



## INTRODUCING ADULT RECREATIONAL ROWING INTO YOUR CLUB

Tribesmen Rowing Club, which has been in existence for almost 40 years and was competitive for most of that time, had, in recent times suffered from a significant drop in membership as juniors grew up and moved on and senior rowing, as is the case countrywide, declined. As with most clubs, we encountered the usual difficulties finding volunteer coaches for competitive crews with the huge time commitment required, and by 2010 there were only a few veterans rowing out of the club and reserves were being depleted at a fast rate. The committee decided to change the traditional approach and instead try to build a wider base of recreational members over a period of years, to enable the club to rebuild, provide manpower and funds and a platform to allow a return to competitive rowing. Using the touring boats provided by Rowing Ireland, several rowing camps were run from which the initial intake of members came into the club and from that, our membership has doubled year on year, now standing at over 80 active recreational rowers, with a waiting list for the next camp. This is what we've learned in that time:

The advantages of introducing recreational, (or leisure), rowing into your club are many:

- Increased membership brings increased income, not necessarily at great monetary expense, which in time will provide the foundation to fund competitive rowing
- Adults bring skills to your club and your committee which you may not even have realised you were missing – and bring a different viewpoint too, which is healthy
- Depending on your current member profile, those adults can help with juniors (chaperoning, launch-driving, trailer-towing, gym- supervising, fund-raising)
- Or if your club is struggling for funds, those adults bring ideas to raise money and widen the network of potential sponsorship and support to be tapped
- Social functions are better attended and more enjoyable when new people get involved, instead of relying on support from the same old faces all the time

- Those new people will gradually get involved in running the social and fund-raising functions, thus freeing up committee and coaching time
- The appreciation felt by recreational rowers for the opportunity to learn to row feeds through the club and provides a feel-good factor which cannot be valued

## **THE RIPPLE EFFECT**

Having witnessed the growth in our recreational rower membership over the last three years, people often ask “Where did they all come from?” The only answer to that is “everywhere”!

But you only need to go looking for them once or twice; (using ads in the local paper, a mention in the sports section from a friendly journalist, a reference on your website or facebook page, perhaps flyers in local companies distributed through their sports and social clubs, or even posted up on supermarket noticeboards) and the remaining growth looks after itself, due to the ripple effect. Almost everyone who joins up in the initial stages and likes it enough to stay on, brings in a friend or partner or spouse – some new members end up bringing in a full crew. And that means you tend to get like-minded people, often already involved in another sport together, maybe also coaching that sport or on another committee, who thus already understand how voluntary clubs work and don't arrive with notions of entitlement or demands. Rather, they tend to have nothing but appreciation and gratitude for those club members who give of their time to teach them how to row.

## **TIME**

And time is of the essence here – do not underestimate the amount of time this will take. Both on a day-to-day basis, in terms of scheduling sessions to suit busy lifestyles (of coaches and beginners alike); the actual pace of the sessions themselves (adults learn slowly, they don't tend to absorb technical information like juniors or students can) and in terms of allowing time for recreational rowing and its place in your club to grow organically. Trying to achieve too much too quickly will backfire; those existing members who may not be too keen at the start will be antagonised by too many people appearing at once, swarming around, not knowing how to lift boats properly, store

blades correctly, just generally getting in the way! Introducing a small group first is the way to go, get them used to the idea.....

## **START SMALL**

Trust in the fact it will grow at its own pace and be content with a small intake at the start. What constitutes small depends entirely on the size of your club now (which will determine both numbers of coaches and the equipment available) but as a rough guide, if you are using the Rowing Ireland tour boats to run a learn-to-row camp, aim for an initial intake of a dozen or so, no more.

If you have access to a greater number of boats and coaches, you can increase your intake accordingly, but always remember just how many coached sessions you will be undertaking, if even half the group joins up after the camp and expects to get out at least once a week – do the math. There is little point running a camp for 2 or 3 dozen people if you have to turn them away after all that effort, when they want to join up permanently.

Starting small allows for the following to happen:

- The club members who are prepared to help get to practise on a manageable group and it isn't too overwhelming for any of them;
- Those club members who are reluctant to see the introduction of non-competitive rowing can gradually come to terms with it, if they see it isn't the ruination of their club as they know it, or the takeover they fear;
- The group you start with are thus in from the start, which gives them a sense of ownership and pride; they tend to be the ones who go on to do the introductory coaching courses, offer to learn to steer, help at subsequent camps, tow trailers;
- You gain time to assess the success of the programme and the resulting requirement for further equipment, which allows you to plan for any funding required.

## **COSTS**

What you charge to learn to row at a camp is entirely up to you – some clubs use this as a fund-raiser in itself, others just want to cover their costs and charge a nominal amount, seeing it as a taster to encourage new members to join up. The costs to run a camp can include petrol for safety launches, perhaps a newspaper advertisement, or printing flyers; in our club we tend to have a social get-together following a camp, maybe have some races if the weather allows, followed by a BYO BBQ or drinks at the local pub with platters of food funded from camp monies.

In terms of equipment required long-term for new recreational members, we have found the best investment you can make is a quad touring boat, which can be coached from the cox's seat in the stern and is safe, robust, stable and thus comfortable. These do not come cheap, but they can be more affordable than racing boats and if you intend to make recreational rowing part of your club, you can establish how many members you need to justify the cost, get your treasurer to work it out and look on it as an investment. Side benefits are that existing adult members can use the boat for touring and your younger juniors can learn to row in it, thus allowing wider use for the whole club.

We attempted to start a recreational programme without one of these boats and it proved fruitless; the boats we used, whilst fairly stable, were still too difficult for many adults to master quickly enough to make rowing enjoyable for them. And enjoyable it needs to be. Sitting in an unbalanced fine boat for anyone slightly nervous, or prone to back problems, (or often both), is not to be recommended and does nothing to encourage joining up.

## **TIPS**

We have run over half a dozen camps at this stage and have tried various different approaches with upwards of 200 people. We now have over 80 recreational members and a waiting list to join.

Tips we can offer, from hard-earned experience, are:

- If you can run your camp when the evenings are brighter, it is best to do one-week long camps, giving four lessons in a row and then finishing on a Friday with

a fun-night. Participants learn and retain more and see a huge improvement in themselves from Monday to Thursday. It can be difficult for people to be available four nights in a row, so this needs to be made very clear before they start – if someone misses more than one night, they just hold the others up when they join in again, such is the progress made.

- If that isn't an option, then a variation of evenings (e.g. two nights a week for a fortnight) will also work, it just spreads it out longer. We tend to do two sessions back to back, using two boats, to cope with the numbers signed up, which maximises the use of each coach and boat. We have tried to do three in a row, when under pressure with numbers, but have found it is too much for any one person, both mentally and physically, to coach three separate groups, without a break.
- If you have to run your camp during the winter months and you are restricted to weekends, that can still work; do four weekends in a row, for example. If you are targeting a particular group (say retirees) and can use weekdays, even in winter, so much the better. The gap between weekend sessions is long and you can spend quite some time each session just bringing people back to where they left off last time.
- A ratio of two helpers and a coach to cox works best in each quad tour boat. A bowman to keep you out of trouble (remember the tiller is no use if the boat is practically stationary!) and keep you balanced with their oars on the water – and a stroke to show them what to do. Some coaches like to put a beginner in the stroke seat to give them one-to-one attention, others prefer to put them in 3 and 2. By the third session you should be able to have all four rowing, even just for a few strokes, if only to let the beginners see just how much bow was contributing as the stabiliser!
- Depending on your stretch of water, you may wish to have a safety launch with you at all times; we use one when we leave the canal beside our club and head up the river itself. On the narrow canal, a launch is more of a hindrance - the water is shallow and the bank not too far away, in the event of a capsize. We have had no such incidents, but I can't guarantee it wouldn't happen, despite the

fact a tour boat has a keel. For the more nervous beginners, we encourage them to wear a flotation device, one which doesn't impede their finish.

- Put one person on to the scheduling of coaches and helpers and another on to scheduling the beginners. The latter can be prone to last minute changes and cancellations, until they realise the impact this can have on their crew, so always have some spare helpers on hand for last minute substitution. Juniors are great for this, so if you can do this out of season, it can really work. Help is always useful even carrying the boat to the slip as they are quite heavy and awkward for the uninitiated.
- Have someone to meet and greet for the first session, collect payment, sign forms etc. That person can show those who turn up early how to use the erg, introduce them to the basic commands and so forth – they can also take those who have just finished on the water and put them on the erg, reiterating what they have just learnt, thus freeing up the coach to get back out on the water with a new group.
- Once the camp is over, follow up the participants by email and establish if they would like to keep going and join the club. This doesn't have to be available immediately, particularly if you have borrowed the boats and don't have your own, but it will allow you to assess whether the club should consider purchasing one- people will wait to join until you're ready for them, provided you keep them informed. We have found that over three-quarters of campers on average join the club and as we become more proficient at running the camps ourselves, a greater percentage join now compared to earlier camps.
- As the programme grows, you will come under pressure from your new members to let their friends and relations join too. If it's only one or two, you can bring them up to speed quite quickly within the existing group, if they don't mind being slowed down by complete beginners for a few sessions. But at some stage this stops being feasible and can backfire, if a crew feel their progress is being hampered continually.
- If you end up with a waiting list and can't say no, you will need to consider holding regular camps to accommodate this. Your initial intake of recreational rowers will come in to their own at that stage; apart from sourcing more

beginners, they will offer to help in each session and may even take on the coordinating of the schedule, which can be the most time-consuming aspect of the whole thing. Beginners starting this way are more likely to remain, if they have friends or partners there already.

- Encourage past members to get back involved in taking some of these sessions; this is less daunting than coaching competitive crews and the feedback they receive is very gratifying. They in turn will spread the word to their contemporaries, bringing old faces back into the club once they appreciate it won't take up all their spare time.
- One or two weekly regular coached rowing sessions seems to satisfy most recreational members. Some are keen to take it further; a few only wish to dabble less frequently but they tend to fall away as they see they have fallen behind their peers and are impeding the progress of the crew.
- Adults, at any age, appear to have a 45 minute window of concentration. Be sure to be close to home at this point, not 45 minutes away from the slipway, or you will rue your decision not to turn sooner! It can be a long haul home with what was a reasonably competent crew half an hour earlier, now catching crabs every stroke, because their brains have switched off with technical information overload.
- If you are coaching, do not feel it necessary to talk non-stop. Everyone needs to be given space and time to figure it out themselves, so once you have the basic necessities out of the way and refreshed them on the technique, let them alone to practice in silence for a few minutes – they will quickly ask if they have a query.
- If you are considering this for your club, have a good number of like-minded members on-side to support you. Nobody can do this on their own; it takes an army and would be difficult to do in the face of opposition from the rest of your club. And it is relentless; there is no off-season - once you get a programme up and running, it's almost impossible to halt it, so be prepared for the onslaught.
- Once people have a few decent spins under their belt, they get addicted – those of us involved in rowing for years may take the sport for granted but never under-estimate the enjoyment that beginners can get from learning how to row, particularly as adults – and your own satisfaction from enabling them to enjoy it.