

STEVE FAIRBAIRN: FINDING GOOD STROKES

By Marlene Royle

It's the thickest rowing book I own; in size it rivals the 1,223 paper-thin pages of *Lonely Planet's Europe on a Shoestring*. A hearty two inches thick, *The Complete Steve Fairbairn On Rowing* stands as an essential classic. Inside the jacket reads, "Steve Fairbairn is generally regarded as the most inspiring and innovative rowing coach of the last 150 years. His glory days were in the 1920s, when he coached Jesus College, Cambridge and Thames and London Rowing to an extraordinary succession of regatta victories. Wherever they went, Fairbairn's 'disciples' lifted standards of performance to undreamed heights." Fairbairn, who lived from 1862 until 1938, is called the father of modern rowing.

During his lifetime, the Australian wrote six definitive works: *Rowing Notes*, *Some Secrets of Successful Rowing*, *Chats on Rowing*, *Rowing in a Nutshell*, *Don't Exaggerate*, and *The Endless Chain Movement*. Originally published in 1951 and then reprinted in 1990, *The Complete Steve Fairbairn On Rowing* is a collection of these pieces. I particularly like Fairbairn's rowing chats. There are 15 in total and each one has its own slant. Steve writes in a conversational manner explaining his concepts, not mincing his words. Chats range from *The Rhythm of Rowing*, *Lateral Pressure and Turns of the Oar*, to *Unscrew the Tension Nut*.

Chat Five is about initiative. The word *initiative* is defined as the power of acting independently. Physical talent aside, having initiative and being responsible is a key component of becoming a better rower or sculler. Fairbairn has good words on the subject that, if internalized, improve every stroke you take and keeps an eye on the big picture. First, he writes, "concentrate on working the blade: rowing is merely doing your best to work your oar to move the boat every stroke. If a man realizes that he has to take charge of his own rowing, he will then learn to concentrate properly and to feel what his blade is doing, and he will try to do better next stroke. The next stroke is really the race, and the race is only an illustration of how the crew rowed the next stroke. So every man should be ready and determined to do his very best the next stroke to propel the boat the best he can. As he does that, he will row each stroke better than the previous one."

The second point: "continual improvement possible by concentration: rowing is really like climbing a high mountain, if one concentrates. As one climbs one sees a peak ahead, and thinks that is the top. When he arrives there, another peak appears and so on *ad infinitum*. So in rowing, as one concentrates on working the oar to move the boat, he feels a fresh power come in, and he thinks he has reached the top. But again he feels an improvement come in and so on. There are always heights in the distance to be found out by working the oar and sensing and feeling that one is doing his best to move the boat. New feelings of increased power and ease keep coming in, and so one climbs the heights of the rowing mountain. He never reaches the top; as he reaches height after height he realizes there are more heights to climb. I fancy the same principle applies

right through everything in this world and a good solid religion is, whatever your hand finds to do, be sure you are going to do your best, next stroke.”

Fairbairn touches on hard work, firm grip with elastic spring, as well as, the art of coaching but emphasizes that, “The oarsman must sense this feeling of what his blade is doing with the water and what the water is doing with the blade. That is the beginning and end of learning to row. As he senses this feeling, his rowing will improve. But to think about holding or moving his body in certain positions takes away from his capacity to work the oar to drive the water away and get the reaction of the water to drive the boat. By working the oar to move the boat, the body moves easily and elastically, smoothly and continuously.” Fairbairn adds, “I do not coach for any movement of the body. That has all got to come from inside you, laddie, and it comes unconsciously through the subjective mind’s unconscious action. I coach entirely to work the oar to move the boat. Everyone has moved their bodies unconsciously all through their lives. Becoming body conscious is the first step towards locomotor ataxy.” He advises that oarsman can learn a lot by reading rowing notes, reading intelligently as if he were rowing and going through the motions all the time. He encourages rowers to read, criticize, and test out new points in their rowing. He tells his rowers to watch their blade to find out what it is doing and to shut their eyes and learn to sense what it does. Fairbairn believed that rowing with the eyes closed opened the eyes to rowing more than anything else.

Finally, *Chat Five* reminds, “no careless strokes; do your best every stroke. A careless stroke reflects through the crew and does harm; a careless stroke does harm to you and your crew and your club and college. The harm of a careless stroke will reflect through the ages, doing harm, just as a good stroke will do good.” Fairbairn concludes, “Enjoy every stroke-only done by concentration and doing your best.”