

DOCK TALK: SCULLING INTRO

By Marlene Royle

Developing the level of skill that you need to scull competitively requires a great deal of time devoted to improving stability, stroke length, acceleration, and maintaining your technique under full pressure in all water conditions. No matter how many seasons you have sculled, you will continually refine your technique making new discoveries about the stroke and how to move the boat better. The stroke is simple in concept yet often illusive. It is the wish to feel another stroke in flow and our own bodies engaged in moving the boat that keeps us dedicated to sculling for decades. We are addicts of the perfect stroke.

My coaching career started in 1982 at Boston University's Summer Recreational Rowing Program. Then continued at Middlesex School for a couple of seasons in the mid-1980s before starting to coach sculling in 1986. For the past twenty years my coaching has been predominantly at sculling camps, Craftsbury Sculling Center in Vermont and the Florida Rowing Center, in addition to giving clinics. Over the course of two decades there have been thousands of first-time scullers that I have had the opportunity to work with. Giving the dock talk introducing sculling is one of my favorite parts of any camp. Seeing how quickly one can to introduce a newcomer to the basics and getting them out in a boat to start taking strokes is something I constantly try to refine. Give the novice enough information to have a successful outing, but not overwhelming information. In a weekend camp, it is remarkably common to see someone, who was in a boat for the first time on a Friday afternoon, by Sunday morning, capture the basic motions and be ready to start practicing on their own once they return home. What is key to the initial session on the water is helping your students understand how the system of the body, oars, boat, and water interact. Rather than trying to do something to the boat, the student must become aware of how to work with the boat and learn its reactions. For those of you who will teach novice scullers or take part in a learn-to-row activity at your club here are some of the points to help guide your students through their first session.

Review how to carry the boat and handle the oars. Then go over the equipment naming all parts of the boat and the oars. Call special attention to the design of the sleeve of the oar, the shape of the blades, and the flat surfaces of the oarlocks with regard to feathering and squaring. To give them an appreciation of the power of the grip of the water on the blade, while standing on the dock take an oar. With the blade in the square position place it in the water-just let the water support the blade. Then ask each student to hold the end of the handle and try to move the blade. They will immediately feel how the water sandwiches the blade and takes hold. This small demonstration can be very helpful for the novice to gain confidence in the ability of the water to support their blades once they get into the boat. Show how to get in and out of the boat. Butting the end of the handles together towards the stern and keeping the collars against the oarlocks will hold the very boat stable. Each student should practice getting in and out a few times. Often this can be difficult if the student has poor flexibility. How much support you need to give them will depend on their general fitness level. Show how to check the footstretcher position so the

oarhandles are a fist-width apart and in front of the torso about a thumb-length. Once you are in the boat push off the dock.

Orient the novices to a position of stability and make them aware of where the surface of the water is. Sit with your legs down and let the blades go flat on the water, holding the handles together at the crossover you can rock side to side to show how stable the position is. Describe the basic parts of the stroke and the position of the hands at the crossover. Row some full strokes to demonstrate the rhythm of the drive and recovery. The real task of the first outing is to assist the sculler to take a few successful strokes-even with just arms and body only-and to learn how their strokes affect the boat. Review posture, how to sit in the boat, then the points of the boat that they are in contact with-seat, footstretchers, handles-and the pressure against the oarlock-that will help them feel the boat better. Encourage them to just feel what it is like to sit quietly in the boat and know when the blades are on the water. Have the sculler sit with their legs flat and oars feathered on the water in the crossover position. Keeping subtle outward pressure just square the blades and let them sit at their natural depth in the water. Let the student see how the well the oars are designed and that they will rest in a natural position so one doesn't have to hold the blades in place. The water will support the blades. Then show the student feathering the blades and then gliding them back and forth over the surface of the water to get a sense of the plane of the handle level.

Demonstrating how you can keep the hands light and start taking easy strokes can be shown by rowing just arms-body, placing the blade in the water, lean the weight of the upper body, and drawing the handles through level with just the thumb and index finger for two-finger rowing. When a student feels the ease with which this can be done they will often be able to maintain a more relaxed hold on the handles from the start and be more careful about feeling the water. Encourage them to go slow. Once they place all fingers on the handle you want them to feel the handle pressing in the hook of their fingers as they relax their bodyweight to move the boat versus trying to pull the oars. Aim for them to feel the water support the blade giving resistance to work against. Once the sculler can feel this rowing arms-body only you can progress to adding the slide making the stroke longer.

A boat familiarization exercises where the handles are lifted and lowered on alternate sides teaches the boat's reaction to handling the sculls. Show rowing in circles with one oar at a time so the sculler learns to turn the boat. Keeping one oar braced against the body with blade flat on the water for stability while using the other oar, so the sculler can watch the blade of the oar they are rowing with to make sure the blade is fully squared or feathered. The sculler should practice rowing circles in both directions several times before starting to use both oars. Basic steering should be introduced, as well as, when to look over the shoulder to check in front of the boat.

This first outing is meant to provide a foundation for understanding how the equipment works, the basic stroke cycle, blade depth, posture, and fundamental maneuvering. As the sculler practices they will learn the finer points of the release and blade placement while lengthening

their stroke. Eventually power application will start to be developed. Facilitating an atmosphere of enjoyment, experimentation, and a sense of adventure from doing something new will aide the progress of your sculler to start their own search for the perfect stroke.