blade feathered on the water and the boat balanced, row with one oar in a circle. The advantage of this simple drill is that you are able to watch what the blade is doing during the stroke. Accomplish the right action in the water and your inboard handle levels will

be correct. Keep the top edge of the blade level with the surface of the water so you have a reference point for where the blade level should be.

To practice just the exit of the blades, use the *release guide drill*. Sit at the release position. Square the blades in the water. Stabilize the boat by sitting evenly on the seat, keeping pressure into the pins, and holding the hands level. Bob the oarhandles up and down enough to let the lower edge of the blade clear the surface of the water. Then return. Move your oarhandles simultaneously and notice the distance you must press down to release from the water. Use this distance as a guide for changing the handle height at the release during rowing. Do this for five minutes daily.

To achieve a clean and silent release of the blade from the water the *delayed feather drill* is a classic. Row for segments of 20 strokes at a time, when you extract the blade from the water, emphasize a square blade release before feathering. The point of the drill is to clear the lower edge of the blade to make sure that you are out of the water before feathering. This must be accomplished by pressing the handles down before the hands change the direction of travel and move away from the body.

Feet-out rowing helps you feel the correct release point of the blade from the water and teaches you to preserve the inertia of the drive into the recovery. Focus on achieving a sense of letting go at the release by learning correct timing. Remove your feet from the boat shoes and place them on the top of the shoes. Enforce good posture throughout the stroke; pay special attention to staying tall over the seat at the release. Allow your core strength to provide support into the oarlock, keep the head up and shoulders still. Rowing with firm pressure keep your feet out of the shoes and maintain contact with the collar into the oarlock. Coordinate the release with the completion of the leg drive in order to keep the body weight behind the handles and transition smoothly into the recovery. You will feel when you need to take the blades out of the water. Late execution of the release and change in oarhandle direction will allow the body weight to collapse into the bow and the feet will come off the shoes. Spend 10 to 15 minutes rowing feet-out two to three times per week until you integrate the tempo.

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