Team Dynamics: Preventing Burnout and Fostering Enthusiasm

A bit about the nature of CRI program
  3 separate seasons plus winter training. Each season a slightly different group
  • Spring – athletes from schools that don’t have their own programs
  • Summer – Some athlete from Spring and many local rowers from other schools
  • Fall – Some from CRI only schools plus Brookline HS and a few from other Boston Teams that don’t have fall rowing.
  • Winter – Smaller group.
Each year the comp program has grown by about 10-15 %---overall CRI Youth Program enrollment has been fairly constant.
Growth factors
  • More athletes starting—fairly consistent over last several years
  • More athletes staying—very few drop out.
  • More athletes rowing more seasons—Larger % row 3+ seasons.

Feedback cycle with increased success ⇒ program growth ⇒ increased success

The type of athlete we all want to have
  • Takes good care of her self
  • Supports her teammates
  • Loves to train
  • Loves to race
  • Loves to row
  • Goal oriented

It is my experience and belief that if we coaches set up the desired team dynamics, the athletes will try to fit into the team ethos, and become the type of athletes we want to have. Peer Pressure is the most powerful motivator for adolescents—and I see it work for masters also.

The #1 characteristic shared by successful athletes is love of the sport. Therefore our first priority as coaches must be to encourage an appreciation for the sport of rowing.

Enthusiasm Vs. Burnout
  Positive experiences > Negative experiences…enthusiasm grows
  Negative experiences > Positives…burnout grows

Resulting mission: to establish an environment that has many positive experiences, while minimizing the negative experiences

It should be fun…
  …but also remember winning is more fun than losing.
Creating Positive Experiences

Goals. Attaining a goal gives an athlete a sense of satisfaction that is extremely powerful. It stands to reason that the more goals you set, the more possibilities achieve success.

Keys
- Definite – you know when you have achieved it.
- Positive – something you want, not something you want to avoid.
- Appropriate – challenging, but attainable. Not at odds with team goals. The harder an athlete has worked to achieve a goal, the more satisfying it is to achieve it.
- Need a balance of Performance vs. Outcome goals.

Individual Goals
Individual goals we set during regular goal setting exercises
1. Begin with writing down 3 long term goals
   Long term = Not this season
2. List the obstacles to achieving this goal
3. Set Medium-term Goals to overcome these obstacles
   Medium term = this season
4. List obstacles to medium-term goals
5. Set Short Term goals to overcome obstacles
   Short term goal = daily, weekly, maybe couple of weeks
Repeat exercise at least once a season
Keep, Review, Assess.
These goals can stray further and further from rowing:
   ex. Athletes who realized that to achieve their long term goals they had to rearrange their carpool schedule to allow for more efficient use of time after school to study.

Erg goals
Each athlete must pick their goal for each erg test.
Positive reinforcement through
   Show of hands of athletes who made goals.
   Remark on athletes who set and make challenging goals.
   Set up for success by timing tests with training cycle.

Technical goals
Every rower should know exactly what one problem they need to improve on next.
Every rower should know the purpose of every drill you have them do
Every day/week/cycle should have a technical focus
Use video to show when people have achieved goals
Team Goals
We set through discussions early in season -- athletes have a say.
 Particularly important to have performance and not only outcome goals
 What boats to prioritize.
 What are expectations of what will mean success.
 Know time standards.
 Establish Stepping Stones like with individual goals.
 Examples:
 Spring. Goal was performance at USRowing Youth Invit.
 Success = make finals
 Performance goal: sub 6:50
 Stepping stones –
 Sub 5:12 1500 early in season
 Win Regionals
 Results: 6:42 @ Cinci; 3rd place
 Fall. Goals for Head of the Charles
 Success = retain entry for both boats, great to medal
 Performance goal: Youth 8--17:30; Club four--19:50
 Stepping stones
 2 x HOC in under 36mins (8+) or 40mins (4+).
 Maintain cadence and run in early season races.
 Comfort of cox’ns through mock races.
 Results:
 Eight 17:19 1st US Jr crew to win event since ’85
 Four 19:26 3rd place out of 58.

Markers--measured performances we use to evaluate the progress of a boat or individual
  • Individuals, boats or team may set goals related to markers, but I
determine the nature and timing of the markers we use.
  • Frequent enough to gauge progress
  • Scheduled into training plan for success
  • Should be known about beforehand so athletes can be mentally
prepared for them

Examples
  Erg tests
  Timed pieces over distance
  Bridge to Bridge
  2 x HOC
  Races --If you can track times over years, or time on a given course
each week.
Workout Variety vs Predictable Rhythm—Both can be positives

Importance of predictable rhythm
- Training needs.
- Allow athlete to know what to expect, plan accordingly.
- Surprise is a cause of stress.

Importance of variety
- Keeps things interesting
- facilitates change of focus

Examples
Weekly cycle
  Rhythm relatively constant: ss days, interval days, AT days
  Other than markers, what we do varies

Daily
  Structure of practice relatively set
  Warm up shifts with technical goals

Fun activities
  Relays
  Hat race
  Coed workouts
    Head race pieces
    Mixed squad relays
    Mixed eight races
  Cross training/Games
    Capture the flag
    Hiking
    Tour de Nonantum

Communication
Communication should be a positive team experience.
The rowers are going think, they are going to talk.

Either:
  They talk to you and you listen.

Or
  They talk only amongst themselves and you don’t hear what they are thinking. In which case if you happen to think the same way—great—otherwise a widening gap between your perception and theirs will occur, and they will feel like what they think doesn’t matter perceived lack of control = stress

Alternative: you can help them to understand what you are doing and why, and explain what you want them to do to achieve their goals.

Listen first, then spin
Communication must be two way
When I mean “…” what do you think I mean?—try this in a group some time.
Athletes must feel you are approachable—your job to make them feel this way.
Trust also two way
That they will pull with honest effort.
That you will respect their limits—more important to train well than to train a lot
Feedback: Your approval and recognition is a strong positive reinforcement. Use it.

Minimizing Negatives
Always assume the athlete wants
1. to make the top boat.
2. the boat to feel good in practice.
3. to win.
Therefore:
Selection is the most stressful part of the process. Some athletes will get up the guts to say “what do I need to do to get better”
Assume they all want to know.
If practices aren’t going well, they will be unhappy quickly. Structure drills and workouts for success
Set up reasonable goals and expectations so that you can get something positive out of facing opponents of any level

Injury Prevention
Nagging repetitive use injuries cause of burnout and stress.
They are also the type of injury that rowing is conducive to and that athletes often hide or ignore.

To prevent injuries:
Rig light
Switch sides every few seasons.
Sculling
Exercises to balance strength – Abs and core muscle strength
Make sure athletes feel safe coming to you when injured.

Stress
Primary source of stress is a perceived lack of control over a situation which matters to the individual
• Athlete wants to get better but doesn’t have a clear idea of what they need to work on.
• Athlete isn’t in the boat the want to be in and doesn’t know why.
• Athlete is frustrated with how boat is going and doesn’t understand the problem.
• Athlete doesn’t know where they stand in on the team
• Athlete doesn’t know how to approach the coach
• Athlete is injured
• Conflict between athlete desires and demands of parents/school
• Conflict between athlete desires and those of boatmates.

Answer: Work to minimize these through effective communication and clear standards and a coaching style that defuses, not aggravates stress.

Managing stress
Let them know where they stand
Let them know what you are looking for
Set up expectations for what is going to happen during the season, week, practice:

Ex. Season:
Phase of technique, adjustment, and general prep
Phase of selection
Phase to develop boat chemistry

Week:
Hard days, light days
Technical focus and/or changes to race plan we are working towards.

Simply letting them know that they should be feeling tired and worn out during a specific phase of the training cycle makes a difference

Mistake: “I want my team to be ready for anything, so I am going to make it tough on them, keep them on their toes”

No, you want team ready to perform at their peak for a race. Treat them like thoroughbreds, not Marines.

Remember:

“Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.” - Dwight D. Eisenhower