THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BASIS OF RACING

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The previous two articles on strategy dealt with the physiological aspects of crew racing. This and the two subsequent articles will illuminate the psychological basis of rowing competition. Again numerous illustrations will be provided from international competition.

If rowing a race at an even pace is desirable from a physiological standpoint — it being the most economical way of rowing a race, why is it then that only a few crews take advantage of it? The reason for this is that most crews start off at their maximum rate and continue that way for a considerable length of time with the intention of placing themselves in an early lead, or at least remaining in close contact with the others from the outset of the race. Since starting a race at a very high rate is psychologically very demanding, these crews must inevitably slow down after just 500m. This is reflected in slower and slower times as the race progresses. This slowing down has a variety of ms depending upon the initial speed and the state of exhaustion after the first quarter of the race. For example, a lightning speed in the initial phases of a race will undoubtedly be reflected in progressively slower 500m split times right until the end of the race.

An excellent example of this type of racing is provided by the W. German double-scull in its racing in the 1977 and 1978 finals of the World Championships. In 1977 the crew finished fourth, with the following 500m splits and placings: 1:32.64—1st; 1:42.09—2nd; and 1:50.44—4th.

If the initial speed was not quite so fast but still faster than the crew’s cruising speed for the entire 2000m distance, then the crew would slow down in the second 500m and row even slower in the third 500m. In the last 500m the speed might increase slightly depending on the crew’s rate of exhaustion when going into this final stretch. The speed of crews rowing this strategy, however, almost never increases substantially (see speed curves of Olympic medal winning eights in Diagram 1).

Another pattern that has recently become very popular in crew racing is the one in which a crew, after rowing a relatively fast first 500m, continues at the highest possible even speed that can be maintained until the end of the race (see speed curves in Diagram 2).

From the above examples it is obvious that there are many patterns in crew racing that do not follow an “even pace” strategy. It seems that although an even pace strategy is the most economical, from a physiological point of view, it must generate substantial psychological uneasiness and discomfort to competing oarsmen. What other reasons could there be for it not being selected more often?

Another psychological benefit of rowing in a leading position is the phenomenon which often starts operating within the oarsmen of the leading crew. The phenomenon is related to the enhanced competitive spirit of the crew and it spurs the crew to the highest possible degree to counteract an opponent’s attack, or to tenaciously hold onto a lead before the finish line. In these instances “extra” energies, which in normal circumstances, are not available to competing athletes, are mobilized in the oarsmen of the leading crew.

If rowing in the leading position is psychologically boosting to competing oarsmen, the opposite must be true of rowing in the tail of a race. Coming off the starting blocks last and remaining in one of the last positions is not only psychologically demoralizing but impractical as well. Most oarsmen, it seems, must see for themselves the immediate results of their efforts, or they just cannot row. As they fall back in a race they are not in a position to accurately judge a number of important things, such as the distance they are lagging; who is leading at the moment; whether or not they are still within striking distance of the winner, etc. The result is that they become worried and panicky and their confidence dwindles as soon as fatigue starts increasing. Many oarsmen start looking around which further affects a crew’s rowing efficiency causing the crew to fail back even more.

This situation is somewhat easier in coxed events because it is the coxswain’s job to continuously inform the crew about the developments of the race. But to many oarsmen hearing does not mean believing: so, they too have to unduly look around; turning their head in both directions — as the bowman in
Photo 1 — just to make sure that they know exactly what has changed since they last peeked over their shoulders, which was only a few strokes earlier! It hardly has to be mentioned how irresponsible this type of behaviour is and how much disturbance to the crew's rhythm it may generate. Many a race has ended disastrously because of such poor habits.

Psychological problems of this kind do not occur when the crew is rowing out in front or together with other crews in the pack. An additional benefit of rowing out in front is the fact that the crew is rowing in an undisturbed lane which is otherwise not the case. The hull waves of leading boats quickly spread to both sides and may affect the crews rowing behind. These are precisely the reasons it appears, for adopting the early lead strategies.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EVEN PACE STRATEGY OARSMAN

There are very few oarsmen who possess a strong enough personality to take the psychological beating of rowing in the tail in the early phases of a race. When the oarsmen of this type are seated together in a crew and decide to row their fastest in the most economical way, regardless of what their opponents will do, this crew will accomplish wonders in the second half of the race. By using an even pace strategy the crew expects to row in last place in the first half of the race, but then, by maintaining an even, sufficient speed, gradually to close the gap and catch the other crews. From last place early in the race, this crew will row through its opposition in the second half of the race, providing that it has other ingredients such as good oarsmanship, excellent conditioning, and good equipment. Overtaking opponents one by one is in itself boosting for the crew's morale and is psychologically devastating for the tiring opposition, who are desperately trying to hold onto their lead, but in vain. This was well demonstrated in the men's Olympic sculling race where there was, prior to the finals, only one real favorite, Michael Kolbe, the world champion from West Germany. The gold medal was not awarded to Kolbe but to the smartest sculler on the Montreal Olympic course, Karpinen of Finland. (This race was discussed in the previous two articles on strategy in the catch.)

Another example is the GB double scull that took two bronze medals at the 1975 and 1974 FISA Championships. They rowed deep fast throughout the first half of the race in both finals. Similarly, the NZ coxless four that took the silver medal in 1977 was 6th after the first 500m, 5th after the second, 3rd after the third and 2nd after the last 500m.

Only a few crews are as psychologically mature and/or confident and as able to perfectly judge their physiological limits as the three examples cited in these notes: Karpinen in single at 1976 Olympics; Hart and Bailleau in double sculls; and the NZ coxless four in 1977. All other mortal in crew racing must resort to strategy patterns that offer more in terms of psychological satisfaction throughout the race but less in terms of economy of energy distribution.

Strategies which are based on psychological aspects of racing have much in common, particularly in the early phases of a race. They all advocate a quick start with the sole purpose of pushing the crew into an early lead or at least maintaining close contact with the opposition. Immediately after the first 500m, various patterns of racing develop. These patterns have been termed as the 'Reversed Even Pace' Strategy, the 'Rowing in Front' Strategy, the 'Favorite's' Strategy, and the 'Surprise' Strategy. These strategies will be discussed in the subsequent issues of Catch.

Diagram 1
Speed curves based on 500m times in the finals of Olympic medal winning eight oared crews.

Diagram 2
Speed curves based on 500m times in the finals of Olympic medal winning double sculls.