

# The Coxswain During Spring Racing Season

Mike Siconolfi, s.j.

The coxswain is the most important person in any shell: a coxed shell cannot even be placed in the order of finish if the cox is missing. Coxes have the power to empower the crew to victory; they also have the power to lose the race for the crew through errors in steering or judgment. Well-trained coxes must develop and earn the absolute trust of their rowers--winning crews always have winning coxswains!

## Coxes Are Like:

- *Quarterbacks*---they call the plays; they don't ask for a vote; the boat is not a democracy
- *Jockeys* for human race horses; they direct and focus the energy
- *Cheerleaders/Psychologists* who must be able to *psyche-out* and *psyche-up* large people in pain
- *Safety Marshals* with responsibility for the safety of all crews and the equipment
- *Father Confessors* knowing everything about the people in a boat that affects them during a race; they can summon up the right motivation (heaven or hell) at the right time!
- *Rowing Officials*---very knowledgeable about the *Rules of Rowing* (they know the difference between reprimand and warning) and the exact quirks of a particular rowing venue
- *Mechanics*---they know how everything in the shell works and can fix it if necessary: they know a forestay from a rigger-stick
- *Clocks*---they always have the right time and always know exactly where each of their rowers and their shell should be at all times
- *Coaches*--they represent the coach's will and mind in the heat of competition
- *Paramedics*--(the coaches are the distant doctors). Coxes are present to the event and know exactly how the coach would cure what's wrong; full diagnosis of the problem can wait until consultation with the doctor-coach; it's the cox who must save the patient *right now*

# **Abilities for Coxes to Develop (and their Rowers to Encourage)**

- Ability to *count accurately*
- Ability to *estimate distance accurately*
- Ability to use a *clear and distinct voice* (tape record yourself often); learn difference between shouting and projecting
- Ability to use *clear, crisp, efficient commands*
- Ability to *vary pitch & tone of voice and vary remarks*; know when to sound *very calm!*
- Ability to *diagnose and correct simple faults* in a positive and supportive manner
- *Ability to steer accurately and efficiently*: you always row *only 2000 meters, always.*
- Ability to tell rowers accurately the only two things they want to know: *Where are the other boats, and, When will the pain stop.*
- Ability to *make yourself the butt of humor* when things look down; and ability to know the enemy is not in the other shell but *within* each athlete: They can tell when Mr. Stuff-it must be stuffed.
- *Ability to be quiet*: no need to talk all the time in a race; a cox who talks constantly is a cox who is *ignored*. There are magical, sacred moments in a workout and a race-- *shut up* and savor them.

"As a coxswain, I concentrated most on knowing the people in my boat - why they were rowing, why they came down to the boathouse, what made them tick. You have to know whether someone's rowing because they love their mother and hate their father, or because they're not sure they are proud of themselves; and they want to be proud. Determine some of that, and you can tap the strongest parts of those individuals. Being able to inspire someone, unexpected and in a way new and fresh to them, is what made coxswaining special for me."

-Devin Mahoney, Cox, Varsity Eight, Harvard '86

"Coxing takes a smart person who can gain the respect of eight widely divergent personalities, steer a very expensive boat not only in a crowded lane but safely back to an all too solid dock, encourage the best performance out of a team who thought they were already giving their best performance, gauge the capabilities of the opposition vis a vis your own boat, and be willing to take the blame for anything that goes wrong. From my point of view, the cox has the broadest shoulders in

the boat to carry that load. Anyone who has seen what a good coxswain can do greatly appreciates the person facing forward."

--6'4", 220lbs Alexandria Va Rower