

A Guide to Advanced Coxing on the Isis

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Thanks to Carolyn for helping me to proof-read and refine this text.

Chapter 1: Prerequisites

Before starting, a brief introduction. I'm a college-level cox for Linacre College, Oxford, and I have been coxing for just three years. There are many who can quite rightly claim greater experience and skills than myself, and who would be better suitable for writing a text about advanced coxing. If they have already done so however, I haven't found it. When I was learning the ropes, I tried to read up about coxing techniques in rowing books and on the internet, but whilst I was able to find plenty of useful information aimed at the beginner, there seemed to be a real lack of anything aimed at those aspiring to a higher level of competency. Therefore, in writing this guide, my intentions are simply to fill a void in the information available to coxes. Others may want to use this as the base for a more useful document in future. If so, they are more than welcome.

This guide addresses coxing specifically on the Isis stretch in Oxford, however I hope that some of the information will be applicable elsewhere. Some other river stretches already have their own purpose-written guides. Those looking to cox on the Tideway, for example, might want to look at the Tideway Slug's coxing guide at <http://www.twrc.rowing.org.uk/coach/tideway.htm>. At some point, I have considered setting up a dedicated coxing wiki, a Coxipedia if you like, where people could contribute their own guides for popular stretches around the UK. In the meantime however, a quick Google search should hopefully help you find something appropriate.

Of course there is no substitute to getting onto the water and actively coxing. Trying out different ideas, and being receptive to the feedback from your crew and coaches, is the quickest way to improve your abilities. It should also be borne in mind that coxing technique is a very personal and subjective matter, and that there is no single right or wrong way to do it. What works well on one crew may be a turn-off for another, and it's the cox's responsibility to be in tune with his or her crew and to figure out what type of approach is required. A good cox is ever inventive and always flexible.

This guide is **not** aimed at those who are just starting off. The safety of the crew is paramount as the cox's primary role, and coxes should be comfortable with the basic techniques associated with handling a boat and crew before thinking about anything else. There are several excellent resources out there for beginners, which are well worth looking at.

- **OURCS Basic Coxing Handbook**
<http://www.quarrell.demon.co.uk/hbk.html>
A guide to the basic commands, with boating and landing instructions specific to the Isis.
- **Brasenose College Coxing Guide**
<http://bncbc.bnc.ox.ac.uk/coxing/>
A newly written and excellent guide to starting coxing.

- **1st and Third Trinity Coxing Guide**

<http://www.firstandthird.org/tables/rowing/coxguide.shtml>

This guide is Cambridge specific, but highlights the basics of Safety, Steering and Speech very well.

Finally anybody looking to take their coxing seriously should be fully acquainted with the Rules of the River. These may be specific to your stretch, or they may follow instructions drawn up by national bodies such as the EA (Environmental Agency) and the ARA (Amateur Rowing Association). For those of you coxing at Oxford, you should read the following:

- **OURCS Rules**

<http://www.ourcs.org.uk/ourcs/rules/index>

This site contains a description of all the rules which college crews in Oxford must abide by.

- **ourcsWiki**

http://wiki.ourcs.org.uk/index.php?title=Main_Page

This wiki provides helpful explanations or clarifications of the main rules, along with other useful information.

If you have any comments on how this guide can be improved, please feel free to get in touch.

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Chapter 2. Coaching a Crew

A cox who is prepared to get the most out of their crew can attempt to do so in one of three ways. The first is to actively coach the crew, either alone or in collaboration with a separate coach. The second is to use special calls to motivate the crew, and the third is to take the best line possible. The second two are more race-specific, and are dealt with in the subsequent chapters.

Coaching is perhaps the most difficult skill to master, as it requires a sound understanding of the mechanics of rowing technique and a feel for what the boat is doing. It's certainly the area which caused me the most difficulty, and even today I still wouldn't claim to be a truly proficient coaching cox. However a cox who can coach can make a significant contribution to the success of a training outing. The cox is in the ideal position for seeing certain faults, such as bad timings at the catch and blade heights, and can make big improvements to the crew's performance by relaying this information back and issuing corrections.

This chapter is designed as an introduction into certain aspects of coaching. The really enthusiastic cox will probably want to go further, and read a dedicated coaching manual such as the [official FISA manual](#) along with a good reference on the [physics of rowing](#).

Rowing technique

In this section, we'll outline some of the many different calls that a cox can use to emphasise certain aspects of rowing technique. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and you should use these suggestions to develop your own calls. Listen to your coaches and rowers, get their feedback on what they do and don't like, and always be adaptive to the situation on hand.

Calls for the drive

Figure 1 outlines the basic technique. We'll deal with calls for parts of the drive stroke first. Here are some suggestions for tightening up the catch.

- ✓ "Slice it in."
- ✓ "Crisp / sharp catches."
- ✓ "Lock the blade in the water."
- ✓ "Circle the hands in at the catch."

Another focus point is to try and maximise the reach of the blade spoon behind the rower's body, to ensure as long a stroke as possible.

- ✓ "Rotate the outside shoulder."
- ✓ "Reach around the rigger."
- ✓ "Reach right around."

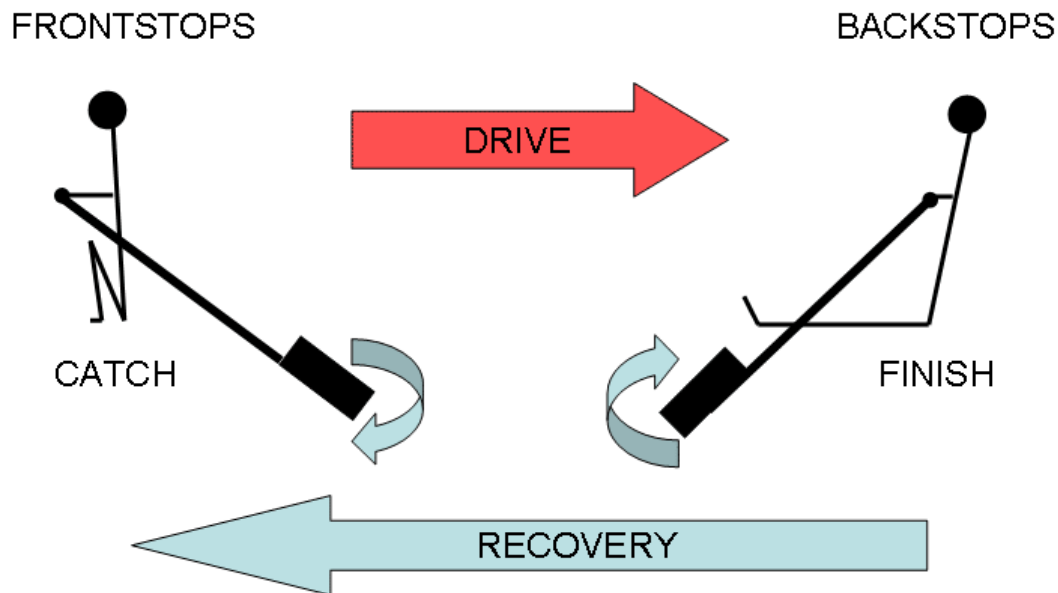


Figure 1: A schematic of the basic rowing technique

Rowers should aim to insert the blade and push off their footplates as soon as possible after they reach frontstops.

- ✓ “No pausing at the catch.”
- ✓ “Connected stroke.”

The drive is all about transmitting power into the water, using the oar as a large lever. This is when the rower needs to give their all.

- ✓ “Power through the water.”
- ✓ “Hang off the handle.”
- ✓ “Feed in the power.”
- ✓ “Power through the legs.”
- ✓ “Swing through.”

The blade should be the same depth in the water throughout the entire drive. These calls emphasise this aspect.

- ✓ “Draw through level.”
- ✓ “Keep your hands consistent.”

Posture is all important, to prevent injury to the back.

- ✓ “Heads up.”
- ✓ “Eyes straight ahead.”
- ✓ “Focus straight ahead.”
- ✓ “Sitting tall.”
- ✓ “Bodies straight.”
- ✓ “Relax the shoulders.”

The drive stroke should gain speed right through into the finish.

- ✓ “Accelerate through.”
- ✓ “Quick body and arms.”
- ✓ “Draw it into your body.”

The extraction of the blade at the finish should be clean and sharp, without any excessive splashing.

- ✓ “Clean finishes.”
- ✓ “Sharp tapdowns.”
- ✓ “Finish together.”

Extra stroke length can be found by pulling the handle through for as long as possible at the finish.

- ✓ “Hold the finishes.”
- ✓ “Push off your toes.”
- ✓ “Lean back at the finish.”
- ✓ “Draw the handle up to your chest.”

Calls for the recovery

It’s important to control the recovery part of the stroke, so that rowers have time to breathe before taking the next stroke, and also avoid perturbing the speed and balance of the boat.

- ✓ “Quick hands away.”
- ✓ “Down and away.”
- ✓ “Control the slide.”
- ✓ “Breathing.”
- ✓ “Slide together.”
- ✓ “Glide.”
- ✓ “Float.”
- ✓ “Relax up the slide.”
- ✓ “Arms then bodies.”
- ✓ “Hands away, shoulders follow.”

Rowers should aim to decelerate throughout the recovery phase, and to arrive slowly at frontstops.

- ✓ “Transfer your weight from the seat to your toes.”
- ✓ “Decelerate through.”
- ✓ “Brake with your legs.”
- ✓ “Slow the last part of the slide.”
- ✓ “Slow onto frontstops.”

They should aim to square early, balance permitting.

- ✓ “Square early / over the knees.”

Rowers should ensure that they slide forwards as far as they possibly can, in order to set themselves up for the longest stroke possible. At the same time, they should ensure that they keep the spoon close to the water, so that the catch requires the smallest possible raising of the hands to insert the blade. Sometimes bad technique can cause the spoons to rise higher before the catch, as the rower lowers their hands or leans their body forwards whilst coming to frontstops.

- ✓ “Tuck your seat into your heels.”
- ✓ “No lunging at the catch.”
- ✓ “Sit up at the catch.”

Mistakes to spot

The cox is in a position to spot mistakes in rowing technique which might not be immediately obvious to a coach, particularly a bankriding coach (although a coach following in a launch isn't quite so handicapped). This section outlines some common ones, and what the cox can try and do to correct them. The calls given are just representative examples, suggesting a few different ways of expressing a given idea. Coxes should not try to memorise these, but rather they should understand the principles and then create their own calls when required. The best way to learn though is to listen into what your coaches say to the crew, and to use those same instructions (or variations on them) in your own calls.

A quick note on the pronunciation of some of the calls. The **tone** of a cox's voice is just as important, if not more so, as the words that they use. Some of the calls where this can help have been colour-coded to indicate that a different tone of voice can help. The syllables in **red** are to be drawn out slowly (e.g. “**slowly**” should be pronounced “sloooooowly”). The words in **blue** are to be spoken quickly (e.g. “**quick**” should be said as a sharp “**QUIK!**”). However this should just be used as a simple example, as good coxing calls involve more than just three different voices. Using subtle changes of tone and pitch can go a long way in conveying your message to your rowers.

Mistimed catches

Bad timing at the catch results in a reduction in the efficiency of the crew's drive stroke, and therefore a boat which isn't going as fast as it's capable of doing. I experienced an extreme case in Torpids one year, when half the crew was finishing as the other half was taking the catch. The result was that the boat slowed to a near standstill, as the forward momentum imparted by the four finished strokes was counteracted by the rearward momentum by the other four “kicking” the boat back by rushing the slide (which is another issue in itself, addressed later).

Most cases of missed catches thankfully involve smaller split-second margins, however this principle of ‘destructive interference’ still applies, as a late catch will act as a brake as it moves against the water sped up by already-engaged blades.

Timings are best taken from the stroke seat, and this should be reiterated. Also it can help to pick out rowers who are consistently early (evidence of rushing the slide) or late (need to slide faster).

- ✓ “Take your timings off stroke.”
- ✓ “Single splash at the catch.”
- ✓ “Catches in time.”

- ✓ “Bow, you’re late on the catch.”
Maybe add a call to quicken their slide, such as
 - “Speed up your slide.”
 - “**Quick** hands at the finish.”

- ✓ “Two, you’re early on the catch.”
Maybe add a call to slow down their slide, such as
 - “Slow down your slide.”
 - “Don’t rush the slide.”
 - “**Decelerate** through your slide.”
 - “Slide with three.”

Late catches can sometimes be because the blade is too far above the water when the rower reaches frontstops. This can be due to a lowering of the hands whilst sliding, or due to their body leaning forwards (which then lowers their arms and hands). Fixing this can help sharpen up the catch timings.

- ✓ “Keep your hands level up the slide.”
- ✓ “Raise your hands slightly as you come up the slide.”
- ✓ “Don’t lunge at the catch.”
- ✓ “Don’t lean forwards at the catch.”

Mistimed finishes

Mistimed finishes can really upset the balance of the boat during the slide. If a rower is extracting their blade too early, they need to try and hold their finishes for longer, either by pulling the blade handle up higher on their body, or by leaning back more at the finish.

The blade can “wash out” at the finish. This occurs when the blade is buried at the catch, but then begins to partially emerge from the water partway through the drive. This could happen if the rower subconsciously lowers their hands during the drive.

If this happens, the rower needs to adjust their hand height during the drive, normally by raising their hands during the drive so that the blade goes deeper.

- ✓ “Take your finishes off stroke.”
- ✓ “Listen for a single sound at the finish.”
- ✓ “Consolidate the finishes.”
- ✓ “Finishes together / in time.”

- ✓ “Three, you’re finishing early.”
Maybe add a call to lengthen their stroke, such as
 - “Lean back at the finish.”
 - “Hold those finishes into the body.”
 - “**L**engthen out.”
 - “**R**each around the rigger.”
 - “Push off your toes.”

- ✓ “Four, you’re finishing late.”
Maybe add a call to shorten their stroke, such as
 - “Tap down earlier”
 - “Don’t lean back so much”
 - “**Q**uick hands into the finish.”

- ✓ “Five, your blade is washing out.”
Follow up with call to keep their blade in, such as
 - “Keep your hands raised during the drive.”
 - “Pull the handle up to your chest.”

- ✓ “Sharp **t**apdowns”
This call/exercise can sometimes help rowers listen in to the timing at the finish, as you can hear the blade handles make contact with the sideboards.

Rushing the slide

This is probably one of the most noticeable faults from the coxing seat, as a crew rushing forwards can cause a “kickback” effect as they hit the frontstops position. In severe cases, this has been known to induce mild whiplash in the cox. And rest assured that even if you don’t immediately notice, your stroke almost certainly will when he/she is being rushed by seven over-eager rowers.

As well as posing an inconvenience to the cox’s neck muscles, rushing the slide also impedes boat speed because the “kickback” jerk pushes the boat in the rearward direction, sapping its forward momentum. This often happens when rowers get panicky, and they can adopt a startled herd mentality. They therefore need to be brought under control using a combination of calls and voice tone. The importance of the latter shouldn’t be underestimated, as rowers are more likely to react to a calm, slow, soothing voice than one reflecting a lack of confidence.

- ✓ “**S**low on the slide.”
- ✓ “**C**ontrol the slide.”
- ✓ “**R**elax”
- ✓ “**D**ecelerate”
- ✓ “**S**moothly forwards”
- ✓ “Let the boat run underneath you”

Too slow on the slide

Being too slow on the slide is a common problem at higher ratings, as rowers don't come forwards quickly enough to take their next catch in time. As a first step, the rowers should move their hands away quickly at the finish can help to buy them time for the rest of the slide.

The correct sliding rate is that at which the boat glides underneath the rowers. In an ideal case, the rowers would slide forwards at the right rate thanks to the runners under their seat. However rowers often make this process more complicated, either by actively pulling themselves forwards onto their feet (thus rushing the slide), or by tightening up their legs so that they resist the boat glide. In this case, loosening their leg muscles can help them to slide forwards correctly.

Outside of the boat, the rowers should be encouraged to undergo stretching exercises to improve their flexibility, which will help them to stay loose on the slide.

- ✓ “**Quick** hands away”
- ✓ “**Spin** the hands”
- ✓ “Relax your legs on the slide.”
- ✓ “Don't resist the slide.”
- ✓ “Let the boat run underneath you.”

Boat off-balance during the drive

Rowing boats are normally stable vessels when the blades are in the water, and it takes a lot to upset their balance during this phase. A possible cause in this case is that some crew members have their blades in deeper than the others. This can be easily spotted and corrected.

- ✓ “Six, you're digging your blade in.”
Follow up with a call to correct their blade depth, such as
 - “Lower your hands.”
 - “Only bury the spoon.”

Boat off-balance during the slide

Having an unbalanced boat in the slide phase is one of the most common problems of a crew, as it is at the mercy of the many slightly varying techniques through the boat. It's certainly one of the most frustrating for the rowers, as it prevents the side closer to the water from squaring their blades and catching normally.

A rower can do several things to correct the balance, and novice rowers should be reminded of these occasionally. These include:

1. Varying their hand heights
2. Exerting outwards pressure against the gates
3. Pushing down harder on the footplate on one foot
4. Pushing down harder on the seat on one side

You should also watch out for whether the boat becomes unbalanced immediately at the finish, or whether it happens partway through the slide. If it occurs straight after the drive, you should watch out for mistimed finishes, and deal with that problem first.

Correcting the balance is best done systematically, and in a training situation, can be aided by the use of specific exercises (see next section). First, each rower should ensure that their blades are being pushed properly against the gates. After that, you should examine the individual blade heights. All of the blades should be at the same height, so if there are some that stand out as being different, those should be corrected. You could tell the appropriate rower to raise or lower their blades, but it'll make more sense to them in the heat of the moment if you tell them what to do with their hands.

- ✓ “Push your blades against your gates.”
- ✓ “Seven, raise your hands on the slide.”
Corrects a blade that is too high.
- ✓ “Stroke, lower your hands on the slide.”
Corrects a blade that's too low.



Figure 2: Note the middle two strokeside rowers in this Linacre womens VIII whose blades are too high.

If the blades seem to be at an equivalent height, you can try and make changes to the actions of an entire side. A rower can control the balance by moving their hands up or down, as this has the effect of putting different degrees of pressure onto the gates, and hence the boat sideboards.

Hands down → more pressure put downwards on the gates
→ pushes boat down on that side

Hands up → less pressure exerted on the gates
→ lets the boat rise on that side

This can be done for all the rowers on a particular side.

- ✓ “Bowside, lower your hands on the slide.”
Correcting a boat that's down on strokeside.
- ✓ “Bowside, raise your hands on the slide.”
Correcting a boat that's down on bowside.

If the balance is off after the finish, another possible adjustment is to get the rowers on the “down” side to scoop their blade deeper in the drive, to help prop up the boat on that side.

- ✓ “Strokeside draw higher.”
Helps a boat that’s down on strokeside to sit up.

It’s important to remember however that rowers should be taught to feel out for and correct the boat balance by themselves, without the need for any large-scale inputs from the cox or coach. Sometimes it’s best to remind them to stay active and to make these changes autonomously.

- ✓ “Correct the balance.”
- ✓ “Get the boat off strokeside.”
- ✓ “Feel for the balance.”
- ✓ “Make small adjustments to hand heights.”

Blades not square at the catch

This occurs at higher ratings when rowers don’t square early enough. A failure to take the catch with a square blade can result in crabs (when the blade gets sucked into the water).

- ✓ “Square early.”
- ✓ “Square over your knees.”
- ✓ “Square blades at the catch.”



Figure 3: Note the number 2 oarsman isn’t putting his blade in square at the catch.

Blades not square at the finish

This is rare but can happen if a rower has a loose grip on the handle.

- ✓ “Keep the blade square in the drive.”
- ✓ “Tighter grip in the drive.”

Exercises

(Detail some exercises that coxes can use)

Adjusting the Boat

(Talk about gearings, footplate adjustments etc...)

Chapter 3. Race Coxing

The real excitement of coxing is racing, and for those lucky enough to cox at Oxford or Cambridge, there is the unique thrill of *bumps* racing, a particularly brutal form of the sport where the cox can make a considerable difference.

A good race cox has many different qualities. First and foremost, they must be an excellent motivator, who can keep the crew relaxed and in a positive spirit in the build-up to a race, and who can find the words to encourage them to continue pushing when they begin to tire in mid-race. This skill is universal across all forms of coxed boat racing. A good example of how **not** to do it is a call that I used in a Tideway Head race, where races last around 20-25 minutes. At the one-third point I overenthusiastically called out “8 minutes down!”, at which point my already tired crew collectively slumped. Finding the right words to inspire your crew is crucial.

They also need to be highly organised, with a good awareness of the race event rules and procedures. There’s nothing less appreciated by rowers than a cox who misjudges the time before the start and has to race the crew to the startline to make it. They will also have a race plan in mind before starting, which they can use to break down the race into manageable sections for the crew and themselves.

Thirdly, they will understand the nuances of the course that they’re racing on, and be good and confident enough in their steering to take the best line. On certain courses such as the Tideway, the difference between the right and wrong lines can be several minutes over the entire course. In a shorter bumps race, selecting the right defensive line can keep your crew ahead of a faster crew that’s about to bump you, and the correct offensive line can help you to secure a bump. The only time when steering isn’t as much of a priority is on a completely straight stretch, where the cox’s job is to minimise all rudder application and to keep the boat away from any lane marker buoys. (Having your oars hitting one of those is a sure way to invite a beating from the affected rower(s) after the race.) Throw in just one bend though, and it’s a whole new ball game.

Finally, they need to have the mental awareness to do all of the above at the same time. This comes only with experience.

In this chapter, I’ll discuss the race plan and some examples of race calls for different situations. In the next chapter, I’ll go over the racing line on the Isis stretch.

The Race Plan

It’s often easier to tackle a race with some sort of strategy, rather than going all out from the start, so that your crew can conserve some energy and push hardest where it’s most necessary. You should discuss the race plan in advance with your coach and crew, and have it clear in your mind when you start. It’s also worth spending some time thinking of suitable calls to emphasise each section of the race.

In events on the Isis, the race is typically broken down into three sections:

- From the start to the Gut.
- From the Gut to the crossing point at the end of Greenbanks.
- From the OUBC rafts to the end.

There are two specific pushes that I normally tell my crew to anticipate. These are called in advance of any stream crossings (one at the Gut, the other at the end of Greenbanks), and last around 10 strokes. If we're starting a long way away from Donnington Bridge, then we may introduce a third, as we pass under the bridge. Large landmarks are excellent for pushing off from, as they provide a visible target for the rowers to focus their energies on. Bridges are particularly nice as they generate an echo if you make a call underneath them, which can really help to emphasise a shift in racing state.

In long races without many obvious features, it's even more important to break down the race, otherwise your rowers can get bored and won't know how best to pace themselves. One useful strategy is to break down the race into cycles of 3x 1 minute sections, which you repeat throughout. These comprise the following:

- 1st minute: Focus on something technical.
- 2nd minute: Do a restricted push using a subgroup of rowers (e.g. in pairs or fours).
- 3rd minute: Do a concerted push with all eight.

Getting the crew to focus on a specific part of their technique is a great way to take their mind off the hard work by allowing them to concentrate on one small part of their stroke. The section on technique calls in the previous chapter provides ideas for areas that can be focused on.

Motivational Calls

This section is a collection of motivational calls that I've collected over the years. The main call is the type that I regard some as the "stock" call. These are the ones which I use frequently, with different tones, rhythms, and volumes depending on the situation. These are used to impart some measure of aggression but also to emphasise timing at the catch and finish.

Keywords at the Catch

Catch
Push
Legs
Pop
Drive
Send it
Long
Build
Quick

Keywords at the Finish

Finish
Send
There
Away
Long
Strong
Through
Light
Down

Strike
Squeeze
Swing

These phrases are to be used as one-offs, to inject extra urgency. I've obtained several of these from the internet, and haven't used that many, and you should use your judgement as to which of these may benefit your crew. Some of these could give them that much-needed bit of fire to finish the race on a high. Others could just make them laugh. It depends totally on your crew, so treat these with caution, and use them as inspiration for your own calls.

- ✓ "Drive it down!"
- ✓ "Stomp on those footplates!"
- ✓ "Break your riggers!"
- ✓ "Bend the oar!"
- ✓ "Hammer those knees!"
- ✓ "Slam your knees down!"
- ✓ "Jump on it!"
- ✓ "Make those hands fly!"
- ✓ "Keep the fire!"
- ✓ "Make it intense!"
- ✓ "Put the power down!"
- ✓ "Pick the boat out of the water and make it fly!"
- ✓ "How much do you want this!"
- ✓ "You're invincible!"
- ✓ "We're walking like crazy!"
- ✓ "Power it up!"
- ✓ "Show me you want it!"
- ✓ "Own it!"
- ✓ "Take it here and now, make a decision!"
- ✓ "Make every stroke count!"
- ✓ "Smash off the footplates!"
- ✓ "Now's when you get tough!"
- ✓ "Grit your teeth!"
- ✓ "Hang in there!"

These are some calls to squeeze that last bit from the crew at the end of the race.

- ✓ "It's now or never!"
- ✓ "Drive for the line!"
- ✓ "Empty the tanks!"

These can be used when you're close to another crew.

- ✓ "Don't let them move!"
- ✓ "Hold them off!"
- ✓ "Reel them in!"
- ✓ "Walk away!"
- ✓ "Let's nail them!"

- ✓ “Walk right through them!”
- ✓ If side-by-side, and ahead:
”I’m on their 7 seat. Give me their 6.”
(relay their position relative to yourself)
- ✓ If side-by-side, and behind:
”We’re on their 4 seat. Give me their 3.”
(relay their position relative to your bow)

When it comes to using these types of calls, there seem to be two schools of thought. One approach is to make heavy use of these, and to motivate your crew with lots of calls like these which are aimed to fire up your crew. The other is to use them very sparingly, and to focus instead on keeping your crew calm and relaxed for as long as possible. A good example of these contrasting examples can be seen in the two Oxford vs Cambridge Boat Race coxes in 2007 and 2008. Nick Brodie (Oxford) had a very aggressive style, whereas Rebecca Dowbiggin (Cambridge) was much calmer in her approach. Dowbiggin’s approach won in 2007, whilst Brodie’s crew got their revenge the following year. As always, there’s no right or wrong approach, and it’s up to you to tailor your technique to your crew.

Chapter 4. The Isis Racing Line

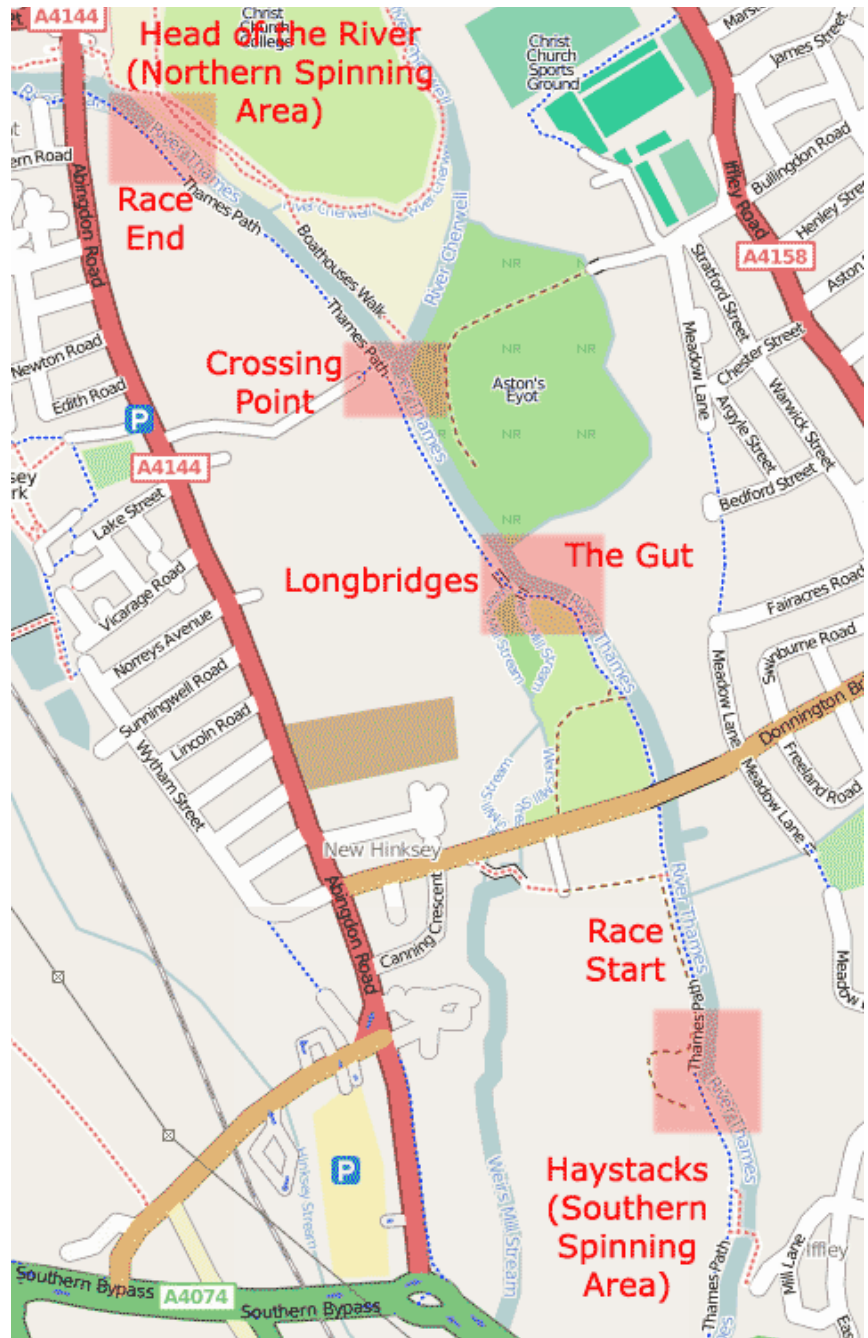
The Isis stretch in Oxford is the home for the city's many college and town boat clubs, and is also the venue for the highly anticipated *bumps* races (amongst other events). Although it's not too difficult to steer, there are several areas where a good cox can make up time for their crew by paying attention to the details of the course. I'll explain these details in this chapter, and also touch upon the art of offensive and defensive coxing in bumps events.

Overview

Races on the Isis normally take place on a north-to-south upstream stretch, around 1.2-1.5km long, from the start zone south of Donnington Bridge to the finishing zone at the Cox Stone near Foley Bridge / the Head of the River pub (Map 1). The first half of the course is fairly narrow, and contains the only difficult bend on the stretch, the Gut. The second half is much wider, and the river stream comes into play more here, particularly at the crossing over point.

At the Start

The start system depends a lot on the type of race that you'll be doing. In a Head race, crews line up south of Donnington Bridge and do a *rolling start* (i.e. they cross the start line already at full racing speed) under the bridge. The trick here is to work out

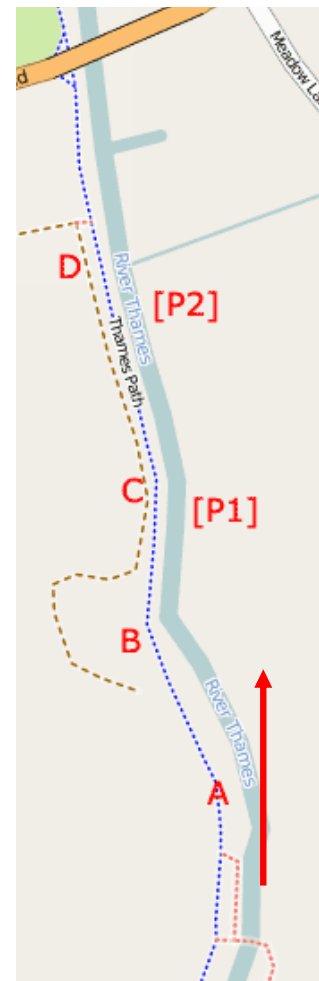


Map 1: Overview of the Isis rowing and racing stretch. Red arrow denotes normal racing direction. (Map (obtained from OpenStreetMap.com) (North = top of map)

the point at which you start winding your crew up – too early and you’ll tire them out unnecessarily, and you may also be too close to the crew in front. Overtaking before the Gut is tricky due to the narrowness of the river, so you’ll want to give yourself as much clear space in front as possible if you want to get a good time.

In a Bumps race (Torpids, Summer Eights, or CORC Bumps), the system is totally different, and an element of luck comes into play regarding your start position. All crews in a division line up along the west / towpath side of the river (positions A-D on Map 2). The first crew will be a few lengths south of Donnington Bridge (D), whilst the last will be down past the bends in the river (A). Start positions are allocated on the basis of each college crew’s position on an overall leaderboard, which is taken from the previous year’s racing (for the first day) or the previous day’s racing after the first day. The coxes hold onto a rope or bungline at their start position, and wait until a cannon fires to signal the start of the race. Crews then execute a *standing start* and head up towards Donnington Bridge.

The first 8-9 crews in a division are lined up on a straight stretch (C to D), and won’t have many difficulties in getting away. However crews between A and C will need to negotiate the tricky bend at C. The key here is to ensure that you remain tucked up close to the left (the west / towpath side) of the river after this bend. If you don’t, you’ll be exposed to the worst of the river stream, and you’ll slow your crew down unnecessarily (Figure 1).



Map 1: The Haystacks Stretch (Map obtained from OpenStreetMap.com)

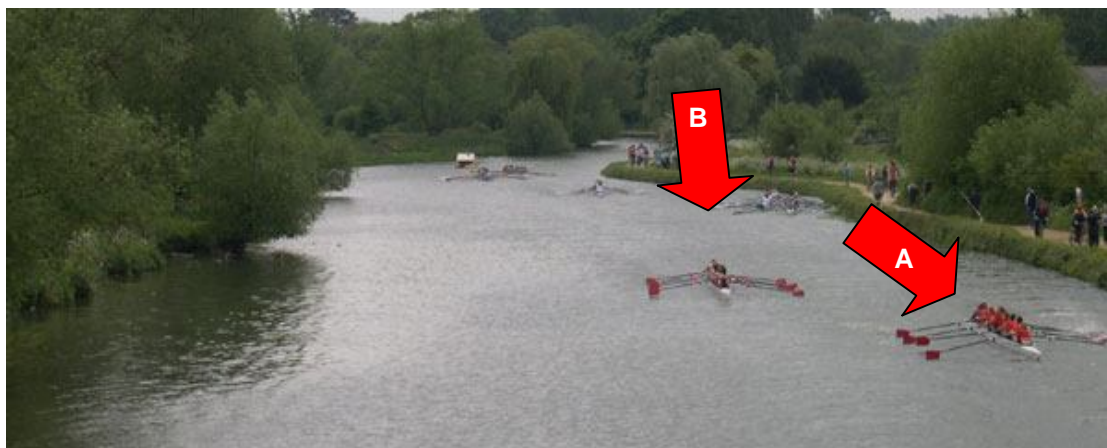
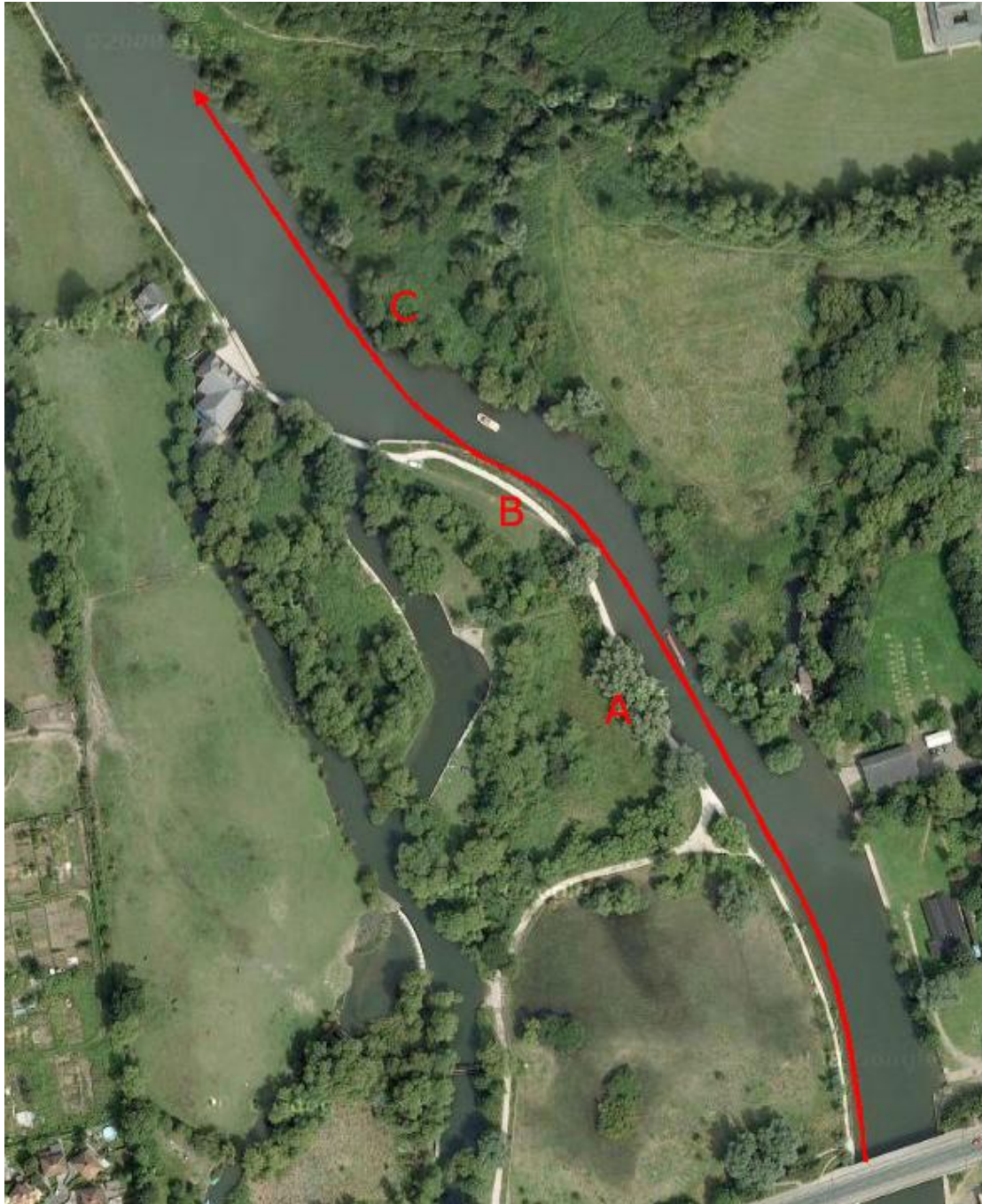


Figure 1: The line from the start of a bumps race to Donnington Bridge (where this photo was taken from). Boat A is on the right line, tucked up close to the towpath side. Boat B is more exposed to the stream, and will have to work harder to keep up.

The Gut

The Gut is the key corner on the Isis course, where the river funnels briefly before expanding out on the exit. However there are some features to be wary of even before you get to the Gut. Map 3 shows the racing line from Donnington Bridge to Greenbanks, just north of the Gut.



Map 3: The racing line through the Gut. (Map from [Google Maps](#) ©).

Stay to the left as you go under the bridge. If you're at the tail of the field, it might be useful to call for strong tapdowns here, to help stabilise the boat as the wake from the crews ahead reverberates back off the bridge walls. Keep to the left around the

shallow bend, but then be aware of a shallow bay just ahead on the left (A). You'll want to straightline this section. Don't get sucked into following the bank all around, otherwise you'll end up steering a longer course.

Set yourself up as you approach the Gut so that you can keep close to the left bank for as long as possible (B). This will let you take a shallower line across the river to point C. Call for a push before you cross over, to minimise the effect of hitting the stream on your boatspeed.

Once you've crossed, you can take it easy now. You should keep close to the right side of the bank (the tree-lined Greenbanks section) to stay as far from the fast central current as possible.

The Greenbanks Crossing and the Finish

Down Greenbanks, there are two main objectives. The first is to keep close to the right side for as long as possible (Figure 2), and the second is to spot the ideal crossing point. The right crossing point will allow you to take the smoothest line across the stream and the broad left bend in the river.



Figure 2: The line down Greenbanks. Crew A has a good line close to the bank. Crew B is further out into the stream, and could be affected by the current. Photo from http://pictures.nicolas.delereue.org/england/20060304_Torpids/

Map 4 describes the ideal racing line. Stay right along Greenbanks until you see a red lifebuoy on the towpath side, around point A. As your bow crosses this, you should do a push and start steering gently for the towpath side. You should aim to be close to the towpath bank as you cross the OUBC rafts at point B.



Map 4: The racing line crossing the stream after Greenbanks (Map from [Google Maps](#) ©).

After this, you need to keep to the left. After you pass the boathouse island, the left bank will fall away from you. Don't hug it any longer, but keep a gentle left course so that you don't end up affected by the stream. Before long, you should pass the finish line.

Offensive and Defensive Bumps Coxing

In a head race, the instructions to this point should help you steer the fastest course. However in a bumps race, other considerations come into play, namely bumping the crew in front and avoiding being bumped from behind. In close races, there will be times when you'll need to be flexible with the racing line in order to achieve one of these objectives.



Figure 3: An offensive inside line past Donnington Bridge yields a bump on St Johns in Torpids.

If you're being closely followed by another crew, you often have two options. The first is to keep on your racing line, and hope that your rowers will keep you clear. If it's obvious however that you're going to get caught, you can opt to go defensive depending on your position on the river. The aim of this is to surprise the chasing cox with a change of course, in order to buy you some time and tire out the chasing crew if they're putting in a push.

I should point out that if the rate of closure is too great, and it's obvious that you'll get caught no matter what course you steer, then you must concede. In Torpids, it is always to your advantage to concede early in these cases, to avoid being tangled up in the chasing crew's blades, as this can hinder your chances of making up a bump, whilst increasing your chances of being bumped again. In Eights it's less clear-cut, but your crew's safety must always be a consideration.

The key to defensive coxing is to stay on the outside (i.e. closer to the stream than the river bank) of the chasing crew. This will ensure that you always have the option to steer away from them if they get close. Of course, doing so will mean that you get slowed by the stream, but sometimes the surprise advantage you gain can make it worth it.

Similarly, offensive coxing calls for covering your target by staying on their outside, to block off any chance of escape. This is summarised in Figure 4. On the left, the purple boat is trying to evade a bump from the blue boat. By staying on the outside, it is able to give itself a chance to escape when the blue boat gets close. On the right, the blue boat is using more aggressive tactics, and covers the purple boat's escape route

by staying on the outside. The purple boat can't cross the river as it'll get bumped. It will eventually get caught unless its rowers can push harder.

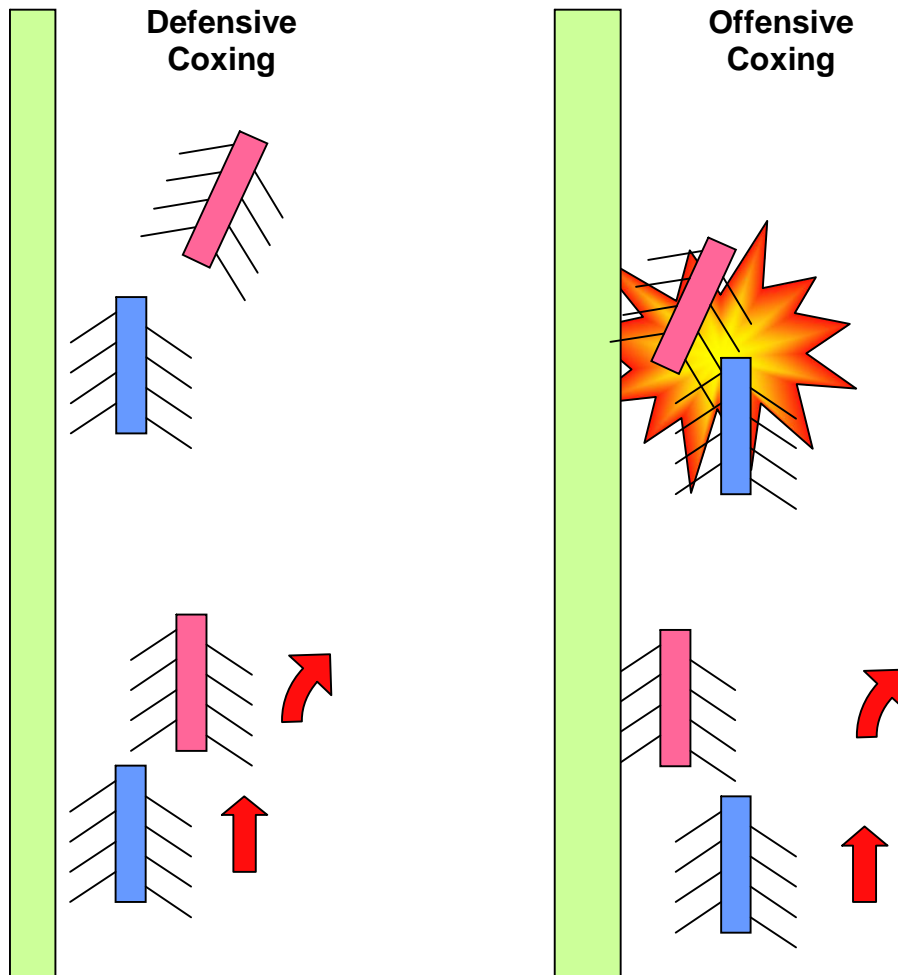


Figure 4: Defensive and Offensive Coxing. The left diagram shows the purple boat keeping to the outside of the chasing blue crew, giving them an opportunity to escape if they get too close. The right diagram shows the blue boat countering this in advance by holding the outside line, thus preventing any attempt by the purple boat to escape across the river.

Here are some examples of racing lines that I've used or encountered in my coxing career. These are not guaranteed to work, and their success or otherwise depends greatly on how canny the opposition coxes are. I've included them though just to provide examples of how trying something different can sometimes pay off (and sometimes not!).

- ✓ I once subbed in for mixed VIII in a men's division, which had been bumped well before the bridge during the first two days. To avoid a repeat on this occasion, we decided in advance that we'd try something different. Figure 5 shows how it worked out. At the start, I steered the crew directly across the river to the east bank (A). The crew behind decided to chase us across. As we got close to the bank, I switched direction and steered back towards the towpath bank (B). In the process, the chasing crew didn't anticipate the second change in direction, and was so distracted that they ended up crashing into the east bank!

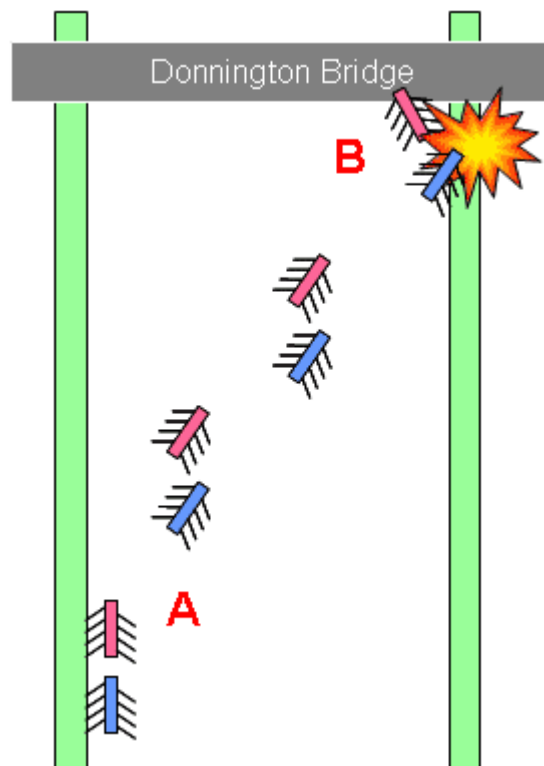


Figure 5: Selling a dummy to a chasing crew at the start. In this case, the blue boat failed to anticipate the second turn (B) and ended up going straight into the bank.

- ✓ St Johns tried out the start manoeuvre we described earlier, and hoped to get an advantage by going wide at the start. Figure 7 shows how the race developed, after they decided to go straight to the east non-towpath side after the start (A). Unfortunately for them the river and racing line both curve to the left after the bridge, and that was to our advantage. We stayed on the towpath side (B), knowing that if we were able to keep level with them under the bridge, we'd eventually be able to bump them. That's exactly how it worked out. After we went under the bridge, they had to come back onto the towpath side (C), and we managed to bump them in the process (D). The result can be seen in Figure 3.

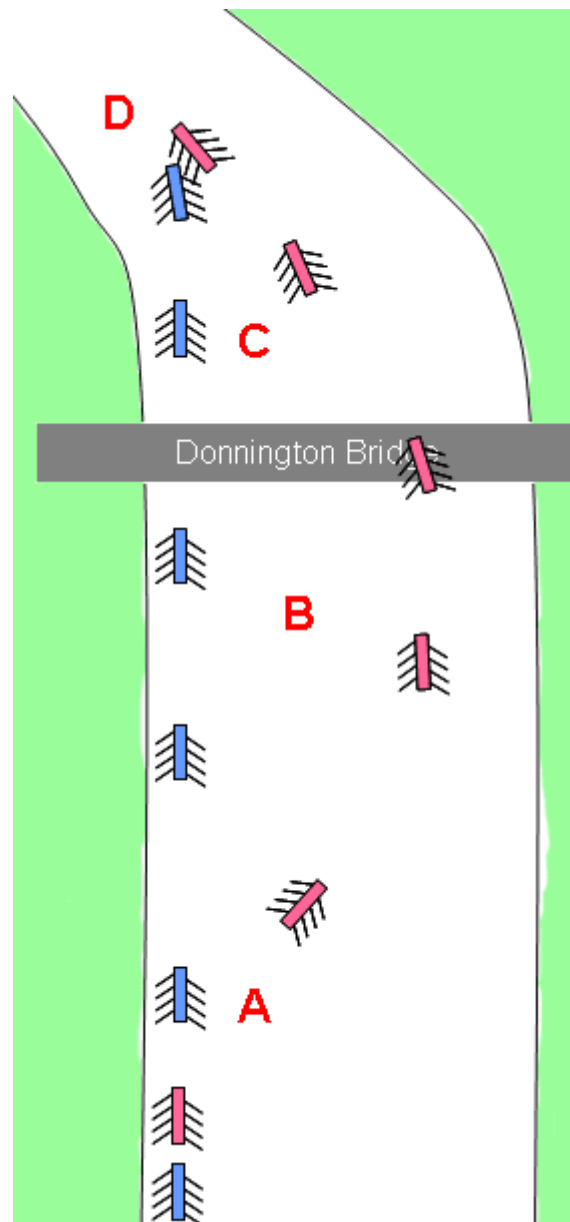


Figure 7: If a crew goes wide at the start (as in Figure 5), hold your nerve and keep to the racing line.

- ✓ We were given a rough time during one Summer Eights season by a persistent Trinity 1st VIII, who chased us closely for three days. Figure 6 outlines the situation on the first day, when they were close behind us going into the Gut (A). This time, their cox took an unusual line out of the Gut and immediately crossed over to the towpath side (B). Normally this isn't a recommended move because it entails rowing head-first into the stream, which is particularly fast and wide at this point. (The one time when it's worth considering is if there's a strong west-to-east crosswind, as there was in Torpids 2008, when crews were being blown into the Greenbanks trees.) However they had a good speed advantage at this stage, and it was clear that if they maintained their pace then they would eventually get us when we crossed at the end of Greenbanks.

They then decided to cross back over to try and bump us (C), and in doing so, they blew their advantage as they were slowed by the strong current for a second time (D). It was enough for us to get away, and we managed to scrape through without getting bumped.

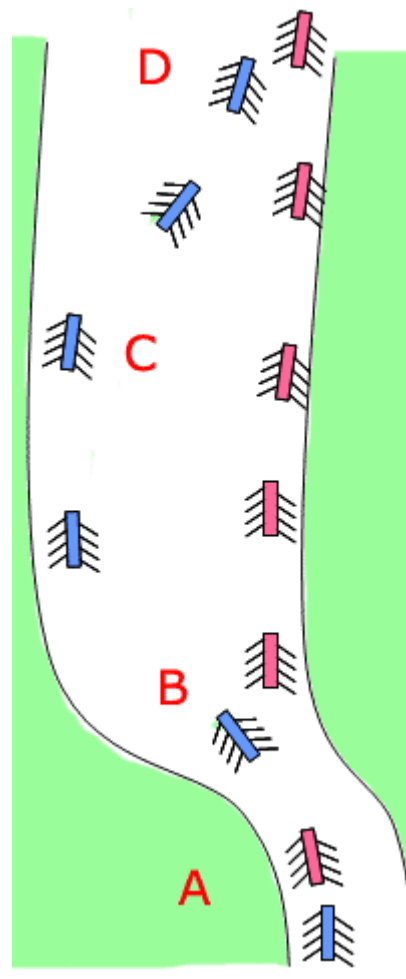


Figure 6: Taking the towpath side of the river at Greenbanks doesn't often pay off, particularly if you then decide to double back again. If you're considering crossing at a different location to usual, make sure that you won't have to cross back again later (unless you're near the finish).

- ✓ On a few occasions going past the OUBC rafts, when we've been caught up by other crews putting in a big push, we've managed to evade a bump by crossing a second time in front of them (a pure defensive move, as in Figure 4), and steering to the other side of the river, as far away from them as possible.
- ✓ We had a very close call with Wadham chasing us during my first Summer Eights, whilst we were crossing Greenbanks. They were in a perfect offensive position coming down Greenbanks, on our outside (strokeside), and they began to cross over (Figure 7A). In response, I delayed our own crossing for as long as possible, to buy us some time (B). We took a slightly wider line across the river (C), and overlapped by two seats for the duration, but it was just enough to keep us clear, and we managed to reach the finish line without being bumped (D).

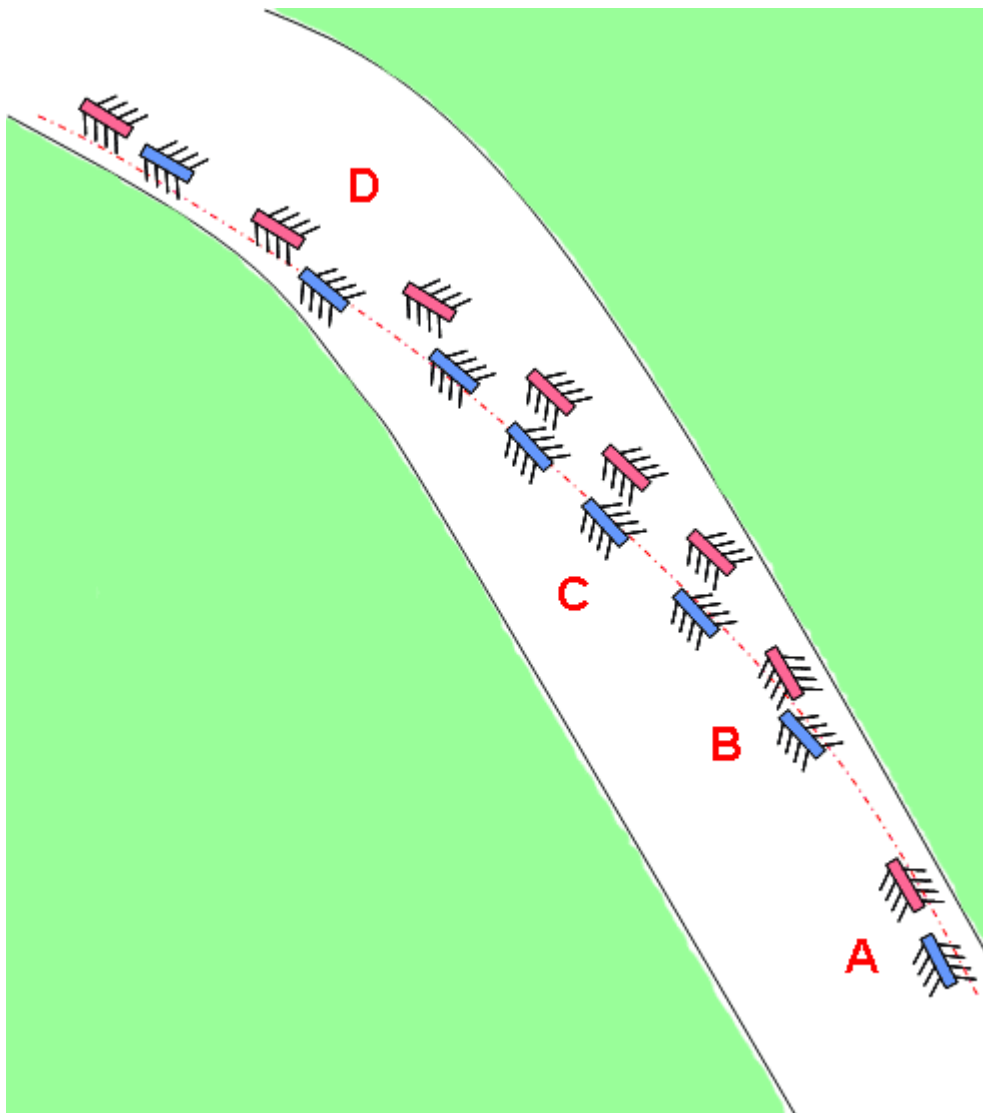


Figure 7: Taking a wider line at the crossing point at the end of Greenbanks can sometimes buy you time. The red dotted line represents the ideal racing line, followed by the chasing blue boat. The purple boat starts its crossing later, in order to stay ahead.

- ✓ Sometimes the best thing to do is to remember the basics. In one of my early bumps races, we managed to overcome a five length disadvantage on St Hildas down Greenbanks, by sticking tight to the bank whilst they rowed out wide in the middle of the stream. The racing line is the fastest line for good reason, and it can really pay off if you can perfect it.

A good race cox needs to be aware of the race situation as it develops around them. They should also be prepared to make quick decisions, and to take chances where necessary. A good strokesperson can sometimes help to make these decisions, by keeping an eye on the crews behind you. As with all other aspects of rowing as a sport, teamwork is everything.

Chapter 4. Senior Cox Status

An Oxford college cox can hold one of three statuses, Novice, Experienced or Senior. The latter is by far the most difficult to get, as it involves doing an outing supervised by one of the top coxes. The ourcsWiki says the following about getting this status:

Senior coxes should have at least 6 full terms of coxing, unless they are exceptionally talented. Senior status is awarded to coxes who are not just competent, but expert. While we expect experienced coxes to be able to conduct outings safely while unsupervised, for senior status we're looking for someone who can get the most out of the outing for their crew, without ever being unsafe.

If you aspire to being a senior cox, here are a few suggestions that might help:

- ✓ Learn all the college blade colours. It makes a big difference to your water presence if you're able to address other college crews by name.
- ✓ Know the rules of the river, and be aware of what you are and aren't allowed to do.
- ✓ Try to expand your coxing experience by putting yourself in different situations. Cox other college crews, other types of boats, and on different stretches of river. Cox under different coaches. Learn to row, if you haven't done so already, as it'll give you a much greater appreciation of the technique involved. It'll also give you a chance to listen into other coxes.
- ✓ Be proactive with the coaching. Give good technical feedback to your crews. Try to give your crews as much clear water as you can for their training. This means learning to anticipate the crews around you.
- ✓ Get feedback on your coxing technique. Better still, try trialling for one of the university Development Squads. The coaches and the rowers in these crews have high expectations of coxes, and will be able to tell you what they expect and need to hear.
- ✓ Above all, always be aware of your crew's safety. No matter what you're doing, and what your crew, coach and others are saying, this is always your top priority.

If you bear these points in mind, you should do just fine.

Chapter 5. Some Useful Links

Here are some useful links for coxes who want to find out more.

- [Coxwain Nation](#) - A site with some useful coxing information, including a great [guide to Competitive Coxing](#)
- [Zen and the Art of Coxing](#) - And other coxing articles by Kevin Murphy at RowersWorld.com.
- [Coxwain's Cafe](#) - This page links to coxing recordings available on the internet. The second one, "Bauer and Cipollone on the Charles", is definitely worth a listen. Here's a direct link to the [Cipollone performance](#) steaming download (Realaudio) and complete transcript.
- [Labelled map of Isis](#) - From the City of Oxford rowing club. Useful landmarks are marked on.
- [Coxing as Art](#) - One of several interesting articles on the "Bossy, Tiny and Loud" site for coxes.
- [Best and Worst Coxing Calls](#) - A very amusing article from RowersWorld.com.
- [Coxie.com](#) - A coxing portal with a useful bulletin board.
- [LMH Guide](#) - A brief guide to coaching by Lady Margaret Hall college, Cambridge.
- [FISA Coaching Manual](#) - A whole set of resources, including the FISA coaching manual, on the Durham University site.
- [Drill Card](#) - A useful printable sheet on various coaching drills that you can use
- [The Physics of Rowing](#) – A great introduction into the physical principles of rowing and erging.