Survival Guide for High School Rowers

The following is a guide for those interested in rowing at the high school level. Rowing is the ultimate team sport in that what you do on and off the water directly affects your team mates. It is a sport where you can learn a great deal about yourself while actually having the opportunity to change the things that you may not like about yourself with the support of your peers and an involved coaching staff. Like most sports, rowing can build character and cement lasting friendships along the way. This guide is by no means a complete path to ultimate success in your rowing career, but rather an attempt to guide you through the many different challenges and opportunities that await you in this sport.

Freshman year:

During the school year

Fall

• Speak with experienced oarsmen about the program. This is your most important resource to learn about the sport and the program. Ask lots of questions regarding the program. Some things you may want to know are:
  - How long are the practices?
  - How many coaches are there?
  - How far is the boat house?
  - What is the equipment like?
• Keep an open mind
• Learn from the upper classmen, find a rower to shadow or work with
• Keep a low profile
• Work on core strength and flexibility
• Learn how to row the erg.
• If your school offers fall rowing now is a good time to try the sport out without a lot of commitment on your part. If your school does not row in the fall then play another sport!

Winter

• Play another sport! Swim, play hockey, squash, basketball... the idea here is to compete.
• Get on the erg on a regular basis and pull steady state pieces
• Continue to work on core strength and flexibility. Ask your coach for body resistance workouts.
• “Face time”. Be seen at the boat house or the gym with the other rowers. It is during the winter months that you start to build the trust of your team mates.

Spring

• Have fun! Freshmen year is the time when you start to build friendships and bonds that can last a lifetime. Usually you will be in a lower boat with less pressure than a varsity boat.
• Focus on technique and pulling hard. Your coach can help you with your technique. If he or she is asking you to make a change in your technique, make a consistent effort to make the change. (You will most likely find a way on your own to “make it through the stroke”. This may get you through the stroke without “crabbing” yet it can lead to bad habits in your technique that will prevent your future advancement).
Summer

- Learn to scull! Get small boat experience. Sculling or rowing in small boats will help your sense of balance and feel for the boat. It also helps with your stroke as you get instant feedback to what helps move the boat and what doesn’t.
- Cross train; hike, bike, swim etc. Stay active and learn to be an athlete.
- Start a weight lifting program

Sophomore year:

Fall

- If your program rows in the fall, follow your coach’s training program.
- If your program does not row in the fall, play another sport!
- Continue your summer lifting program with rowing specific exercises while ensuring that you maintain a well balanced body.
- Get back in touch with the erg. This is the time to begin to build an aerobic base that will help lower your 2k times in the winter.

Winter

- Compete in other sports!
- Get a partner to workout with. This will help you stay on track and get you through the long dreary months of winter.
- Face time! Be seen by the other rowers. Do not train by yourself or during “off hours”. It is important that the other rowers, especially the rowers who are in the upper boats, see you on the erg or in the weight room. They need to know that you are taking rowing seriously. They will play a role with the coach concerning your possible position early in the season.
- Do long steady state pieces on the erg
- Maintain a regular lifting program
- Consider rowing at the Crash B’s

Spring

- This is the year to make yourself known.
- Focus on improving your technique.
- Learn to pull hard on EVERY stroke during pieces in practice.
- Learn the ethics of rowing this year; sportsmanship, values, and dedication to your team mates.
- Stay positive even if the season is going poorly. Start to develop your leadership skills.

Summer

- Go to a rowing camp or row for a local club
- Compete in small boats.
- Consider trying out for the Jr. Development camp
- Cross train and get back into a lifting program
- Start thinking about colleges!
Junior year:

Fall

- See sophomore fall suggestions...
- This is a critical year for you as far as colleges. Your junior year grades matter the most to the colleges, NOT THE FALL TERM OF YOUR SENIOR YEAR!
- Begin researching college rowing programs. Pay close attention to the seniors in the program and what schools they are looking at. What are their qualifications and what schools are realistic for them? Learn from their mistakes and successes.
- START MAKING CONTACT WITH COLLEGE COACHES; Go to their websites and fill out the recruiting questionnaires. E-mail the coaches and let them know that you are interested in their program.
- GO TO THE HEAD OF THE CHARLES TO MEET COACHES. This is a terrific opportunity to meet lots of coaches without a lot of effort.
- Make a decision to be a leader this year. Even though you are most likely not a captain for your program, you can develop your leadership skills. Organize workouts for your team mates; i.e. separate or additional lifting sessions.
- Speak with your coach early in the fall. Discuss your goals for the year, focus on improvement; 2K scores etc. (Do not focus on a particular seat in a boat! The coach will determine that in the spring and there are so many other factors that you have no control over that may prevent you from achieving your goal).

Winter

- Play another sport
- Develop, with the help of your coach, a realistic training program to increase strength and flexibility for the spring.
- Row at the Crash Bs
- Lots of steady state work on the erg to build your aerobic base.
- Start visiting colleges

Spring

- Focus on intensity this season.
- Understand how seat races work
- Constantly strive to improve your technique
- Be a leader through example
- Sign up for SAT 2 subject tests
- Sign up for a SAT summer course

Summer

- Try out for Jr. National team
- Go to summer rowing camps
- Do something unique for college resume!
- Cross train
- Contact rowing coaches at perspective colleges
- Visit college campuses and start making a list
Senior year:

Fall

- Make a contact list with your coach for colleges. Decide on the top couple of schools and give your coach all pertinent information regarding your grades, SATs etc.
- Contact teachers early in the process for college recommendations
- Decide if you want to apply ED to any of your schools on your list.
- Periodically contact the college coaches on your list to keep your name on their radar
- Visit colleges.
- Go to the Head of the Charles
- Work with the other seniors and your coach on how to prepare for the spring season to bring in recruits and develop the younger rowers.
- Lead the lifting programs and the other land workouts or the on the water workouts.

Winter

- Keep in contact with the college coaches.
- Row at Crash Bs
- This is the season that helps determine how your squad does in the spring. As seniors this is your year to lead the younger guys.
- Be positive during the winter training. You can make a huge difference on the development of the younger rowers and they in turn can help add boat speed to your boat in the spring.

Spring

- Row and train as you would like to be remembered. If you have a great attitude, row hard and leave a positive impression so that you will be remembered for years to come for your contributions to the program.
- You determine the legacy you leave behind. Take advantage of it.
- See the season through to the end. You were once underclassmen. Even if your season is not going well you owe it to your team mates to finish the year off with class even if you are into a college. The senior prom is not an excuse to let your team mates down on race day or the week before the Championships!

After graduation

- Remember your program. The many opportunities that availed themselves due to rowing are a good reason to give back to your program at a future date.
- Get involved as alum. E-mail your coach, stay in touch with the oarsmen that are still rowing for your school.
- Stay in touch with the guys that you rowed with in high school.
- Come back to support your program and go to a race!
The role of the Erg and your times:

- “Ergs don’t float”

ERG SCORES:

Although a strong erg score gets you noticed as a rower, you must be able to back it up with technique on the water.

Erg scores are like SATs. They get you an “interview”, or a shot at a seat.

However, a great 2k score does not mean you will automatically make the top boat. You must have strong technique to match your scores and be able to defend your scores in seat races. What a coach is looking for in your erg tests is a consistent improvement on your tests throughout the year. One word of advice, never quit in an erg test! Unless there is something physically wrong with you, always finish the test. Don’t quit!

In order to make a game plan for your test try the following practice tests:

4 X 500 meters with 250meters rest in between sets. Record your average split.

Rest ten minutes; drink some water, stretch and lightly spin the erg to stay warm.

2 X 1,000 meters with 5 minutes of rest in between sets. Record your average split.

Find the average split between the two tests. This should give you a good idea of what split you should be able to hold for the 2K test. Write out your game plan on an index card for the test and hand it to a coach, coxswain, or teammate prior to the test so that they can coach you through the test.

SEAT RACING:

Sometime in your rowing career you will take part in a seat race. This is an opportunity to prove yourself to the coach and to your team mates. Be sure to get plenty of sleep the night before the seat racing and eat well prior to the practice.

- You will typically be raced in fours. In the smaller boats, compared to the eights, the swing and the feel play a major role in making the boat go fast. When you are first put in the boat take the first twenty or thirty strokes to get a feel for the boat and how to swing with the other three rowers in the boat. The better you make the boat “feel” the harder everyone can pull and thus you’ll move your boat faster. Once the boat is swinging well together, settle into a rhythm and pull hard with good technique for the entire race.

- The objective of a seat race is to make any boat you sit in faster than the boat was without you in it.

- Your coach is looking for a combination of excellent technique that allows you and the rest of the rowers to pull hard. Without good technique and boat feel, power alone will not move your boat!!

How seat racing works:

The coach will pick a location that is fairly straight and with even lanes. Often the coach will tell the coxswain that they can only callout stroke ratings and time during the piece. The standard length of the seat race is three minutes.
Most races start with two control pieces, one in each direction, and at a set rating. The coach will record the winning margin as well as details about each of the pieces. The coach will then switch the two “target” rowers between the two boats. They are given a couple of minutes to row in the new boat and then lined up again over the same course as the original pieces.

Two more pieces are run and the margins are recorded. In order to “win a seat race” your boat must either win all four pieces OR close the winning margin between the two boats after the switch. For example, if you are in a boat for the first two pieces and win both pieces by 1 length, and then after switching into the “slower” boat you lose the next two pieces by only ½ length, you actually have won the seat race.

Unless there is a clear winner in these races, the coach may or may not make a switch in his or her boat depending on how he or she believes you will impact the boat.

You will then have a trail period in the coach’s boat to assess your “fit” with the other rowers and then a decision will be made.

How coaches choose boats and seats

When a coach puts together a lineup, he or she is looking at which eight rowers work together the best in a shell. He or she often puts rowers together as pairs in the eight. This might mean that someone is placed in a lower boat if the coach believes that the rower would “fit” better in another boat and make it go faster or if the rower would benefit from a couple of weeks rowing at a lower rating or intensity.

A coach will decide the paring that he or she feels will make the boat the fastest for that week. Sometimes rowers believe that they were not chosen for a seat in a specific boat because the “coach doesn’t like me”! Although this is a convenient excuse for the rower that feels wronged, there is rarely a time that this statement can be justified. The coach has to look at what is best for the boat as a whole. Typically this means speed.

Many rowers make the mistake of believing that once they make a specific boat that they have “earned their seat for the rest of the season”. This is not the case.

In a competitive program, the coach will often change the boats around to try new combinations as the season progresses and as other rowers gain experience. One should approach every practice as if you are getting seat raced.

Earn your seat every day and leave no room for doubt in the coach’s mind that you belong in the boat. If you do get changed out of the boat, take the next week to correct your technique with your coaches’ guidance. Focus on being the best technician and rower you can be.

Remember, it’s the program as a whole that is the priority for the coach, not what seat you happen to be sitting in.

The hierarchy for you to address complaints:

There may be times when you do not completely understand why a decision that affected you was made and you feel you may have been wronged. There is a correct way of dealing with such situations.
Please follow the protocol below:

- **The 24 hour rule.** If you feel something was unfair in the way a decision was made and the coach did not immediately address the issue in a manner that you agreed with, then take 24 hours to “cool off”. It will only make matters worse if you approach the issue in anger and the belief that the coach “has it out for you”.

- During the 24 hour grace period you should discuss your grievance with your captain who is the “go between” for the team and the coach.

- After 24 hours search **the coach of your boat** out again, and in a mature manner ask him or her to help you understand why the event unfolded the way it did.

- If, after 24 hours, you still do not understand or agree with the coach your next step is to discuss the event with **the head coach** of the program. It may be in your best interest to have the captain with you at this time. If you still have a grievance at this point it may be wise to involve your parents. They can call the head coach on your behalf at this time.

- If after talking with the head coach you still feel the same way then the next person you should seek advice from is the Athletic Director of the school.

Part of rowing is learning how to deal with adversity. A coach will respect an individual who, when faced with adversity seeks advice and then works at overcoming the problem at hand and wins his or her seat or position back. You will be faced with adversity and disappointments throughout you entire adult life. It is how we deal with these setbacks that help to determine your character and molds the young man or woman you are trying to find within you.

**CONCLUSION:**

In closing, let me emphasize once again that “rowing is the ultimate team sport”. It is also one that helps to teach you a great deal about yourself. If, after a race or a hard practice, you feel that you let yourself and your teammates down because you did not perform at the very best to your abilities, then you have the next day to make a change.

Most athletes do not have the opportunity to participate in sports at this level. Many of you will not realize the impact of this experience until you go on to college and participate at the next level. You may become disillusioned by the equipment or the fact that other athletes may not take it as seriously as you do. You also may find that the coaches treat the athletes as “numbers” and can quickly replace you if you’re injured or sick.

The days you spend on the water during your high school career can be some of the most rewarding times in your athletic career. Some of you may go on to become great collegiate or national level rowers, yet always remember your first strokes and what it took to get there.

Good luck and most of all have fun!

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