

# Sprint Race (Practice) Coxswain - Notes from A Stroke Seat

I find it very motivating to have a good coxswain in the boat, especially during race practice and races at regattas. Hence, here are my thoughts on what to do and why when it comes to sprint race practices (and races).

**These notes do not include any thoughts about steering straight and keeping the boat safe - that goes without saying!!**

## Race Warm-Up

A race warm-up can be a tricky thing and it's important to be flexible:

- Sometimes there's not much time/space to do a warm-up and cramming in all useful or necessary drills is difficult.
- What is important can change. The first warm-up at a regatta will likely have more rate building 10s than the 2nd or third warm-up of a long regatta day (when everybody has already raced), where short drills for boat-feel and synchronization may be all that's needed.

Things to include in a typical race warm-up on the way to the starting line:

1. A quick rotation of rowing by sixes to get people moving. Pick Drill (all 8) is also a good option.
2. Some drills for technique (apply as needed):
  - a. If synchronization is lagging, maybe a few pause drills, to get people on the same page.
  - b. If balance is lagging, maybe a few calls to make the rowers focus on handle heights, sitting over the keel, etc.
  - c. If there's a lot of check, a reminder about slow recovery and ratio may help.
3. A few rate building 10s, say, 10 at 24, 28, 32 with 15 to 20 paddling strokes in between. This could be called something like: "In 2 we'll do 10 strokes at 24, building to 24 over 3 strokes ... 1 - 2 - build, 22 - build, build, 24, 1 - 2 ... 9 - 10 - paddle".
4. In the last, say, 500m to the line, a few start sequences should be done, each from a complete stop.

A typical set of starting sequences with increasing intensity is:  
- "starting 5 and glide at 50% press",

- “starting 5 and glide at full press”,
- followed by “starting 5, high 5 and glide”.

## Lining up the Start

Before the start of the race the boats need to be lined up. This is often hectic and stressful, because there’s almost never enough time for it and the conditions - wind, drift, position of the other boats, etc - often change quickly.

However, stress is not what is needed in the boat at the start of the race, so any calls the coxswain makes to line up the boat need to be calm, decisive, and effective. (Any indecisiveness will likely make the rowers start looking around and try to fix stuff on their own ...)

It is also important to be ready for the starting 5, even if the boat isn’t perfectly lined up, whenever the coaches/umpires announce the start.

The call to end lining up and preparing for the start is something like: “All 8, come to the catch at  $\frac{3}{4}$  slide ... blades squared and fully buried ... sit ready !”

(If there’s time and small corrections need to be made, they can be done by calling short chopping strokes without the rower having to leave the “ready at the catch” position.)

## A Race Piece

A race piece - if it’s not cut short, like for example a 250m only piece - typically can be split up into these parts:

- 5 Starting Strokes
- High 15
- Settle
- Main Body
- Final Sprint

Normally the boat knows which rates they want to hit at the end of the high-15 and after the settle, so these numbers should be confirmed before the start.

## Starting 5

During the first five strokes the boat needs to be accelerated from a complete standstill, while the rowers need to settle into their full-length, synchronized stroke motion.

A typical start sequence of strokes is :  $\frac{3}{4}$  - half -  $\frac{3}{4}$  - lengthen - full.

The first  $\frac{3}{4}$  stroke gets the boat moving from a complete standstill. We want to apply as much force as possible, BUT not so much that the blade is ripped through the water, wasting all the applied effort.

This stroke is therefore often called the 'pry', as we're 'prying' the boat off the start line.

The second stroke (half) is the transition from the initial getting the boat moving to climbing into the normal stroke rhythm. It is a half stroke, because after the boat is starting to move after the pry, we want to add speed quickly.

The next three strokes ( $\frac{3}{4}$  - lengthen - full) add more speed to the boat and also allow the rowers to build their stroke movement.

Overall the starting 5 need to be firm, but controlled (We cannot win the race here, but we can lose it ...). The calls need to emphasize this: they need to be firm and on time, but not overly enthusiastic.

The rowers typically start on the coaches call (or the umpire's call/flag), and the coxswain should call the strokes anticipating the stroke seat's catch, so that by the time the call is made it is in sync with the stroke seat catch (The rowers know the sequence, so the call is about 'when', not 'what').

The call to make should be something like: "prrryyy ... half ...  $\frac{3}{4}$  ... lengthen ... full ... high 15 !"

The coxswain may hear the starting signal/call or may not, so it's important to be ready and react quickly and start calling the sequence when the stroke seat takes the pry stroke !

The starting 5 (and the following high-15) often seem hectic, so it's important to infuse calm determination into these strokes with the calls.

These strokes also happen fast, so the pattern needs to be well known and called without hesitation.

## High 15 (or 10)

The "high 15" strokes accelerate the boat to its maximum speed. During these strokes the rate climbs quickly and to a rate that is likely not sustainable over the full race, but helps to build boat speed.

The coxswain counts the strokes on the catch of the stroke seat, something like : "1 - 2 - 3 ... 9 - 10, five more - 1 - 2 - 3 - settle in 2 - settle in 1 - settle !!)

During these strokes it is also important to let the rowers know what the rising stroke rate is, every 3 strokes or so, in between the count something like: " - 3, rate is 28 - 4 ..."

The last of the high strokes is the one called as "settle in 1", but it's more important to clearly call it, even if the count may be off by one or so.

## Settle

The “settle” is important, because it gets the stroke rate from the max “high 15” rate, to something that ought to be sustainable throughout the whole piece.

During the settle, the rowers change the motion from a quicker and slightly shortened stroke pattern to one that emphasizes leg press, length with body swing, and ratio.

The aim is to keep the max speed the boat has gained during the high-15 and maintain this speed (as long as possible) with a longer stroke at a lower rate ! Therefore the first settle stroke is sometimes called the “hardest stroke” of the piece.

Settling into the sustainable rate typically takes a few strokes. After calling the settle, the coxswain watches the stroke rate and if it doesn't come down, calls “settle” again, perhaps including the decreasing stroke rate number in the call.

## Main Body of the Race (“Middle 500m”)

Obviously this is the main part of a race piece. Fatigue settles in during it and the coxswain needs to keep the rowers motivated (and distracted from their increasing misery) with encouraging calls.

During the main body the coxswain should report:

- where the boat is in terms of overall race distance (“250m down”, etc) - this helps the rowers to partition the race effort (or at least confirm their own stroke counting)
- Where the boat is in respect to the other boats (“We're half a length down on lane 2 - get me up to their stroke seat”)
- How the race develops over time and how we are to react to it. For example, it may be productive to do a “power-10” to get connection to a boat in front.

It is also important to keep feeling what the boat does and make calls to correct whatever is wrong (“I can feel check - slow down the last quarter of the recovery a bit”).

All technique calls should have an actionable item in them and be positive. (Screaming “Row harder” does not qualify ... ;-)

## Sprint

During the last 250m or 200m of a 1k race we may do a sprint. (“May” because if the boat is hopelessly behind everybody else, this is pointless; or if the boat is really far in front, there's no need for a sprint, just calls to maintain the effort.)

During a sprint we aim to go faster (or at least stop slowing down more) by taking quicker, shortened strokes. This can be accomplished either by having quicker hands out of the release, or by shortening the lay-back, or both.

The coxswain should announce the upcoming sprint and needs to state which part of the stroke we're going to change ("Okay, we're going to do a sprint to the finish ! We'll do quicker hands for 10 and then shorten the backswing"). Then, after a few more strokes call it ("Sprint in 2 ... 1 - 2 - quicker hands "). Hopefully the rate (and speed !) will increase and we can follow it with another call to shorten the backswing for what will be the last 15-20 strokes of the race ("In 2, shorten the back swing ! ... 1 - 2 ...")

The announcement of the sprint will take a while and since the last 250m are only about 30 strokes, the sprint has to be called a little bit ahead of time.