

Talent ID follow up: the Peter Shakespeare model

Testing

Peter Shakespeare developed and employed a battery of simple tests in his home country of Australia which he then used in the UK and now in Canada to identify people who had the physical parameters of Olympic rowers. He also devised a specific athlete development programme designed to develop them carefully into Olympians.

The tests involved a measuring of height, weight and armspan, four strength tests on the Concept 2 Dyno and one aerobic endurance test on the Schwinn arm-leg bike. The tests were designed to find athletes with big aerobic capacity while eliminating any sports-specific ability or previous experience in rowing.

The tests can be carried out in schools, universities and businesses, and amongst the existing rowing population. Members of the public can be invited to be tested if it looks like they might be tall enough! It is not advised to test anyone under the age of 15 as their physical development as they mature will be unpredictable. While rowers do go on to compete at the highest level as late as their early 40s, using U23s as a stepping stone is extremely useful. Selecting athletes over the age of 22 means that they may well struggle to develop in time to have a successful Olympic career. (The development time-span is expected to be between six and eight years from beginner to Olympian although it has been done quicker than this.)

A professional approach should always be employed when asking an organisation for permission to test their students or workers. There are a number of documents and procedural suggestions available from Rowing Ireland on request. Universities will often allow testers into Freshers Week and schools will allow testers to attend a PE lesson and put a whole class through their paces. Rowing Ireland has the testing equipment and anyone wishing to conduct some tests in their town or region can book the equipment for this purpose.

Selection

If you are looking for an Olympian, you are looking for a needle in a haystack. Very few will get even close to respectable scores and you may do a whole round of testing without finding anyone. Guidelines on the kind of scores you are looking for are available from Rowing Ireland.

Coaching

Once you've found an athlete you'd like to take on, their introduction to the sport and their early development is absolutely key both technically and psychologically. The basic principles are:

- Skill acquisition is prioritised and this is the only thing that happens in the boat in the early stages as opposed to completing any kind of mileage
- Enthusiasm from the coach and general environment is key
- Understanding of long-term goals from the athletes support network (which will include club, coach, friends and family) is critical

- Never offer any monetary or material rewards, all motivation needs to come from satisfying the competitive instinct and intrinsic values
- Never praise the athlete for being talented, as this can lead to an assumption that they are 'special' and do not have to work as hard as others. Praise only effort and achievement that has been fought for
- Get technical skills, such as grip and balance, correct before moving on to taking strokes. This will prevent a ceiling being placed on the athlete later in their career when a technical fault blocks progress at a higher level. It also means their first two years may see slow progress with water speed but with a far better long term prospect than someone who has been allowed to train with faults in their early years.
- Postural stability, core endurance and flexibility are critical and should be worked on and developed to a point where they will not be a long term problem or cause injury.
- Provide intensive feedback and demand change from the athlete. Create a responsive individual.
- The athlete must enjoy the sport and the skill aspects can be turned into games and fun competitions. They should be a fully engaged member of the club on land while not compromising the individualised approach (in which they will be doing something different from your average club junior) being taken on the water.
- Cross training can be done to compensate for the lack of hard work on the water until the athlete is ready to start doing rowing miles.
- Expose the athlete to more 'pressurised' situations, which in the early days may be executing a skill while being timed or in competition with their previous best and later might be regular on-water time trials. This will help create an athlete who is goal-oriented and mentally tough under pressure.
- Obviously any athlete invited to start the sport should be fully briefed on and held to any Rowing Ireland Safety guidelines. In addition, they should bring a medical note from their GP stating that there is no known reason why they cannot do the sport.

A series of skills can be employed during the early stages of the athlete's career and these are available from Rowing Ireland. These skills are also excellent to use with athletes of almost any level who you want to upskill.

Anyone wishing to embark on testing based on Peter Shakespeare model should contact mary.mclachlan@rowingireland.ie for further information and supporting documents

Additional talent ID ideas, plus some ideas on how to grow your club membership...

Freshers Week: holding a fun ergo competition during Freshers Week amongst the general population of the university is a great way to attract some talented novices to the boat club.

One idea is to take two ergos to a suitable event during the week, where the boat club might have a stall, and hold a competition. You can put up a time, such as the world record for 500m for each gender, and challenge people to beat it or get as close as possible. Have a sign-up sheet for name, email, phone number and score. Then you can invite the top scorers to another day at the club where they can meet some other rowers, try on-water work and have another ergo competition.

Make sure that you make the day fun and that there's a good buzz around the club so they have a positive experience of the sport. Then again you can narrow down the numbers you invite back if you wish and hopefully retain all those you want to keep on.

Rowing for schools

You can try to forge a link with a local school, something which is already happening in some areas successfully, and offer rowing as a PE or after school option. If the club wants to go down this route it must ensure that it has adequate safety procedures in place and that it has enough coaching support to make sure that the children have fun and are adequately looked after and taught the basics well. This should help grow the club junior section and create a link between the club and the local community.

Parent's day

Offer a day of rowing, or reduced membership, or an ergo club one night a week or on a weekend lunchtime, for parents of keen children in junior squads. That way you can build a bigger adult membership at the club.

Corporate days

Advertise to local (and preferably) rival businesses in your town or area and offer them the chance to take part in a learn to row challenge, composed of four crews if possible. The companies would pay to take part. The course could take place either over a weekend or over a few consecutive Saturday or Sunday afternoons in the summer. The course would involve learning the basics in say, a coxed four, or eights, followed by a 'regatta' at the end. This is a great challenge for four coaches at the club to get involved in as they can get pretty competitive against each other too! It's also good experience for coxes, which the club would provide. This is a brilliant way to try and increase adult membership at your club while creating good links with the local community and raising some money.