



Mid Hudson Rowing Association

Coxswain's Handbook

February 2022

At some point in your novice rowing experience, you will be asked to be the coxswain for your crew. The first time is always pretty scary. Follow the instructions of your coach, and you will be fine.

The MHRA Coxswain's Handbook was created by Mid Hudson Rowing Association for coxswains in MHRA's recreational and competitive rowing programs. Take a few minutes to read through it and familiarize yourself with the terms. You don't need to memorize anything. Your coach will lead you through your coxing debut, and your crew mates will support and appreciate your efforts. This handbook is designed to introduce you to boat handling, coxing on the water, and assisting you in navigating your way around the boat bays and on the Hudson River.



Table of Contents

1. The Role of the Coxswain.....	3
2. Steering, Stopping, and Turning.....	5
3. Commands	8
4. Boat Handling.....	11
5. Safety	14
6. Equipment.....	16
7. Appendix	18
Basic Rowing Terms	18
Coxswain Commands	21
Useful Links	23



1. The Role of the Coxswain

The coxswain leads their crew on and off the water as well as steers the boat. A crew's performance is as dependent on a well-prepared coxswain as it is on the technical and athletic abilities of the rowers. The coxswain also plays an essential role in the psychology of the team, maintenance of the equipment, and the effectiveness and efficiency of a practice session.

Specific coxswain roles listed below

- Maintain a calm and purposeful manner when working with your crew. Your calm attitude will translate to the crew. You set the tone for the practice or race.
- If you are focused and confident of your job, your crew will respond to your leadership. Even if you are not confident, fake it! Get all the information you can from your coach, then do your job the best you can.
- Ensure the safety of the rowers and the boat both on and off the water.
- Maximize practice time by motivating your crew to be quick and efficient in the boat bays and on the dock. Know where your coach expects you to meet him/her on the water.
- Steering, Launching, and Landing.
- Provide the leadership needed to maintain the attention and focus of the rowers.
- General care of the equipment you use. Report any damage to your coach, and write any repair needs in the "repair notebook", which is located on the credenza in Bay 6.
- Communication with the coach regarding the practice. The coach depends on you to assist in practice management and for feedback from your perspective in the boat. Express difficulties you may be having (i.e., steering, docking, motivation, crew member, etc.). Also report all boat successes (i.e., set, drill execution, etc.)
- Maximizing the quality of the practice by filling "down" time with drills (if you are not sure which drills are appropriate for your crew, ask your coach before practice).



- Giving specific direction to individual rowers for better oar handling, matching and blade work. Follow up with feedback to let the rower(s) know if they've made the appropriate correction.



2. Steering, Stopping, and Turning

Steering Basics

- Push the steering mechanism or steering cable in the direction you want to turn.
- Keep on course by picking and maintaining a point high enough on the horizon, so that you can always see it over your rowers.
- Make small adjustments to keep the boat on course.
- Be aware that sharp steering will affect the set of the boat and may disrupt the rowers' focus.

Advanced Steering

- The lag time between rudder application and hull response is from 3/4 of a stroke to 1 1/2 full strokes.
- Fours are more responsive, making them more difficult to keep straight.
- The rudder mechanism needs to be tight otherwise coxswains can unintentionally move the rudder in trying to stabilize their own bodies. Keep even pressure on the steering cables until you want to adjust your course. Movement of the coxswain can cause rowers to continually adjust to variables they cannot control. You can increase your stability by grasping both gunwales and the steering cable simultaneously. Hold the steering cable with 2 fingers only.

When to Steer

- Turning slows the boat because of rudder drag and because the rowers have a harder time setting the boat.
- Try to minimize your turning.
- Anticipate the need to steer, as the boat begins to move off course and make small corrections early.
- A shell is more stable when the blades are in the water. Try to steer while the blades are in the water.
- A shell is less stable when the blades are out of the water. Try not to steer when the blades are out of the water.



- The boat accelerates on the drive and decelerates on the recovery. Steering is less responsive the slower the boat is moving.

Coxing Style

- Always give a thumbs-up when you have understood your coach's instruction. If you do not understand, signal your coach by putting your hand to your ear, or ask for clarification if your coach is close to you.
- Turn your Cox box OFF if you need to yell to your coach or others outside of your boat. If you need the amplification of the cox box to talk to the coach or others outside of your boat, tell your crew.
- When adjusting a point have your 7 or 8 seat back or hold water while your 1 or 2 seat rows. This will let you spin your boat without moving forward or backwards.
- When making a gradual turn, steer during the drive and straighten the rudder during the recovery.
- When making a sharp turn it is OK to keep the rudder to one side. However, tell your rowers when you are "on the rudder" and again when you're "off the rudder".

Steering Practice

- Refrain from steering for a given number of strokes. If your boat naturally steers straight, you will see how little you need to steer. If your boat tends to pull to one side you may need to work with the coach to find which rower(s) is being out-pulled. Over steering may hide what is really happening in the boat.

Stopping

- When having a crew stop you can give the command, "In two.... weigh-enough" or "on this one, weigh-enough. Always say when you want your crew to stop before you say weigh-enough. Say "weigh-enough" on the catch i.e. as the blades go through the water.
- You can stop your boat by holding down all eight. You can keep your boat from moving by having all eight square their blades and hold water. "All 8 check it" or "All 8 hold water"
- Always have your crew "glide" after they weigh-enough. Rowers should stop with their "hands away". If the command is "weigh-enough", blades should be feathered and on the water. If the command is "let it run", blades should be off the water, and feathered.
- Always stop your crew even with the other boats or immediately pull your boat even after



you have stopped by using your stern pair or four to row.

- Maintain your point and keep boats parallel while stopped. You should always be adjusting your point even if the coach is talking (use your stern or bow pair, make brief comments, trying not to interrupt the coach), so that you are ready to go when the practice is ready to continue. Communicate to other coxswains what you are doing and if you need their help. Do not wait for the coach to tell you to “get your point”.

Turning Around

- Always turn your boat into the wind, unless that causes you to violate the traffic pattern.
- Begin by having stroke hold water (or additional oars, all on the same side of the boat). Ask bow (or additional oars on the same side of the boat) to row.
- Another way to do it: begin the turn by backing first. i.e. have stroke back (or additional oars all on the same side of the boat), followed by bow to row (or additional oars all on the same side of the boat)
- Maintain a set boat during the entire turn.
- Unless otherwise directed, turn your boat one side at a time (i.e., ports to back, starboards to row, ready back, row, back”, etc...).
- If two or more boats are turning, stagger the boats so that all boats can turn without collision.
- Always turn your boat so that you end up facing in the right direction for the traffic pattern when you finish your turn.



3. Commands

Your voice, execution of drills and workouts set the tone for your boat. A coxswain with a confident voice and precise calling of commands will ensure the focus of your rowers and the quality of your row.

On land or water, the coxswain tells the rowers 1)what to do 2)when to do it 3)to do it.

Examples, on-water, each command on a stroke:

“In two, up two.....one, two (counting on the stroke).....up two”

“Up two on this one.....up two”

Example, on-land, rhythmically:

“Up overhead.....ready.....up”

Attitude

- Have confidence in your ability to make accurate decisions and in correcting mistakes. Do not apologize. Just make the change in your command and then continue.
- Demand attention and focus from your rowers on and off the water.
- Treat the rowers with respect.

Voice

- Use a deep voice versus a high/shrill squeal.
- Don't be afraid to be quiet as you assess a situation and then make a decision. Try not to think out loud.
- If you anticipate a tight situation, or there is a wake coming, give the rowers a calm warning. “Starboards, we're passing another crew on your side, heads up.” Or “Wake coming from the port side in 3 strokes.”
- As the intensity of a practice or race increases, your voice needs to remain calm and relaxed. Do not increase the volume or speed of your voice unless it is for specific emphasis (i.e., power ten, passing a boat, etc...). Increase the intensity of your voice rather than the volume.



- Your voice affects your rowers. If you talk fast, the slide will tend to increase. If you panic, your rowers will panic. When you're nervous, your rowers will be nervous. It is very important that you remain calm under stress whether you are lining up for a race or trying to maneuver your boat in a tricky situation during practice.

- Use a strong and assertive speaking voice. Never yell or scream at your rowers. Remember that just because you speak loudly in the bays, you do not have to take an angry tone.

Timing – on water

- Counting (“in two....one,two...”) is reserved for counting strokes on the water, not on land.

- Always count your strokes at precisely the same moment as the stroke’s catch. Calling the count before or after the catch will confuse your rowers and can lead to unmatched rowing. Never count at the release.

- Always start your command by saying, for example, “in two...”

- Starting to row: Tell your rowers where you’ll start from (the finish, the catch). Use “Ready all” to start the rowers.

Boat Handling – on land

- “Ready” is used for on-land commands. Counting (“one, two”) is reserved for on-water.

Examples, on-land:

“Up overhead.....ready.....up”

“Split to shoulders.....ready.....split”

“Roll to slings.....ready.....roll”

“One foot to the edge....Roll to water.....ready....roll”

Miscellaneous

- Wakes: Always set up for a wake with your boat parallel to the wake. Use turning protocol to position your boat.



- Always give a thumbs-up after a coach gives you instruction, to acknowledge that you understand.
- Keep your hand in the air or signal the coach if you do not understand an instruction. Always ask questions if you do not understand an instruction.
- Always stop even with other crews or immediately pull your boat up to the other boats by fours or pairs (do not wait for the coach to tell you to do this).
- Contribute your ideas to the coach. Communicate problems/concerns (i.e., not understanding instructions, internal boat conflicts, etc...) to your coach.
- There should be no talking in the boat other than from you or unless rowers are responding to a question or have an emergency (i.e., broken equipment, injury, etc...). Use positive language to reinforce this: 'all rowers listening'.
- Do not speak when the coach is talking. Keep the count in your head and then continue calling the piece when the coach has stopped talking. Use silence to your benefit by letting the rowers hear the rhythm and listen for the bubbles, while giving yourself a break too. If you talk nonstop, rowers will tune you out.



4. Boat Handling

Carrying boats

- There should be no talking other than from you in the boat bay or as you walk your boat.
- All rowers should carry the boat at their shoulders, or just above, if they are not as tall as others.
- Have rowers split opposite their riggers (i.e., ports split right, starboards split left). People helping carry a heavier boat should split so that sides are equal (have rowers tip their heads in the direction they are going to go, while the boat is still overheads).

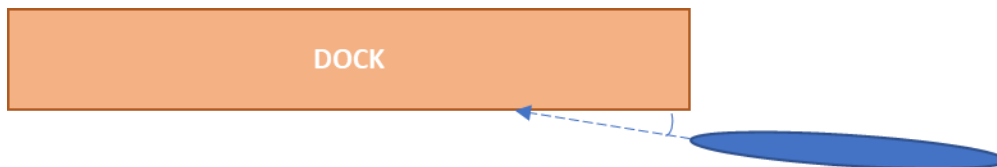
Launching

- Stand and face your rowers as you call your commands. They cannot hear you if you turn your face away from them.
- As the boat is rolled into the water, move to the stern and make sure the fin does not hit the dock.
- Designate, for example, ports to carry oars and have starboards undo the oarlocks. We get oars after the boat is in the water. Make sure rowers hustle as they retrieve the oars.
- When your crew is placing the oars in the boat or removing them use the following order.
 - a. Launching: Have dockside oars in first. Make sure rowers hold the boat for others as they place the waterside oars.
 - b. Docking: Have waterside oars removed first. Make sure rowers hold the boat for others as they remove the waterside oars.
- Look to make sure all rowers are ready to push their oars out. Say, "oars across".
- Call for the rowers to enter the boat together "one foot on the tape, down and in" (in = tie in). Coxswain always enter last.
- Say "count down from bow when ready"
- Make sure the boat is held a couple of inches away from the dock so the bolts won't get caught on the dock as rowers get in/out of the boat. No part of any boat should ever touch anything except water, the rack or rowers.

- Always make sure rowers keep their hands on their oars.
- Immediately walk (or push) the boat off the dock. “One hand on the dock, ready, push”
- Call for bow to take a few strokes, then add oars as needed to maneuver off the dock area
- If you are waiting for another boat to launch and join your practice, wait in the area just off the dock and tie into the foot stretchers on the water. If you are the last boat to launch, row to the rest of the boats in your practice by stern four (full slide) while the bow four tie in and then switch fours.
- If you have tied in and are waiting for other crews or for the coach, check your marks at the catch and the release and do catch/release drills.
- Always leave the dock going north, to stay in the traffic pattern.

Docking

- Always approach the dock slowly by pairs (sometimes fours works, but use good judgment). Typically the stern pair is used to bring the boat in. Approach the dock from the south.
- Approach the dock slowly. The boat’s speed can be adjusted a few ways: dropping out a pair, and the use of different slide lengths: full slide, half, quarter, arms&body, or arms only, as needed depending on conditions (current, winds).
- Notice which way the wind will blow you and adjust for it, with angle and speed.
- Approach the dock at a slight angle (less than or equal to about 15° depending on conditions).
- Point your bow about a quarter of the way up the dock. Do not point your bow on the corner of the dock.



- There should be no talking from the crew during docking.



- Remember that when you have your rowers lean away from the dock, the boat will momentarily travel slightly towards the dock. Remind your rowers not to lift their blades until your command to do so. If you have some or all of the ports (waterside rowers) 'hold water', the bow will pull away from the dock.
- Coxswain always gets out first. Hold the boat while you make sure all rowers are ready to leave the boat in unison, before you call "one foot up, up and out".
- 8+ and 4+ boats are taken into the bays and stored on the racks bow- in house.



5. Safety

Boat handling

On land or water, the coxswain tells the rowers 1)what to do 2)when to do it 3)to do it.

- Always tell your rowers what it is you want them to do before you ask them to do it. Stand facing the rowers so that everyone can hear you.
- Make sure everyone on your boat is ready and quiet before you issue commands. Make sure rowers synchronize their movements. For example, when setting the boat in the water or picking it up, make sure that everyone does so at the same time.
- Make sure everyone is carrying the boat at his or her shoulders or above.
- When pressing the boat “up and over heads” or setting the boat into the water, make sure everyone in your boat is working and contributing.
- There should be no talking during boat handling procedures.

Steering

- You must stay within the correct traffic pattern at all times. Near the shore going north, away from the shore going south. **STUDY THE TRAFFIC PATTERN MAP IN THE BAY!**
- Always strive to keep the other boats in your practice no more than an oars’ length away from you.
- Act quickly. Anticipate what will be asked of you next. Never let yourself drift into an undesired position. If your decision is wrong, at least you will know and can quickly change your command.
- Stay out of the shipping lane!

Rowing

- Rowers should remain quiet while on the water.
- Rowers should synchronize their motions so that the boat remains set at all times.
- Never let the boat ride or sit in an unset position. If it is down to the same side 2 strokes in a row, call for the rowers to set the boat immediately.



- Give clear commands so that the rowers know what is expected of them.
- Always give a thumbs-up after a coach gives you an instruction to acknowledge.
- Use bow and stern lights in the credenza in Bay 6, if you anticipate any rowing in darkened conditions.

Obstruction in the water

- When something wraps around the fin and/or rudder, you will feel a vibration in the stern. You may also not be able to steer effectively. You should be able to clear it quickly by reaching under the boat and pulling the debris off.
- If you have snagged a line or other large objects on your fin, stop immediately so that it does not rip off your fin. Then reach under the boat and clear it.
- Do not push down on an object under the hull since it may push back up through the hull.
- If you run over a solid object you will probably hear a loud thunk. If the fin is ripped off, your boat will veer from side to side. The fin could also be bent or it could be pushed up through the hull of the boat. In any case, you must row back to the boathouse immediately. Remember, if there is damage to, or loss of the fin, your ability to steer will be greatly impaired so row back with great caution. One way to do this is to row with stern 6, and have either bow or 2 seat row as needed for steering.

Miscellaneous

- The Hudson River is a tidal river, and we share it with other recreational and commercial craft. Be aware of the direction of the tide, the current, the winds. Watch for barge traffic, recreational craft, and anticipate their wakes.
- Command: “Heads Up” - pay attention, something to watch out for is near you. This command should always be used when someone may not see your shell coming at him or her such as when leaving the boathouse or launching/carrying boats at a regatta.



6. Equipment

Oars

- Oars should be carried blades in front, and set it the rack.
- Make sure everyone has the correct oar and that it is placed in its oarlock correctly before launching.

Foot stretchers

- Foot stretchers should be set at “the catch”, meaning: When the rowers sits in the catch position, the center of the rower’s seat and the pin (the part of the rigger that holds the oarlock in place) of the rigger should be in the same line.

Oar height

- Make sure rowers have enough clearance as they row. Moving spacers above the oarlock will lower the height and moving spacers below the oarlock will increase the height. Set height at the release position.

Wiping boats down

- Boats should be wiped down after each row. Designate a pair from your boat to do so (you will find in some programs the rowers all automatically wipe the boat down.....nothing needs to be said in those cases). This job should not fall on your shoulders.

Cox Boxes

- Know where your Cox box is at all times. Always replace your Cox box immediately after you row and make sure it is plugged into its charger. Cox box **MUST** be turned off before plugging it into the charger.
- Always carry your Cox box by the handle and head-set (together).
- Never leave a Cox box on the dock or sitting in the boat bay.

Clothing

- Always have rain gear accessible in case the weather is nasty or you are in a bow loader.



- Dress warmly at all times if the weather is less than perfect. Cold coxswains are less effective.
- Have a spare set of clothes at the boathouse to change into in case you get wet during practice.

Rigging Boats

- You should be able to take riggers off and put riggers back on. Be aware of the nuts and bolts required to hold a rigger onto the boat and know which order they go.
- Tighten all nuts 'finger tight' and let the coach or coxswain do the final tightening with the tools.



7. Appendix

Basic Rowing Terms

1. **Blade:** The flat end of the oar.
2. **Bow:** The forward section of the boat. Also used to refer to the person in the seat closest to the bow. The bow seat.
3. **Button or Collar:** A wide collar on the oar that keeps it from slipping through the oarlock.
4. **Catch:** The first part of the stroke when the blade enters the water.
5. **Coxswain (Cox'n):** The person who steers the shell and gives commands for operating the boat.
6. **Crab:** When the blade gets trapped under the water and forces the oar handle against the rower, sometimes pushing the rower out of the boat.
7. **Drive:** The part of the rowing stroke when the rower is pulling on the handle of the oar.
8. **Ergometer (Erg):** A rowing machine that closely approximates the actual rowing motion, used to improve technique and for body conditioning.
9. **Feather:** When the blade is parallel to the water to minimize wind resistance and interference with the water. A position arrived at by slowly turning the oar handle with the inside hand, when sweep rowing, or by each hand when scull rowing.
10. **Finish:** The part of the stroke at the end of the drive, legs flat and back laid back and hands at your mark, just before releasing the blade from the water to begin the recovery.
11. **Footstretcher:** Where the rower's feet go. The feet are laced in to the footstretcher, but not in a way that could prevent the feet from getting out quickly in case of a capsize.
12. **Gate:** The bar across the oarlock that keeps the oar in place. It must be kept closed when rowing, and after removing the oar before taking the boat out of the water.
13. **Gunwale or Gunnel:** Top edge of the boat where the riggers attach.
14. **Hands away:** The part of the stroke when the hands push away from the body, which moves the blade towards the bow of the boat. This is the first phase of the recovery, and is



initiated before the back swings forward (towards the stern) and before the seat starts to slide towards the stern. The legs are kept flat until the hands pass over the knees.

15. **Hull:** The boat itself

16. **Inside Hand:** In sweep rowing, it is the hand closest to the oarlock. The inside hand controls rotation of the oar for feathering.

17. **Launch:** The small motorboat used by the coach or just to accompany boats as a rescue craft. The launch driver is also authorized to make safety related decisions, and is called the safety officer.

18. **Layback:** The backward lean of your body from the hips at the finish of the stroke.

19. **Oar:** Used to drive the boat forward; rowers do not use “paddles” as in a canoe or kayak.

20. **Oarlock/gate:** The U-shaped hardware that holds the oar.

21. **Outside Hand:** In sweep rowing, the hand that is on the end of the oar. Used to pull only, not to help feather.

22. **Port:** The left side of the boat, while facing forward. The universal nautical color code for the Port side is red.

23. **Recovery:** The phase of the rowing stroke when the oar is not in the water, while you move the blade into position for the next stroke.

24. **Release:** The phase of the rowing stroke when the oar comes out of the water at the end of the pull.

25. **Rigger:** The triangular (usually) shaped metal structure that is bolted onto the side of the boat and holds the oar.

26. **Riverturn:** A method for turning the shell around by having one side pull forward, alternating with the other side pushing backwards.

27. **Roll-up:** The phase of the rowing stroke when the oar is going from “feathered” to “squared”. Also called “squaring”.

28. **Run:** The run is the distance the boat moves during one Stroke, and is an indication of the amount of power being applied to the oars. It can be seen by the distance between the puddles left by the same oar from one stroke to the next stroke. We generally want the puddle from the front oar to be past the point where the last oar on that side of the boat enters the



water for a new stroke. With enough power, the puddle from the bow oar will be past the very end of the boat before the next stroke.

29. **Seat number:** All seats, or rowing positions, are assigned a number, always counting from the bow seat as number 1. The odd numbers are starboard oars in a sweep boat, usually, and the even numbers are usually port. Thus the stroke position, in the stern, is seat #8 in an eight, and #4 in a four or quad.

30. **Sculling:** One of the two types of rowing. In sculling each rower has 2 sculling oars or 2 sculls.

31. **Set:** The balance of the boat. “To set the boat” means to bring it into balance. The term “the boat is to Starboard (or Port) means the boat leaning to that side.

32. **Shell:** The correct term for the boat, to distinguish it from other types of rowing craft. However, we will frequently use the term “boat” among ourselves.

33. **Slide:** The track for the wheels of each seat in the boat.

34. **Squaring:** The phase of the rowing stroke when the oar is going from “feathered” to “squared”. Also called “roll-up”.

35. **Starboard:** The right side of the boat while facing forward. The universal nautical color code for the Starboard side is green.

36. **Stern:** The rear of the boat, and the direction the rowers are facing.

37. **Stretcher or Sling:** The support that the shell is placed on to store it.

38. **Stroke:** The rower who sits closest to the stern. The stroke sets the rhythm for the boat. Others must follow exactly the stroke’s cadence. In an eight person shell, the stroke is seat #8. Traditionally the stroke rows on the Port side in a sweep boat, but boats can also be rigged for starboard stroking.

39. **Stroke Rate:** The cadence, always measured as the number of strokes per minute. A typical training stroke rate is 20 to 22. A racing stroke rate can go as high as 36, sometimes even higher for shorter distances.

40. **Sweep:** One of the two types of rowing. In sweep rowing each rower has a single, large oar.

41. **Swing:** The hard-to-define feeling when near-perfect synchronization of motion occurs in the shell, enhancing performance, speed, and pleasure with rowing.



Coxswain Commands

Getting on the water:

Getting the shell out the boathouse

1. Hands on! (allow for rowers to position themselves with four bunched on each end).
2. Up an inch Ready.... Up (Be careful of Skeg).
3. Bring it to the center of the house
4. Split to shoulders...Ready....Split
5. Walk it forward
6. (Once at the slings) Weigh enough. Walk it to the slings. Weigh enough. Up over head...Ready....Up. Roll to slings....Ready....Roll.
7. Hands on!
8. Up overhead....Ready...Up
9. Split to shoulders....Ready....Split
10. Up and over heads when approaching the dock.
11. Swing the stern. Swing the bow.
12. Weigh enough- toes to the edge.
13. Roll it in....Ready....Roll. Push it out and down (putting emphasis on pushing out to prevent hitting the dock with the fin or shell).
14. Ports get oars, Starboards unlock.... Be efficient! Be Quick!
15. Ready All! Oars across... one foot on the tape, down and in. (In our club, rowers typically tie in at the dock, but other clubs tie in on the water to limit time on the dock.)
16. Get yourself in the coxswain seat AFTER all rowers to prevent flipping.
17. Count off when ready.



18. Hands on the dock...Ready... Shove or Push.

19. To save time on the dock, have rowers adjust foot stretchers and spacers on the water

Getting off the water:

1.(Landing) Lean away. Weigh enough.

2. Count off when ready.

3. Always get out of the boat first before crew.

4. One foot up... Up and out!

5. Bring oars across, or Oars In.

6. Be quick! Be efficient.

7. Hands on!

8. Up and over heads! Ready... Up!

9. Lock the arms, push up it! Walk it forward.

10. Split to shoulders at the top (once off dock).

11. Weigh Enough. Roll to slings -Ready...Roll.



Useful Links

Coxswaination.com

CoxPod.com

Thecoxguide.com

9thseat.com