

How Much, How Often

Last Thursday, 30th January 2003, I braved the elements and attended the talk at York City Rowing Club given by Pete Sheppard - Chief Coach, GB Juniors. It was a thoroughly enjoyable and interesting talk that was well organised by Loretta Williams.

I wanted to write a few lines to share some of the key themes of Pete's talk.

The talk covered three themes:

- Progression.
- Key coaching themes.
- Ideas on structuring our junior programmes within our clubs.

Progression

Between the ages of 11 and 12 juniors should have no more than one session per week and this should focus solely on technique and skills.

At the ages of 12 and 13 our juniors should be focussing on fun events and developing skills and technique. At 12 they should have no more than 2 sessions per week, rising to 3 when they are 13.

At 14, they should have no more than 4 sessions - two-thirds on the water - still focussing mainly on technique.

At 15 they may move up to 6 sessions per week and we may want to introduce weights sessions (technique not heavy weights) although strength training may have started earlier through body-weight circuits. As they move into the J14/15 age range they should be looking at mainly local and regional competition but the main message at this age was to mix it up (both in terms of different crews/boat types within rowing but also looking at other interests outside of rowing). If we have kids at this age who are showing potential we shouldn't push them too hard - allow them to mix in with everyone else.

At 16 we are looking at between 6 and 8 sessions (4 or 5 on the water with 2 strength sessions). At J16 they have the first opportunity to sample international racing through the GB France Match.

At J17/18 we are looking at 7-8 sessions per week initially, rising to 10-12. This is where the commitment required at the highest level becomes greater but it is still important to find the balance between rowing and other commitments e.g. 'A' Levels.

Key coaching themes

Technique was described as the means of making the boat travel the furthest distance possible in each and every stroke (as distinct from style).

Pete outlined three key priority areas for us to focus on when developing our junior athletes. These were:

1. Posture -particularly around the core and shoulders. A strong posture around our middles allows the power from the legs to be transmitted to the oar. If we are soggy round the middle all this energy generated by the legs will be lost.
2. Holding the handles.
3. Blade work.

The important lesson from the discussion was the need to develop good habits in our athletes. During the session Pete gave everyone plenty of opportunity to try out some of the coaching aids he brought along such as kneeling on inflatable balls (or trying to!) to improve our core stability.

Ideas on structuring our junior programmes within our clubs

The third area Pete focussed on was the structure of the junior programmes within our clubs. Pete suggested that in many clubs these could benefit from greater structure in terms of how coaches and athletes progress through the ranks. The main suggestion Pete made was that coaches should stay with the same age group for 2-3 years rather than moving through with the same athletes. This way the coach benefits by applying skills learnt to the next intake and the athletes learn by being exposed to different coaches every year.

Three models were suggested, with Model C being perhaps the most flexible:

1. Model A: J14 / J15 / J16-18.
2. Model B: J14 and J15 / J16 / J17 and J18.
3. Model C: Novices / Intermediates / Racing.

The principle behind all these models is the same. We should think about the most appropriate split of athletes given the coaching resources we have available and a coach should keep coaching at the same level for a number of years.