Sweeping the Surfboat

Part 1.

This is Part 1 of a series of articles on the skill and requirements to become or improve your sweeping skill and knowledge.

Like all things it isn't the only way but it is hopefully a good start in understanding and developing what works for you. In following articles different topics will be covered so in total we are going to look at the overview of the role through to general sweeping, crew safety, specific skills, strength, training and competition.

Overview:

- To be a great or good sweep you will need a well-developed set of skills including knowing how to be parent, philosopher, friend, mentor, salesman, tough guy and skilled sweep.
- On top of that you need to be responsible as the key decision maker for the rowers under your charge. You will ultimately be responsible for all decisions made within the boat including the safe keeping of the crew.
- You will need to be prepared to learn with your crew. Sweeps that think they know it all seldom do and quickly get shown up.
- Good decision making has no place for wild bravado. Confidence built off practice by all means is very important but the gung-ho approach has no place in the boat.
- Recruitment is key and you need to be actively involved in developing a plan to keep new rowers coming into the sport. Simply waiting for another club or crew to develop rowers and then poaching does nothing for the sport. Development of rowers must sit very high on every sweep's priority list.
- Understanding the politics within your club is another very important part of being successful. You must encourage all rowers to take a high profile in the clubs' eyes to fundraising, working bees and patrols. Ignore any of these and see how quickly you and your crews will become the enemy.
- Attend as many coaching clinics as possible to both assist and learn. The day you think you know it all you are the looser.
- It is no fluke that crews are ever going faster. It is the result of some sweep/coaches better understanding the rowing stroke that have these crews lifting the bar.
- It isn't all about more training sessions. If you are coaching any part of the stroke incorrectly it won't matter how many sessions you do you still won't make the boat go fast.
- Don't flog your crews on egos etc thinking that is what they need to go faster, understand the strengths and weaknesses of each individual crew and rower and learn to coach accordingly.
- Don't practice bad methods whether it be a training program or stroke style.
- If the boat has any form of rock something is wrong that needs to be identified so if you don't know yourself seek out assistance so everyone learns.
- Do spend as much time as you can sitting on other surf craft like the surf ski to understand the run of the ocean. Until you yourself learn to feel the boat run you can never coach it to your crew.

- Make sure you do a good amount of your training work in the ocean. Flat water is where you teach technique but out at sea is where you learn your skills. You must train in the surf to learn the skill required. The day of competition in surf is not the place to be learning the fundamentals.

Part 2

Let's start Part 2 with the thought that you must be able to gain the respect from all members in the crew to have any chance of success and most importantly enjoyment:

- Don't be that sweep you hear that returns to the beach roaring at their crew. This is very counterproductive and in truth it can often be worked back to a bad decision of the sweep but it is easier to make the rowers cop it.
- Don't spend your training or race time berating your crew to go faster or apply more power or in general just ripping the crew along. It seldom works and in fact on most occasions it has the opposite effect of unsettling the crew. Your job it to settle the crew into rhythm, keep them calm and teach them to be the best rowers they can, which is what really makes them go faster.

It is always interesting to stand on the beach and watch both the learning and experienced sweep at work. A good tip is to watch someone that is experienced, has good crew respect, keeps their crew safe and has good surf skills. If you're going to learn from anybody it may as well be from a sweep that knows their stuff.

The very first thing to learn and understand is your stance position in the boat. If you watch a carnival near you, you will see two distinct stance styles.

a) One is the sweep that stands square on to the nose of the boat. Feet are usually together in the same pocket between a quarter bar and holding the oar out to the side in one hand.
b) The second is the sweep that stands roughly at 45 deg with a leading shoulder facing toward the nose, feet are astride one of the quarter bars and for much of the time two hands on the oar.

We won't be too judgemental here because like rowing there is no one right way. However, as a general rule the sweep standing at 45 deg has a lot more options.

- ⇔ By standing at an angle, you have your feet spread across the boat and can take a flexed knee position which will let you feel the boat through the legs with bended knee thus being able to easily counter any rock across the boat.
- ⇔ Two hands are always better than one. A sweep with good control will have both hands in contact with the handle for the majority of time especially when in the break.
- ⇔ Try standing square and take note of how much movement you have with the handle in either direction, it will be OK pushing away from the body but limited when drawing in.
- ⇔ Stand square and note that if difficult to bring the strength of your body into the action nor will you have as much feel to balance the boat.
- ⇔ Now stand at the angle and try the same exercise. You will instantly note that you can now also use your body length as well to push and lay back so your steering spread of movement has been doubled.

The great Ken Murray displaying the angle stance

- ⇔ The sweep oar should become part of your body with two hands to keep control and always positioned at a height where you can apply pressure.
- ⇔ The sweeping movement starts at your feet. Firstly, you need to learn to feel what your boat is doing through your feet. A good sweep can tell you without looking a lot of the time what is going on with late catches, unequal pull pressure or poor release from the way the boat reacts through their feet.
- ⇔ The other important thing that starts in the feet is your power. A good sweep will always be driving up through the legs. Like skiing, water or snow you flex up through the legs driving the power upwards.
- ⇔ When getting set to take a wave the first thing to get right is your feet position because it will be through your legs power and stability that will ultimately determine your success on the wave. If the stance is weak or not set the sweep oar will force you down into a squat. Squat and you lose 80% of all waves. Stand tall against the downward pressure on the handle and you are well placed to continue to be in control.

So, let's look at the blade angle and use of quarter bars on the way to sea:

- ⇔ Learn to steer with the blade lying flat at a bit more than 45 deg.
- ⇔ You rarely turn the blade vertical until on a wave.
- ⇔ To steer a moving surfboat, learn to turn the wrist just slightly and put light outward pressure on the handle to turn the boat back toward yourself.
- ⇔ Leave the blade at its angle and lift ever so slightly on the handle will turn the boat away from yourself
- ⇔ Of course, both these actions require the boat to be moving and the faster the more responsive

⇔ Learn to clear your blade when the boat nose heads into every wave. This way you won't get the blade caught under the water if the boat pushes back

⇔ The slightest push back against a sweep oar caught under the water with you hanging onto the handle can result in an expensive broken shaft. Sometimes unavoidable but most times the rule is; clear the blade and you don't break the oar.

⇔ To clear the blade, you only need to disengage it from the water slightly and push the handle away from yourself.

Clearing the blade

⇔ Remember also that once you have the nose heading into the wave at the angle you want you have nothing else to do until the boat flattens out on the other side so you're not required to actually steer it up and over. In fact, trying to steer the boat through every wave you risk a broken Sweep as well as fighting the oar which can unbalance the crew

⇔ Most boats have a forward and aft quarter bar. The best place to stand negotiating the wave area going to sea is with a foot on either side of the rear quarter bar (leading foot depending on if you are RH or L Handed). From here you have your weight to the rear which will help

the nose lift and if required you can lay your weight onto the back deck to provide further lift at the nose

- ⇔ To pull off the lay back your job is to set the boat up in the direction you want to hit the wave and once about to engage, clear the sweep oar well out to the side and throw your body back onto the rear deck. At the same time make sure you hook your feet under the quarter bar to ensure you stay with the boat. Having the feet hooked will also assist you in recovering your upright position as the boat rides up and over
- ⇔ Of note is that the best way over a wave isn't always at 90 deg. Depending on the size and type of a wave you can be best to run up the face at an angle thus reducing the amount of fall in your boat especially for the bow rowers. This will also reduce the impact on the other side by reducing the distance back to the tough.
- ⇔ Another thing to take into account is the speed you attack the face of the wave. If you have large green swells your boat speed is likely to be increased but will be decreased over a sharper nastier wave. For the sharp nasty wave, you give it all you have so your boat speed will equal out the wave pressure. On the other hand, the large swell wave you might want to consider taking a little speed of so the blast off on the other side isn't as strong. Getting a lot of air off the back of a wave can look spectacular but in the modern boat it is also easy to flip if the crew landing is anywhere off centre.

- ⇔ Through all of this you would be standing at the back quarter bar position.
- ⇔ Once clear of the wave zone you should start to move your body position forward to help trim the boat. Most sweeps will shift completely forward and take up position across the front quarter bar.
- ⇔ From the back of the break to 20M out from the turning buoys your task is to keep the boat trimmed for the crew. Providing them with the most level platform possible will allow them to do their best work.

⇔ Keep both hands on or near the handle, keep the blade at its trailing angle and use your feet position across the boat to help smooth out any cross wave/chop action.

Both hands on the handle, feet across the boat keeping balance and control

Part 3

In part 3 we will be looking at the run out to the turning buoys, to understand your job over this part of the race, plus the turn and return journey to the gate cans.

In general terms this will be the part of the race where your crew will need to show off their best boat speed, to achieve that as a sweep we need to have the boat balanced and set up as best we can.

- ⇔ Keep the boat well balanced. Learn to allow for the ever-changing angle of the water surface. Crews can't row efficiently if one side of the boat is reaching while the other in scraping the handle along their legs. Using the feel of the boat through the feet don't be afraid to alter the pitch of the boat as it climbs over or through rough water if the swell is hitting the hull on an angle. To achieve this, you may pressure down on one side of the boat momentarily to set all rowers up with an even drop on the catch. As soon as the catch is locked rower power takes over and propels the boat forward and quickly righting the levels required.
- ⇔ Keep the crew calm and concentrating on their best rowing. The row to sea is where your style and speed training is best utilised so the crew must stay focused and they can't do that with a sweep berating them with panicked or unclear instructions.
- ⇔ Pick your best racing line remembering a straight line is always the shortest course but in strong cross wind you may need to be laying off into the wind so at the turn you don't leave the crew miles away from their can.
- ⇔ Work out your turning method and learn to aim for a constant run in distance to the cans. For example the cans are 23M apart so you should be setting up to be no more than a third of the way across that space when you start you turn into the cans.
- ⇔ Different sweeps have different turning styles but when you decide on what works for you consistency of line into the turn is your best friend allowing of course for any incoming swell and wind that could hit the cans at the same time as your boat.
- ⇔ Read the Surf Sports Manual and know you're give way rules so you don't find your crew DQ'd for a simple mistake.
- ⇔ Don't take to many risks on the turn that could see you miss the can. It may be only a meter but if you miss it, you will be doing another 20 meters to go around again
- ⇔ Turns must be practised over and over so they become second nature.
- ⇔ When straightening up out of the turn be sure you take a quick look for your gate can. It is important to quickly identify you homeward bound track so you don't miss the gates. Some sweeps will use a predetermined back of beach marker like a house or tent that is easily identifiable at the turn cans to locate the planned run home but whatever your method DO NO MISS THE GATE CAN.
- ⇔ As soon as you have yourself and the crew settled into rowing after the turn you should be looking at the ocean to pick any swell that is travelling your way. You can shift around a little searching for that run but always be mindful of your position in relation to your gate.
- ⇔ If you move off line chasing a swell you have to be mindful of not interfering with a neighbouring crew but you must still be able to realign to pass the gate can on the correct side.

- ⇔ As a rule some sweeps will stay forward on the front quarter bar and some will shift back in between the two bars or further. It really depends on your individual height and ability as to where you stand. The key is to keep the oar in contact with the water at all times so if you're tall and can stay forward and achieve that, use that advantage. If you're shorter you may need to shift aft to increase the shaft angle to maintain constant blade and water contact.
- ⇔ If the swells are sitting up be prepared to jump onto the chocks regardless of where you are in the race. In certain type of conditions and depending on our height you could find yourself getting up and down from swell to swell.
- ⇔ Keeping the sweep blade in constant contact with the water is the key to holding your line. An exercise to reinforce the point for constant blade contact with the water while at training is to set the boat up on a small runner out the back and lift the sweep blade clear of the water, watch just how quickly the boats loses direction. Remember as a rule the boat will be travelling at greater speed coming home so the sweep blade becomes more of a rudder in holding the water which in turn holds the run line.

Importance of blade angle when running swells

- ⇔ Remember in Part 2 we spoke about the angle of the blade and how we keep it trailing just off the flat. We also said the blade didn't go vertical until on a wave.
- ⇔ Running a swell is the exception, it mightn't technically be a wave but if your boat is running it has more speed that can be handled quickly with the flat blade so by employing a quick turn of the wrist and bringing the blade onto the vertical it will provide immediate steering control.
- ⇔ While ever the boat is shooting on a run you are required to directly control and steer with a vertical blade.
- ⇔ The trick to practice and learn is even though the blade is vertical it still needs to be a comfortable distance out away from your body. You need this so you have room to pull the blade back towards the body as well as push it away to steer, If you start with the handle jammed up against the body you are limited in movement. To achieve this distance you will still be using the angled blade in a slip and grab motion so a lot of wrist movement.
- ⇔ As soon as you drop off the run you revert to a angled blade so it can easily be slipped around in the water.
- ⇔ As you run home you will constantly be adjusting the angle of blade attack to the water. Remember it must always maintain contact with the water or the rear of the boat will take off sideways. So, by changing the blade angle to react to the speed of the boat you can maintain the constant steerage required.
- ⇔ Important in achieving the blade water contact is to be always raising and lowering the hand height holding the sweep handle and correctly positioning yourself in or behind the quarter bars. If you're starting to overreach above your head and risk losing water contact step up onto the chocks before that happens. As soon as the boat angle drops at the tail move back down off the chocks
- ⇔ If you feel yourself being pushed into the bottom of the boat (usually at the base of a large run or wave) make sure the blade is vertical so it can find the path of least resistance and stand up strong and tall through the legs. This way you are aiming to keep the handle at a body height position where you have maximum control. The minute you lose control of the handle you lose contact with the water and your crew is shooting along the side of the run and losing race distance

Next time we will look at setting the boat up approaching the wave area and how to handle this last part of the race.

Part 4

In part 4 we will be picking up the critical wave area in the return from the Gate Cans.

By the time you reach the gate cans on the return journey your full attention needs to switch to reading the surf around you and making sound decisions for your crew.

- ⇔ You should have already read the water before leaving the beach so for example if you have a run out going to greet your boat in the wave zone you may decide to steer a course to the left or right of that moving water if safe to do so.
- ⇔ You should have a firm understanding of the type of wave you are going to have to deal with i.e. will it spill, dump or surge and this information should be conveyed to the crew so they also understand what to expect and this should all form part of training routines.
- ⇔ You can never pre-determine what any wave will do because they are all different and your job is to make good decisions and deal with what is in front of you. However, it is a good principle to understand the surf type your operating in and be ready.
- ⇔ What is absolute is the need for you as sweep to be completely focused on the task of steering your boat and not to be looking all over the ocean at other crews. One method is for the sweep to advise the crew just before entering the wave zone on the location of other close by boats. For example, you may tell the crew that two boats could be joining us on the same wave on our right-hand side. This then allows those crew members looking to the right to become the watchtower for any possible danger or avoidance and leaves the sweep to concentrate on the wave.
- ⇔ Select a wave you are capable of handling and have previously trained to hone your skill on. If the waves are coming in sets you should have been watching on the beach to understand any pattern like say 3 waves per set. How far apart in distance and time is another good thing to understand in your decision process.
- ⇔ At training you should be practicing your take offs of varying stroke numbers in front of sizable waves so when confronted with a short take off in competition you can handle it.
- ⇔ In small or clean surf, you would usually take on the first wave that came along.
- ⇔ In big or nasty surf, you would take a more considered approach to wave selection and may well sit and wait for the last wave of the set or the cleanest wave.
- ⇔ Whatever your approach it must be decisive, make the call early, be positive and react according to the selected wave.
- ⇔ The key issues to holding any wave are the setup, concentration, body position, crew skill and a dose of luck. Remember even the best can lose a wave but generally when it happens it isn't all arms and legs. Let's look at each of these segments:

Set-Up

- ⇔ This refers to both the boat and you the sweep

- ⇔ You should understand the power of the wave and where it is coming from. So, if you are about to climb onto a 1.2M wave that has started to break from your right or is about to break from your right the POWER of that wave at that time is going to hit you from the RH side first.
- ⇔ You should always set your boat at 90 deg to the power of the wave so if a 1.2M wave is breaking squarely across behind the boat you would be at 90 deg to the face of the wave. If however, in the example above that same wave is going to start breaking or have a higher shoulder to your right you would lay off slightly to your left (bow pointed away from the POWER) so you have the boat positioned square to the POWER of the wave.
- ⇔ You watch closely and as the wave breaks across behind your boat you continually correct direction keeping square to the point of POWER which for a fully broken wave is at 90 deg to the line of broken water.
- ⇔ The cost of not steering a course adjusted to the POWER is that if the wave grabs one side of the boat it can pull you into a slew.
- ⇔ As the sweep your most important thing to do is to keep the sweep blade in the water. This is one of the only times you turn your blade to vertical and actually use it to directly steer the boat as against keeping it at the lay over angle for all other aspects of the race. If you need to climb on the chocks to keep the blade in the water then do so but never, never, never let this blade come out of the water. If you are currently spinning off at the top of the wave take notice and you are probably losing contact between the water and your blade. As soon as contact is lost the boat will start to slew and the chances of getting it back are very slim.
- ⇔ An important trick for staying in touch with the water is to shorten the blade angle by pulling the sweep oar inboard. This in turn brings the sweep blade up tighter behind your boat giving you more leverage of power but you may also need to climb the chocks as the shortened angle also raises the oar shaft higher so you need to match that using the chocks.
- ⇔ The two key pressure points in holding a wave come at the top where you're set up and stance is so important. The next point of real pressure is as you slide to the bottom of a wave and the force of breaking water engulfs the rear of the boat.
- ⇔ On both occasions STANCE is so important. At the top of the wave stand tall, keep the blade in contact with the water and that usually means climbing unto the chocks. As you learn climb up early say a few strokes before the boat starts to shoot. As you become more proficient you can jump up at the start of the shoot but either way you must be up and set so you keep the steerage set square to the POWER and the BLADE in contact with the water
- ⇔ At the base of the wave the pressure of your blade which is now set deep inside the wave will be to try and push you into the bottom of the boat as the sweep blade tries to exit the water. You must be standing tall, strong and braced to have any chance of holding this wave at that point. If you allow yourself to fold down and bend over your strength of purchase is gone and so too is your boat. You may notice some sweeps have a crew member place their hands under the sweep oar handle at this point and provide some upward pressure to assist the sweep in staying tall. This exercise has to be practiced but it can be a very effective means to keep control.
- ⇔ The other thing for sweeps to understand is if any side currents are present at the base of the wave. If you have a current running from left to right and you steer a straight course for the beach as soon as your bow hits the side drift you are likely to be slewed to the right. You would counter this side current by choosing an amount of angle to steer into the current as

you reach the base of the wave thus when the side pull grabs your bow it will bring it back to the middle and give you the best chance of control. This must be practiced to understand the angle to lay off that matches the strength of the current.

Concentration:

- ⇔ Very important for the sweep to completely switch onto the job at hand. We ask our crews to remain focused throughout the entire race and for the sweep you will be under more pressure when approaching the wave area then out the back so we need to focus.
- ⇔ Develop your own system for switching onto the variances of handling the surf zone.
- ⇔ Don't spend your time watching other crews during the race as you have a massive job to do in controlling your boat.
- ⇔ Develop your crew safety process so you always have someone watching out for other boats.
- ⇔ Learn to anticipate – don't wait until something happens before you react because in an 8M surfboat that will be too late.

Body Position:

- ⇔ Be ready, brace yourself and stand strong and tall. Remember like skiing or many other sports your strength starts in your feet and must transfer up through your body.

Flexing through the legs

- ⇔ Coming into the wave zone you should have moved to the back quarter bar. This transfers as much weight as possible to the rear but it also increases your angle of attack with the sweep blade to assist in keeping it in the water. If you stay forward the handle will be lower in the boat which equates to the blade being closer to or above the water surface.
- ⇔ It is noted that a few different approaches are taken to stance and you need to work out what works for you.
- ⇔ Firstly, feet position – some sweeps prefer to straddle the rear quarter bar when wave catching while others choose to move both feet behind the rear quarter bar. What is important is your ability to remain stable and solidly upright regardless of the angle of the boat on the wave.
- ⇔ Body direction – here again we see some sweeps taking a squarer approach with the shoulders set square across the boat. The more conventional stance would be to set the shoulders at about 45 deg to the side of the boat. The later allows for a leading and trailing shoulder and provides the maximum ability to gain a full range of movement across the boat in both directions

Sweep at 45 deg

- ⇔ Your ability to keep your craft trim and under control will be totally dependent on your chosen stance. Watch some top sweeps, talk to them and practice until you have the stance that works best for you.
- ⇔ Don't be afraid to introduce an initial jolt to the sweep oar if you feel your boat starting to slide away. It won't matter how strong you think you are if you stand and wait for the boat to start to run off and then try to correct with pressure it may not be enough. Sometimes a quick burst of power can bring the boat back on line.

Crew Skill:

- ⇔ This is every bit as important to your success as a sweep as is what you do on the end of the Long Oar.
- ⇔ Train in surf, practice the calls of - easy oar, the trail, the trail and back one seat & the trail and back.
- ⇔ Practice until the crew can keep the boat stable for you during the whole process.
- ⇔ Teach the crew that the movement of their body weight can assist in bringing a boat back onto line.
- ⇔ Teach the crew what to do in the case of a sweep going overboard.

And keep up the swim practice

Like training the rower it is only through constant practice in the surf will you become a better sweep. Make good safe decisions based on your skill level. If you can't handle a certain size or type of wave in practice you won't magically be able to in competition. Never be afraid to say NO this surf isn't for me or the crew today. There is no shame in taking a decision to protect your crew and gear.

Safe sweeping and hopefully some of the tips included in this four-part series has been of assistance.

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Sweep/Coach with success at both State & Aussie level.