

Crew Selection

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Introduction

The FISA CDP courses in Levels I and II attempted to provide a coaching educational package of useful information presented in a simple and practical way. One of the concepts emphasized has been that information obtained from using expensive and complicated equipment, although perhaps helpful at times, is not necessary to produce and select world class rowers.

Further, many coaches unfortunately lack not only information from scientific testing but also information about the performance capabilities of their athletes either individually or in specific combinations. Although the coach may have knowledge about the athletes' past performances, the coach may not have information about their present capabilities. This fact may be due either to the absence of sufficient or any competitions, or to a short period during which the coach must select the athletes.

This may apply to either a club coach or national coach selecting a few months or even a few weeks before a championship. This situation is especially challenging for the coach during the process of selecting a crew. To alleviate these difficulties, a simple and objective selection system was devised and has been used quite successfully in the United States.

This selection system is termed **seat racing**.

Seat Racing

This term refers to the procedure whereby an athlete competes directly with another athlete for a seat in the boat by switching that athlete from one boat to another. Although the use of this procedure is generally in situations where the coach has more athletes than seats available in crew boats, it may also provide information about the placement of the athlete within the crew.

Domestic Rowing in the United States

The major part of domestic American rowing is in the universities. The level varies from very good (6 to 7 schools) to very, very bad. Most of the schools start on-the-water training at the beginning of March, sometimes even the middle of the month, and will have a competition period commencing in April and culminating in May or June. Since the larger programs have about 18 to 30 athletes trying to make the first boat (the Varsity Eight), there is a need for a fast, simple and objective selection procedure. Seat racing is, therefore, commonly used.

Since there are only 2 to 4 clubs that have some type of systematic, annual training program, most clubs will rely on the influx of student athletes at the end of the college season for rowers to participate in the National Championships. As the Nationals are usually in June, the clubs must select quickly to choose crews, hence seat racing. It may be noted that early selection allows the "cuts" to leave the program and seek summer employment.

The high school rowing programs are generally much smaller than the university programs. In most cases, the schools are organized to allow students the opportunity of participating in a different sport during each semester (fall, winter and spring). Rowing is a spring sport. Since there are sometimes only 2 to 3 weeks of training before the first race, there is again a need for fast, yet effective, selection: seat racing.

Finally, the National Teams are generally formed using candidates from the clubs and universities who are often all together for the first occasion at the end of June. Since there is no real club racing season and information may be lacking about many of the candidates (for example, information on their ability to race either in boats other than an eight or in different combinations), seat racing is a valuable and efficient tool.

Method

The seat racing process is often used to select from a group of athletes with different technique, skills or fitness, and unknown racing ability. The procedure is a direct race for a seat by switching the athlete with another athlete from one boat to another boat.

Although the race can take place over the standard course distance of 2000 m, **it is recommended that either a measured distance (1000 or 1500 m) or a timed interval (3 to 5 minutes) be used.** The reason is simply the fact that many races may be necessary either in one day or over a number of days which may cause too much stress on the athletes if the full distance is used.

It is also recommended that a fixed start not be utilized and, therefore, **it will be necessary to control the start by having the crews rowing into the start together while uniformly increasing the rate and pressure on the command of the starter.** Although it is recommended that the boats are reasonably aligned for rowing into the start, there is usually a difference in start position. This difference should be minimum and must be noted to ensure the determination of the correct difference at the finish.

It is also usual to control the rate during the race. The actual rate depends on the boat type, the ability of the rowers and the training period but will probably be in the range of 30 to 34 strokes per minute.

After the race, the boats pull together and switch one of the rowers. This switch takes place on the water immediately after the race. The crews then proceed to the start area for the next race.

An actual format may be the following:

We have a group of 16 sweep rowers (8 starboard and 8 port) and have perhaps already made a preliminary ranking from 1 to 8 for each side. We divide them into two groups of coxed fours (4+). We race them within each group and, after 2 to 3 sessions, we know the winners (the 2 best starboards and the 2 best ports) and the losers in each group.

Then, we race one 4+ of winners from one group against the winners from the other group and the losers against the losers. After that we are ready to make the final ranking.

The selection can be completed in 3 to 4 days if everything goes smoothly and without interruptions (injury, broken equipment, bad weather, etc.). Most coaches prefer using the 4+ for seat racing of sweep rowers because the results are readable, there are fewer variables and one session may be enough to learn about each group of the four athletes from one side.

Example of a Seat Racing Session with Two 4+

The following is an example of seat racing with two 4+ designated A and B.

	A	B
#4 stroke	4A	4B
#3	3A	3B
#2	2A	2B
#1 bow	1A	1B
cox	John	Mark

1st Race - 5 mins: A>B by 2 seats.

The difference of 2 seats is the coach's determination of the net difference of the bow of the boats at the finish. This difference is measured by an eye observation from the coach using a reference point of the space occupied by the athlete in the boat; that is, the space from the back of the slide to the front of the footstretcher. Thus, boat A finished 2 seats ahead of boat B.

NO CHANGE.

2nd Race - 5 mins: A>B by 3 seats.

This demonstrates consistency and verifiable results. In the event that the results are otherwise (for example, B>A by 5 seats) it would be necessary to examine the two strokes or look for an athlete who is an "anchor."

CHANGE #3. (3A to B; 3B to A)

3rd Race - 5 mins: B>A by 5 seats.

Since 3A won the 2nd race by 3 seats and, after the change, the 3rd race by 5 seats, athlete 3A is better than athlete 3B by 7-8 seats.

CHANGE #1. (1A to B; 1B to A)

4th Race - 5 mins: B>A by 1 length or 10 seats.

Therefore, 1A is better than 1B by 5 seats.

CHANGE #2. (2A to B; 2B to A)

5th Race - 5 mins: A>B by 5 seats.

Therefore, 2B is better than 2A by 15 seats. Indirectly the strokes (4A and 4B) have now also been compared with the result that 4A is better than 4B by 7-8 seats.

To provide a different scenario for a change, it is possible to switch back any two individuals either immediately or later to confirm results.

Analysis

The results may be analyzed directly or indirectly.

1. Direct results demonstrate:

Port winners:	4A 2B	Starboard winners:	3A 1A
losers:	4B 2A	losers:	3B 1B

For the next session, we pair winners against winners and losers against losers. Thus, we will have for the next set of seat racing with two 4+ these designated A and B boats:

	A	B
#4 stroke	4A	2B
#3	3A	1A
#2	2A	4B
#1 bow	3B	1B
cox	John	Mark

After this session, we will have enough information to provide a final ranking for port and starboard within this group.

2. Indirect results may be determined by counting won (+) and lost (-) races by the number of seats. This would demonstrate:

Race:	1	2	3	4	5		
4A	+2	+3	-5	-10	+5	=	-5
3A	+2	+3	+5	+10	-5	=	+15

Note: The rowers are from different sides.

3. In the case when most of boat A has been selected and we are seeking a final clarification, we could also examine the results to determine who has made boat A go the fastest. This may demonstrate:

Boat A with 3A rows 1500 m in 4:15. Boat B with 1A rows 1500 m in 4:20.

Boat A with 1A rows 1500 m in 4:18. Boat B with 3A rows 1500 m in 4:24.

This result indicates that 3A would be selected because this athlete made boat A go the fastest in spite of the bigger difference when changed to boat B.

Crucial Aspects

There are a number of important points that must be given consideration during seat racing. These are:

1. The equipment must be comparable, in good condition and properly rigged.
2. There should be no rigging changes during or between the sessions.
3. There must be a good clean start with no crew either jumping the start or overstroking.
4. The stroke rate must be in a narrow range and controlled closely at all times.
5. The situation during the race should be noted; that is, who led, who sprinted, etc.
6. If a crew suffers a crab, broken equipment, etc. during the race, note the time and position at the time of the mishap.
7. Seat racing should not be used to select from athletes who exhibit poor technique.
8. It is not proper to race tired rowers who have had a few sessions of seat racing against rested rowers who are making their first appearance.
9. It is important to note the different position of the bow of the boats at both the start and finish, even small differences, in order to determine the net difference at the finish.
10. If the race will determine an important selection, it may be advisable to repeat the race or immediately switch back for the next change.
11. The maximum number of races should be 5 in one session otherwise you may be selecting the survivors and not necessarily the fastest.
12. After each switch, ask the coxswains about the races, the switches and the feeling in the boat.

Summary

Seat racing is a simple, objective tool for the selection of rowers especially when working with a large group.

It allows a direct comparison between two rowers under the same conditions with other factors constant (boat, stroke and crew combination). It is a great training and racing preparation device and **the rowers like it - the simple answer.**

But, it is easy to miss fast combinations; and, it is also easy to exaggerate the use of seat racing and overtrain the rowers.

Remember, seat racing sessions that are well conducted and correctly analyzed will provide a valuable tool to be used for a simple, objective and effective selection.