

# A guide for coxes at Inverness RC



This is intended to be a simple set of guidelines for coxing at Inverness. It is not a definitive set of instructions and it assumes that coxes have had some basic rowing training and been out on the canal a few times at least. It is also a personal view from an old overweight cox who learned to row in the days of fixed pins (ask the old farts) and no cox-boxes – we regarded the megaphone strapped to the mouth as a new fangled device! It is not a racing coxes guide, more of a confidence builder for occasional, or new coxes.



## **Why cox?**

Well we need them to keep the boat reasonably straight and because it would be a shame to have an empty seat (usually rather uncomfortable and designed for narrow bums and short legs). More seriously, they are a VITAL part of the crew and make or break a race or an outing. It is often regarded as an unwelcome chore – but actually can be very rewarding for the cox who can make a real difference – without breaking sweat!

## **So what is the Cox for?**

- Ballast?
- To take the blame?
- To hold the hip flask?

**Possibly....but really the job falls into four broad areas:**

- *Steering*
- *Command*
- *Coaching/Motivation*
- *Safety.*

**The last is probably the most important in these days of Health and Safety – so please read to the end!**

## Steering.

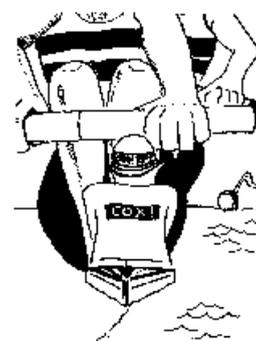
Probably the most obvious task – and potentially the most crucial. Looks simple enough, but races have been lost more than once by poor steering. (I should know, I've done it!) More importantly – poor or casual steering can lead to accidents – at the least damaging the boat, at worst injuring crew.

Basic principle is to take as straight and smooth a course as possible. Every movement of the rudder will slow the boat slightly and sharper movements will upset the balance of the boat.

Anticipate your line into a bend giving yourself enough room, that way you don't have to yank it round! On the canal (see Map enclosed with this guide) we stick to the right hand side and don't have to think about keeping in or out of the stream or worry about tides etc. This means that the fastest course is nearly always the straightest possible line. (Not true for other places where tides, eddies and river currents can make life much more complicated!)

Each boat has a different type of rudder and some are less responsive than others - eights particularly are quite long and can take a while to respond.

Looking ahead – it is the coxes responsibility to watch out for potential hazards such as other craft. Not always as easy as it sounds because there are up to eight bodies between you and the view ahead! The most dangerous situation is actually a straight course with apparently no other boats – something can appear in the blind spot at the last moment – **very** slight 'weaving' will let you see – try not to lean from side to side too much it buggers the balance.



If the situation is such that the rudder won't do the job on it's own (it's only a wee thing) you may have to ask the crew to help, either by asking one side to pull harder or the other to ease off.

*Bow loaders: luckily IRC doesn't have any at the time of writing, but some clubs do. This is where the Cox is virtually lying down at the front of the boat – you can see better, but steering is less responsive because you are further from the rudder. You also don't see your crew which makes coaching and motivation (see below) that much harder. An entertaining side effect is that a strong racing start can catapult the cox into an even more 'prone' position from which there is no recovery until someone heaves you out later!*

More experienced coxes sometimes use the rudder in short 'bursts' as the blades enter the water, easing off as they are coming forward – it affects the balance less and probably takes slightly less 'way' of the boat.

### **Turning the boat.**

Simple is best. The idea is simply to ‘spin’ the boat on its axis without touching either bank. Usually for us it involves a left hand turn.

If the boat still has some ‘way’ on it then ask stroke side\* to hold her gently to start the turn, then it is a matter of asking bow side to ‘paddle on’ and stroke side to back her down, watching that your stern (the bit behind you) isn’t in danger of hitting the bank or anything else and if necessary asking whoever is at bow to watch that the bow isn’t going to touch the other side. If in doubt feel free to use just some of the crew – it takes longer, but you may feel more in control. (ie bow and three, and stroke and six at opposite ends works fine) Whatever method you or the crew choose – alternate strokes, short sharp strokes together – it should be done with discipline and together – like everything else.

*\* we’ll assume you already know that ‘Stroke side’ is the one on your left (from the back 2, 4, 6 and stroke) and ‘Bow Side’ is the one on your right (Bow, 3, 5 and 7)... unless some clever so-and-so has decided to ‘frig rig’ the boat with stroke on the other side and vice versa – VERY confusing for the cox!*

### **Manoeuvring at rest.**

If the crew is sitting listening to the coach or resting, it is your responsibility to keep the boat and the blades from drifting into the bank or too far off line or into the canal. Usually all it needs is for bow or 2 to ‘touch’ her - one or two strokes. Sometimes you may prefer to get someone to ‘back’ her – perhaps to help straighten the boat and stop her drifting down.

It is also coxes responsibility to get the boat straight before starting – particularly in a race – but even when practicing. The last thing you want to do is to pull the rudder hard on the first few strokes and upset the balance when the crew is already struggling to get the momentum going.

## **Command**

The cox is in charge of the boat and the crew - REALLY! The coach or captain of the crew (often the stroke, but not necessarily) will decide what the shape of the outing should be in terms of exercises, duration etc, but they should work via the cox. (Sometime a coach will decide to give some commands from the bank – perhaps for quick changes or exercises, practice starts etc – but the cox is still responsible for safety and may have to override from the boat)

Commands from the moment the boat leaves the rack to it’s return should be given by the cox, preferably firmly and audibly. You are in charge and should sound it! It gives confidence, particularly in an emergency and it all helps crew motivation and discipline. Doing things together as a crew is vital – on and off the water.

### **Around the Boat House.**

The Cox takes charge of the crew taking the boat off its rack and on to the water. As with all such actions, the crew need to be clear what you want and do it together otherwise accidents can occur and boats damaged. Think about how you want to get the boat out – it will depend on which rack it's on, how experienced the crew are etc.

Safety first – don't ask inexperienced crews to take the boat 'over heads', get them to hold it and turn it at waist level and then get the crew to go under one at a time. If in doubt ask them what they want to do – and then make it clear what you have decided!

We ALWAYS put the boat in the water with the bow up-stream - towards Loch Ness – even if we are going to turn and go back under the bridge first. Going down the steps – best to take it one step at a time at your command and put the boat WELL out in the water to avoid damage – even if they have to get their feet wet to do it!

At Inverness we usually get them into the boat one at a time, loading stroke side first so that their blades go in to balance the boat. While loading, best to have two people holding the boat steady, and not too close to the steps as the boat drops in the water as people get in and could get damaged by the bottom step.

Life Jacket – it is compulsory these days for coxes to wear a life jacket for EVERY outing. It has been known for crews to be disqualified in a race if the cox is not seen to be properly attired!

### **Cox Box**

This is the handy box (actually it is usually a cylinder) that plugs into the boat and allows the cox to be heard via the internal speaker system. It also has electronic readouts of things like stroke rate, a timing device etc. The main thing is to make sure that it is charged up (which means someone taking it home from time to time and plugging it in). It is also important to check that it works *before* you get in the boat. When taking it in or out, don't yank the plugs and sockets and *don't* let the plugs get water in them. Check that everyone in the crew can hear you.

*Sometimes the cox box fails to perform. This means depending on the old fashioned method – shouting! (Coxes who have some acting or speaking experience will know how to 'project' their voice without screeching) Keep the commands very simple and give the crew extra warning of impending actions – at worst it means that crew half way down can pass on your intentions to those further from you! Particularly difficult on windy days.*

### Getting going

You need to know roughly what the outing ‘plan’ is – and why. If there is a coach he/she will probably have discussed it with you – if not, ASK!

Check the crew are ready to go – stretchers adjusted, gates done up etc –  
 (*‘Number from Bow when you are ready’ is a handy command – both before and during an outing after adjustments to gear or clothing etc.*)

Examples of some commands you are likely to need are summarised below – the main thing is to try and be consistent so that they get used to what you want and how you are going to ask! Keep the crew informed of what is happening next - so for example, if you intend to stop soon, say something like “ a few strokes more” – “last few” – that way they’ll be ready. If a change of pressure, slide length or rate is coming – we usually say ‘NEXT STROKE...’ as a warning.

Commands should be clear and loud – and where possible should be in step with the rhythm of the stroke – rowing is all about rhythm and anything the cox can do to help that is a bonus. For example ‘EASY’ - as the blades go in (catch) ... ‘ALL’ as they come out (finish). Try to make it clear exactly when the command is to be actioned – so: “Full pressure” on one stroke or at the finish of a stroke and: “Go” on the catch of the next one.

### Some Sample Commands

<b>‘Hands on’ or ‘Hands across’</b>	Crew get in position to lift the boat
<b>‘Ready... lift’</b>	You get the gist...
<b>‘Bow Side holding – stroke side going under’</b>	One side holds the boat up while the other goes under – often done one at a time – in which case do it by crew names or numbers
<b>‘At waists (or ‘shoulders’ or ‘over heads’) – go’</b>	Tells them how to carry the boat in or out and when to do it
<b>Turn her to the canal (away from the canal)</b>	Which way they should turn the boat to get it ready for the water or boat house
<b>Front-stops’ or ‘Come Forward’</b>	Both bring the crew forward to start
<b>‘Backstops’</b>	Crew sits at the finish ready to start
<b>‘Paddling Light’ or just ‘Light’</b>	Tells them to use little or no pressure
<b>‘Quarter pressure’ (&amp; Half/ Full)</b>	You guessed....
<b>‘Ready’</b>	Crew sits up and squares blade in water (usually....)
<b>‘Go’</b>	Kind of obvious
<b>‘Easy All’</b>	Normal stop – crew balance till:
<b>‘Easy’ or ‘Drop’</b>	Blades rest on the water and crew rest
<b>‘Hold her’ or ‘Hold her lightly’</b>	Blades on the water angled to slow the boat – sometimes followed by:

*Sample commands continued*

<b>‘Hold her HARD’</b>	Blades held square in the water to stop the boat quickly – you hope!
<b>‘Back her down’</b>	Blades reversed in the water to send the boat backwards – not easy with all 8 – steering is tricky – bit like reversing a trailer.
<b>‘Next stroke – three-quarter slide, half slide, quarter slide, bodies only (or bodies over), arms only’</b>	Slide exercises – usually used in a sequence with approx 20 strokes between.
<b>‘Build to full pressure in 3 : ‘3 – 2 – 1’</b>	Changes of pressure etc with a built in build-up.
<b>‘Wind her down’</b>	At the end of a hard piece of work – to take the rating down and allow muscles to relax
<b>‘Touch her 2’ (bow pair etc)</b>	To get the crew to manoeuvre the boat
<b>‘Er – um.... Not sure’</b>	Best not use this one

**Counting**

Unfortunately for some of us, coxes are often expected to be able to count. Exercises, spurts, starts etc all consist of finite numbers of strokes – usually 10 or 20. Easy enough if you have nothing else to do like coach, steer, motivate etc – but a bit of a problem at times for those who have difficulty multi-tasking. Crews won’t thank you for making a hard pressure 20 last 24. If you are technically minded you may be able to set the cox box to count strokes for you – or best of all find a crew member near the stern (7 or stroke) to help. Sad things, they often have nothing better to do and will be counting anyway – so get them to tell you at 17 or 18. Crews also appreciated being kept in the know, so tell them when you get to 18 or whatever before the change of pace, pressure etc.

**Getting back in to the steps**

This is one of the trickier bits... the idea is to bring the boat in under control so that it doesn’t hit the steps, yet gets in close enough for someone to catch a blade. Come in at a bit of an angle with the bow pointing towards the middle of the steps and ‘easy all’ when some way off. If the crew can sit the boat reasonably level this allows you to steer the boat while it still has some ‘way’ (momentum) on it and begin to bring her round alongside the steps. You can get stroke to hold her lightly if you are close enough which should bring the stern in a bit. Crew on bow side should pass their oar handles forward to the person in front as you go in. If you have got yourself stuck too far off, you can crab the boat sideways by getting stroke to use 7 (or 3’s) blade to move her in. No shame in stopping some way off and take her in by getting stern pair to take a few strokes. You may need to remind the crew on bow side to watch their blades.

Getting the boat out of the water and onto some ‘blocks’ ready for a quick wash down is similar to getting the boat afloat – but remember the crew are likely to be tired, less motivated and possibly even excited and inattentive after a good outing or race! You are still the boss – this is when silly accidents often happen.

## **COACHING/MOTIVATION and other things**

This can be the fun part ! Clearly this is easier as you get more experience – both as a rower and a cox - but it makes to task more interesting and is worth getting involved with. The cox is part of the team and can often see and feel things that can help the crew. In a tight race, the cox really CAN make all the difference by leading, cajoling, sharpening technique, keeping the crew focussed and squeezing the last bit of oomph out of them. The same is true to a lesser extent in a regular outing.

When there is a coach on the bank – say relatively little and reinforce the things being highlighted. Often there is no coach and the cox can help remind the crew of technique, pick up timing issues etc. Some things you might try:

**‘Place the catch’** to encourage a smooth catch which doesn’t stop the momentum

**‘Squeeze it’** to remind them to accelerate through the stroke

**Finishes together** – if the finishes aren’t clean and together the boat won’t sit or run for the next stroke

**‘Timing’** pretty obvious, but the cox can often feel and see the timing going off – a sharp reminder will focus the crew

**‘Smooth slide’** – if you can feel it getting rushed or ‘clunky’

**‘Keep it long’** –

**‘Let the boat run’**

... the list is almost endless. **BUT:**

**Don’t get carried away and overdo it. Thick rowers can only focus on one thing at a time – so don’t pick on five different things over five strokes... one thing at a time!**

There is a temptation to talk too much for some coxes (can’t think of any in our club though) When the rhythm is right and the boat is running, encouraging the crew to listen and keeping quiet yourself can be equally effective. No need to shout too much either (difficult for those of us who pre-date the electronic age) – the cox box allows you to speak gently and quietly – sometimes all that is needed to keep the rhythm and smooth action.

If you see an individual doing something obviously wrong, a gentle reminder can be helpful and is usually appreciated. Tends to be things like squaring to early or too late, feathering too high, timing ... the kinds of things you can see.

**Motivation.** Particularly important when racing of course, but even in an ordinary outing the cox has a big influence on how the crew feels. Keep it light – but firm when required. Positive comments when things are going reasonably well – only castigate when it's clearly warranted.

After a long break or rest, get them to sit-up and get in the mood for the next bit of work.

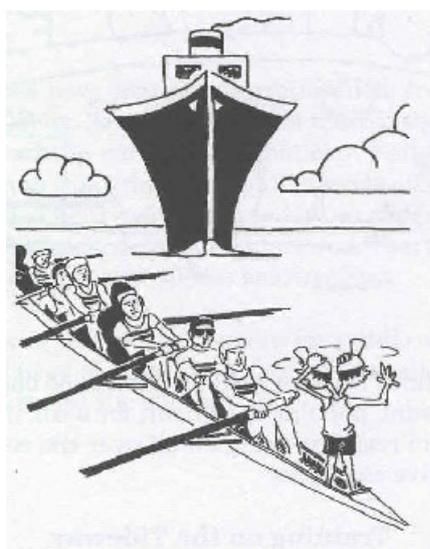
Keep them informed of some things going on ahead and around them. Remember they can't see ahead – so if there is an unusual boat coming, the club captain is out in his scull (or even out of his scull?!), there is a wash coming, swans in the way or a bit of wind, tell them - it makes the crew feel you are on their side. However – remember also that they should be focussing on their OWN boat and technique so you need to bring their minds back to their own performance quick and not distract them too much.

## **SAFETY & THINGS**

The crew's safety is largely your responsibility. So – if in doubt, play it safe.

The canal is a safe environment on the whole, but the dangers are there – mostly from the risk of collision with the bank or other craft.

Technically you have right of way over 'powered' craft, but don't depend on it. Cruisers are a well-known hazard, particularly at the weekends when they



are fresh behind the wheel and have no idea of how to handle them! Give them a wide berth and don't expect them to understand that rowing boats are delicately balanced and low in the water. The Jacobite Queen is big, but the skippers are experienced and rower-friendly – they'll give you a wee toot if they think you haven't seen them coming, but don't make life difficult for them – for example where the canal is narrow try not to get yourself in a position where there are rowing boats either side, she isn't that easy to manoeuvre and cannot get too close the bank without getting sucked in. The most dangerous boats are some of the small

trawlers that steam through from time to time – they tend to go fast (with a big wash) and when they slow down, they lose steerage and can weave all over the place.

Other things on the water include: the odd bit of ‘flotsam’ (luckily much less than some rivers and coastal rowing places) which can damage a boat or a blade; birds - most of which move out of the way – but avoid the swans, they tend to be slower - and if you disturb a group of ducklings you will never hear the end of it from some of the crew (particularly those with a mothering instinct); dog walkers occasionally encourage their dogs to swim – just remember a swimming dog is slow to get out of the way and the owner won’t thank you for clobbering his pooch.

Capsizing is thankfully a VERY rare occurrence for a coxed crew, but it CAN occur – usually after a collision. As a cox you are probably wearing more than most which makes swimming difficult – hence the life jacket. Make sure you know how to inflate it! If the worst happens, stay with the boat (which will stay afloat even if damaged) and get the crew (after you have done a quick head count) to kick it towards the bank.

In winter there is occasionally ice on the canal – dangerous stuff because it can easily damage the boat.

There are a few fences that protrude into the canal which are easy to miss – or not - and if you doze off more than usual you may end up ploughing into the barge house-boat at Dochfour.

Keep a reasonable distance from the lock gates at either end.

If it’s cold and wet – don’t keep the crew hanging about at rest for too long – you may be wrapped up warm, but they will really feel it if they have been working hard and then sit at rest getting cold and wet. Your OWN health matters too – in winter it easy to get chilled. Wear plenty of layers – and always bring a bag with dry clothes in it to change into if needed.

Curiously – one of the most likely places for a nasty accident is around the boat house when moving boats. Riggers are nasty hard things and we don’t like blood stains on them either –seriously, it is YOUR responsibility to make sure people are out of the way or away of your intentions. A beefy shout of ‘MIND YOUR BACKS’ usually does it.

**Good coxes are worth their weight (which matters less than you think) in seconds gained. It is a task often handed out in desperation at the last minute - amazing what bribes are offered. Yet it can be one of the most rewarding jobs in the club – there is nothing better than working with a crew who have had their difficulties, helping them get through it and feeling it come together as you cross the finishing line first!**

