

TAKING THE WATER

By Marlene Royle

The catch is a defining moment in every stroke. It is an instance that each sculler and rower must go through to establish the quality of the power phase of the stroke. It is a transition point, a link between the recovery and the drive. In this article we will review teachings about the act of taking the water from some of rowing's classic texts and contemporary coaches aiming to improve how we instruct our athletes and continue refining our own athletic boat moving skills. Gilbert Bourne in the *Textbook of Oarsmanship*, originally published in 1925, writes, "The oarsman should have a clear conception of what is required of him when he makes his effort. He should understand, and be quite sure that he does understand, that he is not so much required to set water in motion and shovel it along past the side of the boat, as to stick the blade of his oar as firmly as he can into a given spot in the water and to lift the boat as far and as quickly as possible past that spot. His attention must be concentrated on moving the boat, not stirring up the water."

Brian Richardson's chapter in *Rowing Faster* is devoted to the catch. "The catch occurs from the moment the blade enters the water until the blade is completely covered, or locked, into the water. The stroke cycle should be continuous so that the catch should be a smooth transition from relaxed recovery to absolute power." He continues, "Because the catch is the most difficult part of the stroke cycle, coaches must do two things. First, they must rig the boat correctly. Second, they must coach the athletes to eliminate as many faults as possible before getting to the catch position. By learning the correct sequence through the recovery phase the athletes will be in the proper posture for the catch, making the catch less complicated." The value of spending time perfecting the recovery phase is that it creates stability in the hull from which the rower can then work. It has become apparent in my coaching over the years that teaching the correct phases of the recovery sequence and stroke rhythm are preconditions to focusing on the catch. The sculler must clearly understand the tempo differences between the first half of the recovery when the hands are carried through the release establishing the body preparation and the second half of the recovery when the seat is moving on the slide sensitive to the run of the boat.

Rowing Rudern, The GDR text of Oarsmanship states, "The faster the boat speed, the faster the entry must be." The following illustration is used to emphasize the importance of beginning the stroke correctly. That it is not sufficient for the entry simply to be quick and vertical but that the horizontal pressure that follows immediately is just as important, "...using the example of a racing single with an average speed of 4.40 m/sec. In this case, precise measurement showed that at a stroke frequency of 36, oarsman A needed 0.031 seconds for entry, from the first contact with the water to full immersion of the blade, while oarsman B needed 0.047 seconds and oarsman C needed 0.061 seconds. If we assume that this difference remained the same over 200 strokes, A would gain an advantage of 6.0 seconds over C in relation to faster entry." *Rudern* continues to describe

if the beginning of the entry is too slow water will spray towards the bow, behind the back of the blades and that the crucial prerequisite for fast entry is a late and quick squaring of the blades. Simultaneous with the squaring, the blades should be brought close to the water so as to enter by the shortest route possible. Richard Burnell in *The Complete Sculler* suggests that the indicators to watch for are the blades at the moment of entry and the stern of the boat. Burnell describes, "If the blades are moving too slowly they will create 'back-splash', towards the bows. If they are moving too fast they will create splash towards the stern. If they are moving at just the right speed, they will create exactly the same splash as if you drop them squarely in the water, when the boat is stationary- just a few drops both front and back surfaces."

Gordon Hamilton's article, *Sculling and Sweeping with Ease*, describes the recovery and moving into the catch in a way that is practical and reminds us how important it is to keep lateral pressure into the pin during all phases of the stroke especially as we try for more ease and less work at the transition points of the drive to the recovery, the recovery to the drive, and during the drive. Hamilton advises on the recovery to let the arms swing out easily and follow the energy of the drive while getting early body angle. Then, to relax the belly and allow the knees to come up after your hands have passed over them. The former U.S. national team lightweight sculling coach continues, "Begin to gently draw the shell under you from your ankles, not the toes or the top of your feet. Quietly pre-stretch your lats and keep firm pressure against the pin. If the boat is slightly off balance, continue to keep equal pressure on both handles and the buttons firmly against the pin and your weight forward and over the center of the boat (don't attempt to correct this by raising one or the other handles). Stabilize the boat; do not attempt to "balance" the boat. Make every effort to have your handles as close to the same plane as possible and keep them in this relative position! The stability of your hands will not only stabilize your shell, but will also stabilize your own body."

In his section about the catch, Hamilton, paints a clear picture of how to be effective and on time, "The Catch: This is a very subtle activity. In keeping with the idea of always applying pressure on the pin in the direction of the blade, do not make the catch by swinging your hands "up and away". This will pull you off the pin, however slightly, and cause you to be unstable at a critical time. You should think of pushing back and downward on the pin toward the blade. This will put you in the water without losing connection to the pin. Squaring the blades as the hands pass over your ankles, as the blade moves down towards the water, rotate your elbows down slightly. This rotation helps to isolate the lats from the biceps and shoulders. As you push down and backward on the pin, keep pressure on both pins with your thumbs, and your chest. Let your hands follow the natural trajectory of the handles until the water stops them when the blades make their entry. Do not stop the handles with your hands (or your legs). Many scullers, in an effort to be "Light at the Catch", lose firm pressure of the button against the oarlock and therefore their stability precisely at the point of the boat's least stability. Keep on the pin! Continue drawing the shell from your ankles until the blades are in the water...Draw

the shell under you until the last impossible moment! Do not interfere with this process; don't impose yourself on the catch or transition to the drive.”

Jim Dietz wrote another article that I feel is a jewel when it comes to describing the entry called, *Sculling: The Catch*. Much in the way that Pertti Karpinnen, the ‘Gentle Giant’ of sculling has been admired for caressing his sculls into the water, Deitz, a three-time Olympian, competing in the single sculls at both the 1972 and 1976 Olympics, offers a sound perspective on this part of the stroke developed from years of experience on the water. Dietz counsels us to be sensitive and feel the water as a key element of a good catch, “The proficient sculler takes the water on the run, just as the proficient swimmer takes the water and pulls the body past that point. Neither assaults the water nor wastes energy. Rather, they feel the water, gain resistance, and then accelerate the drive. The first thing that happens when the blade takes the water is that the oncoming water starts pushing it forward and outward. So how much additional force is necessary to get the blade anchored prior to unleashing the power in the legs and back?” Dietz says, “This is “feel”...it is the search for the perfect stroke: “Nirvana” or any of the other beautiful metaphors which are used to describe this great sensation associated with taking the water.” Relaxation on the recovery is key to finding a quick catch according to Dietz. He tells that the body needs to hold a set position moving lightly into the catch position because any additional speed on the slide will place the sculler in a position of having to counter and overcome his or her own inertia.

For this racing season, improving your catch timing will positively improve your ability to make your boat go faster. The words of these masters may take time to integrate into your stroke or your crew's technique but striving for that perfect stroke is something we all seem willing to devote countless hours to.