

Point of Greatest Hazard II - Launching Quickly at Crowded Regattas

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Continuing on the premise that handling crewshells on land is at least as complex (often more so) than on water, we move to where the rubber really meets the road: the launch and recovery docks at crowded regattas.

Even at small regattas, these can be extremely busy places; at a large one, they almost make the flight deck of an aircraft carrier seem a place of meditative calm. For an example, the 2002 Stotesbury Regatta launched and recovered 586 boats during a five-hour period; averaging a launch and a recovery every 32 seconds! And this is may not be the busiest regatta in existence. At the Head of Charles, they allow you 45 seconds from first foot on the dock to launch. Granted, they have the operation down to a science, and a staff of helpful volunteers who bring your oars onto the dock to save time. Even without those amenities, however, 45 secs to a minute is a good standard to aim for at any regatta, or even for practices for the sake of efficiency.

This column hopes to help coxswains and rowers through some of the confusion, and to sort out the sometimes conflicting instructions you'll be facing. The goal of the dockmaster(s) is to get everyone on and off the water safely without crews having to wait on land holding shells, or in a large hard-to-manage mass out on the water. Dockmasters are referees, and the same level of cooperation given to on-water referees should be given to dockmasters. Scout the launch area ahead of time; be alert for changes; follow instructions, and chances are you will be fine. Your normal practice launches/landings have probably developed a simplicity and rapidity anyway (getting to breakfast after morning practice provides a huge incentive to be quick).

- 1) Have your oars down at the launching area well ahead of time. Make sure everyone on the boat knows where the oar pile is so whomever you send to bring them onto the dock won't waste time looking. (Decide ahead of time who these people will be.)
- 2) If at all possible, it is best to have a support staff (if one is available) bring the oars down onto the dock at the same time as the shell (see #6).
- 3) It is tradition that Cox and Bow -- while holding the shell -- unlock the oarlocks. (There are many variations. For example: Ports unlock oarlocks while starboards fetch oars, etc.) The Cox will also be sorting shoes, tivas, faux tivas, water bottles, socks, hats, sunglasses, tool bag, butt pads, tape, visors, car keys, cell phones, Darth Vader masks (don't ask), M&Ms (there was actually a reason for these), and all the other amazing cargo without which no ocean voyage - let alone a 6-minute race - would be complete. Also, the dockmaster may require the coxswain's attention for some last-minute instructions about traffic patterns, or other changes.
- 4) Close and check the buoyancy tank caps at the trailer before hands-on to minimize the number of things you will have to do at the dock. (This is technically the coxswain's responsibility.) Check the bowball and attach the bow number.
- 5) Check heel ties before hands-on so that you know they will pass the dockmaster's inspection. There is nothing worse than failing the inspection and having your crew press the shell over their heads for an extended time while the coxswain fumbles frantically at salt-stiffened knots to retie them. (The three inch rule is a safety requirement so that the shoes will release quickly with one hand in case of swamping

or capsizing.)

6) Regatta docks are no place for extra people. However, one or two spare hands (if they know specifically what they are doing) can speed the process by carrying oars, gathering up shoes, etc. The coach plus a spare coxswain make a good "ground crew."

7) Trying to launch too far in advance of their event causes congestion not only in the launch area, but on the water as well. (Launch times will be either be in the regatta guide, or specified at the Coaches' and Coxswains' meeting.)

8) Tie in on the water. (This is perhaps the most important time-saver of all.) Step in and shove, and get well clear of the dock and traffic pattern before waying enough to tie in. Standing shoves (which also look cool) are excellent for getting clear quickly.

Ideally, a quick launch, is boiled down to about four motions: boat in, oars in the oarlocks and run out, shoes off, and shove. (Recovery same in reverse, debrief at the trailer, not on the dock.) It's one more part of the intricate choreography of crew, involving up to thousands of competitors.

It's also perfect training for a career in air-traffic control.
