Small Boat Training

In the never-ending search for faster crews, some coaches have adopted a training method that, although very popular in the rest of the rowing world, has only recently begun to gain popularity in the United States.

Small boats, specifically singles and pairs, are now used extensively by programs from Washington College, a small college in Chestertown, Md., to the University of Washington in Seattle, to the Canadian Olympic teams. As different as these programs are, their coaches all share the belief that small boat training will teach the athletes better technique in less time while having more fun.

Some of the concept's strongest supporters have been very successful using small boats, including the Canadian women, winners of the pair, four and eight at the 1991 World Championships and 1992 Olympics. Al Morrow, coach of the Canadian women's national sweep team, is an enthusiastic advocate of small boat training. His Olympic champions rowed almost exclusively in singles and pairs, and actually rowed the eight relatively infrequently. According to Morrow, there are at least four reasons "small boat rowing improves skill levels dramatically": athletes can train at their own pace without disrupting the team's workout; small boats foster competition every day, preparing athletes for the stress of race day; individual technique is easier to teach and learn; and mental discipline and toughness is strengthened.

Hartmut Buschbacher, the U.S. open women's sweep coach, also endorses small boat training. "I like to use the pair. It's a good training tool and helps the athlete develop better technique. We tried to use it as much as possible last year but were limited by the number of boats available."

Although the college programs using small boat training are a diverse group, the reasons behind their move into small boats are remarkably similar. The University of Washington men's crew began using pairs five years ago, some five years after the Husky women started small boat training. Bob Ernst, UW men's coach, added small boats as a way to increase the amount of competitive training as well as the technical expertise of his rowers.

One of the most enthusiastic supporters of small boat rowing, Ric Ricci, men's coach at Connecticut College, based his support for small boat training on his experience sculling and coaching at the Craftsbury Sculling Center. This experience convinced Ricci that his rowers would learn better technique and improve their conditioning faster in small boats. Ricci had little trouble convincing Connecticut College's head coach, Claus Wolter, of the advantages of small boats. Wolter grew up in the Canadian system where small boats, and especially sculls, are heavily emphasized. Mike Davenport, head coach at Washington College also was searching for improved technique when he first put his athletes in singles and pairs two years ago.

The results to date are also similar. The benefits of small boats fall into three general areas. Compared to those rowers trained in eights, athletes rowing in small boats learn better technique faster and acquire fewer bad habits. Small boats also teach mental discipline. Davenport refers to this as a reduction in "social loafing." Simply put, if you are the only person moving the boat, or the only one responsible for your side of the boat, you can't take any mental or physical breaks; you have to be on every stroke. This mental discipline translates into better conditioning.

Small boat proponents also believe they have the added benefit of preventing burnout, a problem made more common and more acute by the collegiate rowing season's seemingly interminable September to June span. In addition to the technical attributes of small boats, they have promotional applications as well. The Connecticut College program uses the equipment for a credit course in the P.E. department and makes it available to students, thus broadening the crew's base of support.

The major differences between the programs lie in who uses the small boats and what boats they use. Connecticut College trains novices in singles and experienced rowers in singles and pairs. Although small boats are primarily used by the experienced rowers at Washington College, this is due solely to the limited supply. Brown University's men, at UW and Boston University's women use pairs extensively for their experienced rowers.

The benefits of small boat rowing are due to the nature of the beast. One of the early proponents of the small boat movement in this country, Bart Gullong of B & G Rowing, calls small boat rowing "... a dose of reality for the rower. Rower have to take things on faith in an eight, but in a single you learn very quickly what hand levels do to balance."

Mike Spracklen, coach of the Canadian men's national sweep team, is another proponent of small boat training, saying, "Boat speed is the best indicator of improvement ... and small boats are the best way to see changes in boat speed." According to Spracklen, smaller boats have greater variations in speed during the stroke, thus more efficient rowing is more obvious. Athletes who make a technical improvement can see a change almost immediately, reinforcing the change and motivating the athlete to continue to improve.

Programs using singles find that novices not only learn concepts faster, but don't learn bad habits that must be unlearned through hours of repetitive drilling. Those who wish to improve often seek out the coach, ask for advice and listen intently. This can be in striking contrast to coaching an eight, when each athlete may believe it's the other's fault. Novices also learn the basics of boat care, and the rules of the road. And many nuances of technique that take years of drilling in an eight, become plainly obvious in a single.

Single sculls shorten the learning curve for experienced rowers as well. For athletes who can row at full pressure in a single, the boat is an excellent training and evaluation tool.
for Big Boat Success

By Joe Paduda

As Ricci puts it, unlike any other measurement device, single sculls provide quick and incontrovertible proof of fitness and technical expertise.

There are many more programs using pairs than singles, and because the pair is more difficult to row than a recreational single, most pairs are reserved for the experienced rowers. Whereas singles teach basic technique and watermanship, pairs teach the athletes to row together. And according to Spracklen, “the better the athletes can row a pair, the better they’ll be in a big boat.” Ricci believes pair training also makes the job of selecting a crew easier as it is inherently more difficult to assemble an eight from eight individuals than from four pairs.

Most of the programs use the small boats more extensively in the fall, spending more time in the eights as the racing season gets under way. The Canadians are a notable exception, and Connecticut College’s rowers also find themselves in pairs and singles on a regular basis throughout the racing season.

College programs using small boats obtain their equipment from a variety of sources such as alumni contributions, equipment donations, loaner boats and program purchases. Although the expense of a small boat fleet may seem daunting, Davenport, Ricci and Wolter all believe programs using small boats don’t cost any more than programs featuring eights. Small boat rowing results in less wear and tear on racing equipment, and eight singles or three pairs can be purchased for about the same price as a new eight.

Unicque sculling tanks at Connecticut College.

Singles can also be rented to summer or community programs to help defray the cost.

The logistical problems of organizing and coaching small boats are also relatively minor. And while small boat rowing may seem more conducive to smaller programs that have fewer athletes and boats to manage, larger programs usually have the advantage of more coaches, money, launches and boathouse space, making the program equally manageable on a larger scale.

To manage his flotilla on the water, Ricci has developed a method of coaching that ensures he has tight control over his eight singles at all times. The scullers row along in a straight line, doing an “Indian sprint”; as the last sculler rows up to the front of the line, Ricci coaches him all the way up until the next one starts. All the scullers hear the coaching, and all are under control at all times. Novices learn the basics in Connecticut College’s unique sculling tanks before taking to the water in a training single. This boat is not a step toward a racing single but rather a “sweep trainer.” It’s used to teach novices the basics of the stroke, balance, steering, boat feel and boat care. Although the single can be overwhelming at first, Wolter finds that after a few simple instructions, the novices quickly grasp concepts that are much more difficult to teach in an eight. The novices spend several weeks in the singles before moving to a sweep boat.

Washington College’s varsity men also spend the entire fall in sculling boats, switching to sweep only after the winter break. Coxswains aren’t exempt from this training: in the fall they scull and race along with the rowers. Davenport has found this training improves the coxswains’ credibility as well as their ability to communicate effectively with the crew.

Ricci puts his experienced rowers in singles and pairs early and often, switching them between the two and from side to side frequently. This is partly self-preservation, as he puts it, “I have to make sure the best eight are in the varsity. With only 16 oarsmen, it would hurt our chances if they couldn’t row both sides.”

Connecticut College’s emphasis on pairs allows the crew to devote scarce water time to rowing and race training and not to lineup tweaking.

At Brown and UW, rowers find themselves in pairs several times a week. This experience has a short-term application; pairs are used to select lineups for the fall races. UW bases most of the fall season on pairs. There is an active pair ladder determined by timed pieces over a 3,000 meter course. The ladder determines everything, from who can attend Saturday practice to who gets to winter training camp (privileges reserved for the top eight pairs).

For a variety of reasons, many coaches rely almost exclusively on training in eights and perhaps fours. For some, it’s due to a lack of space or funds for small boats; and for others, it’s a function of their training site—narrow, winding rivers don’t lend themselves to pair rowing. Ania Considine, Boston University women’s coach, is a strong proponent of small boat rowing but believes they’re only useful in a controlled situation, inexperienced rowers in small boats may pick up bad habits if they’re not monitored closely.

Coaching philosophy is also a factor, as some coaches’ primary focus is on the overall symmetry of the crew rather than individual technique. Spracklen believes the quest for seamless integration is sometimes overstated at the expense of technical skills. A crew may look good as a result of many miles of rowing together, but it may not be as technically skilled (as a small boat trained crew), and therefore not as fast.

In the final analysis, whether or not small boat training becomes popular will be determined by the success of those programs that make the investment in time and money.
Another lesson of Budapest is that the IOC, wanting its cake and eating it too, is partially responsible for fanning divisiveness. Is the IOC’s first love its motto “Faster, Higher, Stronger,” the performance-led philosophy of elitism? Or is it more enamored with its symbolic five interlinked rings, a participatory affair involving more NOCs, more sports, more sponsors, more money from the five continents represented on the flag? Rowing deserves to be told.

Christopher Dodd is a writer for the Guardian and editor of Regatta, Britain’s rowing magazine. For more information on the IOC’s plan to limit the Olympics, see Dodd’s article in the March/April ‘92 issue of American Rowing.

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