

Membership – New Intake and the Survival of Rowing Clubs

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One of the issues that has been brought up in Rowing NZ and Otago Rowing Association meetings is the participation levels for rowing in New Zealand. I've been hearing about declining numbers since arriving here. It seems that to have a strong elite team, the base of "grassroots" people has to be large. Despite the fact that "training smart" can make up for smaller numbers, it is probably better to pick any crew from your club's Seniors to the Olympic level from 100 hardened athletes than from 8 guys who make the boat by default. With more people training and racing hard at all levels of competition up to the "senior A" level, those in trials for "Senior A" must get faster. As it is, the base in recent years seems to be shrinking, if the reports of participation at both major national championships are true indicators. To address participation in the 2000's in New Zealand, rowing clubs need to provide something that makes them want to be there. Professional (in approach, not necessarily in payment) service to their customers, who are also their members, is a must. Certainly there are people who feel just fine showing up, having a row and going away again in fulfillment of their training. Today, we're all busy and can't hang around that much.

Imagine someone trying the sport for the first time (perhaps bringing their son or daughter around for rowing). How are they greeted at your club?

- "Hi, can I answer some questions?"
- "Hi, were you interested in rowing? How can I help?"
- "Hi – yes, you can get involved. Here's the club brochure with the schedule of lesson start dates. Would you like a tour of the boatshed?"
- "Sorry, we don't have a programme for _____ school."
- "Sorry, you (your son, your daughter) are (is) too young, come back in a couple of years."
- "Here, spend your first 2 years rowing in this {28 year-old-rusted-metal-rotting-wood-un-riggable history piece} boat that one of the guys from the 1972 eight trained in twice." (Part of my first season, in 1980 was spent in the training boat from the 1956 Olympic 8+)

Many rowing clubs that I've seen here and back home are: dusty, frequently wet on the floor, drafty, and littered with bits and pieces of old gear that hasn't been used for years. Change rooms when they exist, are cold, wet, dark places; loos stink, showers where they exist at all barely function, and frequently there's no place to sit down (in shelter) and relax while waiting for son, daughter, or whomever, to finish practice, have meetings, or anything like that. Some clubs are better at some parts of this than others, but if environment had been really high on my list of priorities, I probably wouldn't have started rowing – the club I started at had holes in the floorboards, the equipment didn't work well, and the building was only just shelter from the elements (condemned, and subject to nearly a million in repairs only 4 years later). Even relatively new rowing clubs have their stock of ancient gear lying about that hasn't been used for yonks, and is kept in the off chance that it'll get used again to repair some broken seat – even though there aren't any boats left in the clubhouse using that gear.

If they get past that, new people are frequently called "novice scum" at regattas or around the rowing club, and laughed about in their struggles with the un-riggable piece of history. Is it any wonder that there's a large drop off? If clubs want to grow, people with this kind of attitude need an adjustment, either change their approach or leave, so that the club's a good place to be. Perhaps I exaggerate to get attention, but isn't there some validity to this?

Here's a proposal for rowing clubs to increase their membership at a variety of levels, which should help bring about increased volunteer administrative support, fundraising abilities, with the club becoming a better place to be. The proposal is multi-part, but hinges on the club wanting to grow:

1. Clean the place up.
 - 1.1. Old Boats – if it's not being used, do you want to keep the bow to commemorate the person whose name is on the boat? If so, cut it off and mount it on the wall. If not, can you clean it up and lease or sell it to a

- sports bar for the “atmosphere” displays? If this won’t work, and no startup clubs or hobby restorers are looking for something to restore, there’s the rubbish tip or your fireplace (although with modern construction materials and adhesives, it may be poisonous to burn the remnants of the boat).
- 1.2. Old bits and pieces – Turn a few old wood blades into trophies, and award, sell, or use the rest for commemorating the old-guard. Consider selling the old ones to retired rowers for fundraising purposes. Turn 30-year-old foot-stretchers into kindling. Put rusted, twisted rigger junk and other stuff into the scrap heap. Old brass bits and pieces can be sold as brass scrap or sold at souvenir junk shops. Other metals bits can be sold off as scrap metal. There won’t be much cash in it, but it’s better than putting it in landfill, and might pay for the cost of dropping the stuff off at the scrap dealer’s.
 - 1.3. Boatshed – sweep it out – regularly. If there’s a lot of garbage on the floor that gets in the way, hang it up, store it, or biff it out. Get rid of the dried up paint pots, expired glues, old stiff paint brushes, old spark plugs. Essentially if it don’t work and it ain’t going to be used, get rid of it (bad grammar intended). We rowing types seem to be historical packrats, but maybe we should get rid of the old crap. Fix and/or replace the “dumps” (boat stretchers or slings) so that they can be relied upon not to collapse under a boat.
 - 1.4. PAINT – something light in colour so that you can get away with using fewer electric lights.
 - 1.5. LIGHTS that work so you can see what you’re doing – high-efficiency fluorescent bulbs are more efficient than incandescent.
 - 1.6. Change facilities –yes, this can cost – lights, seats, easy-to-maintain floor surfaces, heat, toilets that work and don’t always stink, showers that work and get cleaned regularly, and so on.
 - 1.7. Safety facilities – Working coaching boats have to be on the water whenever new people or juniors go on the water – someone in the coaching boat must know how to rescue people. (in Canada now coach boat operators need their BOAT operator’s card)
2. Develop a Learn To Row (LTR) programme.
 - 2.1. Set a fee that will pay the costs of the course, and provide a small profit.
 - 2.2. Develop a curriculum that will see people able to execute the basics in relatively short order.
 - 2.3. Advertise in the community. Accept only advance registrations with payment. Confirm registrations
 - 2.4. Make sure that the boats LTR people will use WORK. Very little will turn an adult LTR person away faster than trying to learn to row in equipment that doesn’t work, unless it’s allocating a slot of a busy schedule to standing around waiting for your instructor to organise his/her plans. Make sure that the boats are available at the scheduled time, and make sure that the LTR coaches have priority on coaching launches that work. Learning to row should take effort, but it shouldn’t be a struggle.
 - 2.5. Use rowing club members (coaches or athletes) to teach the courses. Pay them for their coaching, and require that they have at least taken Level 1 Rowing (consider paying for the course). In return for pay, demand quality of instruction, promptness, and standards of behaviour. The pay comes from the course fee. If you’re taking in \$120.00 for a 4-week course from 8 people (or 16), that’s either \$1,000.00 or \$2000.00, which can pay \$10.00 or more per hour for the LTR courses, which ensures their attendance. It may not be a lot of money, but at least coaching LTR won’t be an expense to the coach.
 - 2.6. At the end of the course, have a mini-regatta and barbecue to celebrate the end of the course. If the LTR rowers participate in 8 or 12 sessions over a 4 week period of 2 or 3 sessions a week, they’ve had a reasonable chance to assess whether or not they want to continue. You can offer appropriate novice programmes, incorporating the new people into recreational or competitive novice rowing. Offer membership with _ or 1/3 of the LTR

fee deducted from the subscription (membership fee). Recruit people you want for a competitive programme. Let others who want to row recreationally join – if you have something for them to row in after they join.

- 2.7. These LTRs can be run one group Mon, Wed, with Friday optional, and another group Tues, Thurs, with Friday optional. There can be a morning group and two evening groups, so with effort in a larger centre, your rowing club could be running as many as 10 LTR classes concurrently, and you can run these for the first 2-3 months of a rowing season. This makes 20-30 LTR classes. If you only take 8 per class at \$120.00 (say) per class, that's up to \$20,000 of income before expenses. Use the profit from the LTR classes towards matching grants from your community trust (an NZ financial institution that funds sports, recreation, community groups), and you might be able to get new boats every year. Try to get rid of an old hulk every time you bring a new boat in.
3. Make your subscription fees reflect reality – the real costs of running a rowing club based on the numbers of members. You may scare off a few people who will claim economic hardship (and then spend \$20.00 on beer every weekend through a rowing season). Fundraising still needs to be done, but some people feel that if a product or service doesn't cost very much, it's not going to be very good. (Odd, that.)
4. In return for the "reality" fees, see if you can install proper training gear and more ergometers for those days when the weather doesn't cooperate and the slave-driver says weight training or ergometer sessions. Olympic style lifting gear and safe, solid squat-racks and lifting platforms, pull-up bars, bench pull benches, etc., can help keep your athletes in the rowing club and out of the commercial gym, costing them less in the long run.
5. Consider applying for grants to employ someone to work around the club – you may want to offer a stipend to people who have been volunteering – you may want to hire someone at a part time position to coordinate and instruct the LTR and/or the "post-LTR" duties of making sure that LTR

graduates aren't standing around with their thumbs in their noses while the regular members in the course of their training shuffle around and ignore the new members

These suggestions will probably arouse some argument. People, for some reason, feel an attachment to a boat or an oar that hasn't been used for 15 years. It's just a boat – if it's no use any more why in blazes would it be kept around? Many believe that novices should get stuck rowing in the un-riggable crap because they went through that, and every new person should suffer that way. I believe that this is a sure way to frustrate them and have them walk away. Give them good equipment that works and can be set up so that people can row well. Essentially, the gear that goes to LTR people should be good enough that your club's senior members *could* race in it if they had to. If senior athletes wouldn't row in it because it always breaks or can't be adjusted so that it's possible to row well, why would anyone think a novice is going to be able to learn to row in it? I'm told of a study many years ago where researchers gave a bunch of novices old, un-riggable boats and a full time coach, and another group of novices new, properly rigged boat and no coach. The people in the good boats were faster after a training period than the group that had the coach. So – why not give beginners reasonable boats **and** a coach so that they can be even faster, sooner? Given good coaching and good boats a rower should be able to "look like" an experienced senior rower after only a couple of seasons, if it takes that long. I have personally coached people who have made national "B" level squads after only 1 or 2 seasons and later national "A" squads, so I know it's possible. One key factor was that they weren't held back by having to row in crappy old equipment. (They were also never told that they had to have decades of experience before dreaming of international competition.) In some cases the gear was old, but we made sure it was rowable and in good "nick". The book "Rudern" by Herberger remarks that a generally trained athlete, starting to row at age 18, should be ready to take the podium after 4 years. I believe this to be true – difficult, but true (it probably takes a little longer than 4 years in normal circumstances because at the time "Rudern" was written, there was a formal program of doping athletes in East Germany).

So – Clean up, run a good LTR programme, and be positive around the athletes. Might Help.