

## **Coaching Manual for Deaf Rowers**

by Jill Yates

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### **Introduction**

Deaf athletes have been involved in sport just like anyone else has. However, in the case of rowing it has never been offered until now. It has always been viewed as an elite sport that was for hearing people. Deaf athletes are just as capable as hearing athletes, but haven't been given the opportunity. Communication being the main barrier, coaches have never thought about it or wanted to bother. This manual will be a guide in aiding you as you coach your Deaf athletes. As you will find, there are a few differences that are unique to Deaf rowing. In general though, they are still athletes like any others and performance expectations should be same.

### **Getting Started**

Once you have your group of potential athletes, you will start as you would any other Learn To Row program. Safety is of utmost importance. Have guidelines ready to hand out to each participant and be sure to take the time to go over them. Most of the Deaf rowers will be ASL\* / Sign Language users. Many boathouses have a white board or chalkboard, if you do not have an Interpreter\* for the first day, make full use of the resources you have to communicate meaning. Writing out English explanations can be useful, but drawing pictures or showing the athletes how to do something has been found to be preferred. As you would normally, find out everyone's name. Ask if they have a Name Sign. Instead of having to fingerspell\* each person's name, which can be quite arduous especially if you are not adept at finger spelling, you can use an abbreviated form of the name that is unique to each person. It could be a hand shape like the letter "L" tapping on the forehead for "Linda" for example. There are endless possibilities but each rower will show you theirs and then you have a way of using their name. This makes a big difference in the boat as well to the rower. There is a good chance that the rowers will give you a name sign to identify you with.

\*ASL- American Sign Language. This is a recognized language with structure and grammatical rules as any other spoken language. It is the preferred language of the Deaf in North America. Not all Deaf people are ASL users. There is also a more English based signed language as well. \*Interpreter- A highly trained professional that interprets signed language to spoken English and spoken English to a signed language. You can contact your local Deaf and Hard of Hearing resource centre and ask them to provide you with an Interpreter for your first day of LTR. If you are uncomfortable with not being able to communicate with the rowers, having an Interpreter will ease you into the situation and make the first day a lot smoother. After the first day, there isn't

the same amount of verbal explanation needed ie: safety. Try your best to be able to express your self without an interpreter for the remainder of the program.

\*Fingerspelling- The manual alphabet. Using the manual alphabet is for spelling words, names, etc

Once you have gone over the safety rules and guidelines, and names, it is time for a tour of the boathouse and introduction to the rowing specific equipment and how it is used. As each piece of equipment has a name, it also has a corresponding sign (see attached rowing signs for ASL vocabulary). Spending too much time explaining isn't very effective with this group. Introduce the equipment, proper handling and care, and then go to the ergs. Carrying the boats will come after.

As a coach you have all started with teaching the rowers how to use the ergs properly and then applying to the water. With the Deaf rowers this step has been very affective. Deaf people are visual learners and pick things up more quickly than hearing people if they are able to see exactly how something is done. We have all experienced the rowers that races up and down the slide, pulls the handle over their knees and up to their neck. The deaf rowers tend to skip that stage of learning and get right into the actual technique that you have shown them.

With all eyes on you, the coach, go through the erg motion at a training rate and then break it down piece by piece. Instead of talking through it, show the athletes what you are "talking" about. The catch, drive, finish etc... all are very visually clear; this should be no trouble. Take up the rate and finish off with the full motion and the full picture.

Have each rower spend time on the erg until you are satisfied with his or her technique and are ready to move on to the next step. When working one on one, sit beside the rower and show them again how to move. Now we are ready for the Boat!

### **Getting on the Water**

From my experience, I have found that acting out the process is the best approach to carrying the boat. Have the rowers all looking at you as you all stand in the boat bay in front of the chosen boat. Put your hands on the boat exactly how you want the rowers to, and follow each step while "air" lifting and carrying the boat. From "hands on", "take the weight", "up over the heads" and "split". Each call that you would normally yell will be replaced with a calculated action, pausing after each movement. Once the rowers are split and have the boat on their shoulders, depending on the room in the boathouse, bang your hand on the side of the boat to indicate moving forward. You can delegate one of the rowers to be responsible for that, or do it yourself for the first few times. Each change of position or new direction of carrying needs to be communicated by banging on the boat to let the other rowers know what is going on. It can also be very helpful to do a "dry run" and walk through the trip to the water. In doing

that you can indicate the rowers where they will be turning, changing position and entering the water. This is very helpful when showing the motions of rolling the boat into the water. If you are doing a wet launch be sure that you have communicated this to your rowers so they are ready before they are knee deep in the chuck and trembling under the weight of the boat.

As you would normally, have the rowers get their oars and show them how they are put in the oarlocks. Emphasize which oar goes where and how to know, as well as where to put his or her hands. When the boat is ready, show them how to safely and properly get in and out of the boat. This is best done by you doing it first yourself and having the rowers watch. This also goes for the foot stretchers and hand positioning. Go through the motions of sculling or sweeping depending on the boat. When you have gone through your regular routine of getting rowers ready to push off, having taken a little more time to show what things should look like, push off.

### **On the Water**

With your arms out and palms up, this is the sign for feathered and keeping the oars feathered on the water. By turning your palms down with arms out, this is the process of squaring. Twisting out and then back down in the process of feathering, and squaring. This is a very clear way of showing the rowers what to do with their oars. I am sure some of you have used those very hand movements in your coaching with hearing rowers.

One at a time, have the rowers go through the stroke as proceed as you normally would. You will find that coaching and teaching Deaf rowers is very much the same as coaching and teaching hearing rowers. One big difference is the absence of flogging your rowers up and down the course. Blow horns, megaphones and the like are completely useless. When introducing a new technical focus, or instructing of any kind, it is best to do so when the rowers have stopped. It is always hard as a coach to hold the information but trying to show them how to do something mid stroke is very disruptive to the boat and they will automatically stop anyway. Watching the coach and rowing at the same time is hard at first. Have them stop first and then go to instructing. You will find yourself using the sign for STOP a lot and becoming very comfortable with that sign.

Communicating in the boat is very different than with hearing rowers. Having the communicating come from stoke seat has worked out to be the best approach so far. With head nodding to either side to indicate direction, or to power up, the rest of the rowers can see the movement and respond accordingly. Both the Bow and Stroke people are responsible for making sure they don't run into or hit anything. The stopping and banging on the side of the boat can make emergency communication. Race plans aren't so easily communicated on the water. This should be done on land and when needed have each of the

members tape a race plan to their backs. Mid race motivation isn't as easily done.

### **Attention Getting**

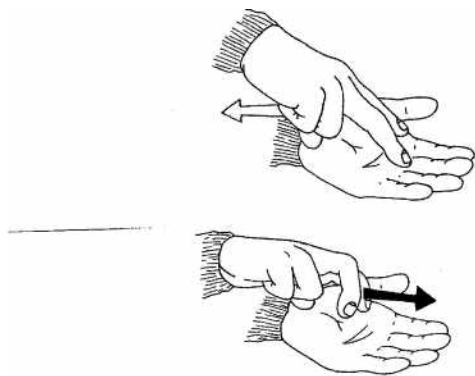
Waving your hands in front of the rowers is the best way to get their attention. When on the water, you may be doing a lot of this. If you have a more "chatty" group it can be tough to get their attention. Emphasize the importance of paying attention prior to getting on the water. When applicable, tap the rower on the shoulder or have someone else who is closer in proximity tap the person on the shoulder. Splashing water, throwing pens, rocks, twigs and such objects is not appropriate for attention getting. There are always exceptions to every rule and in certain situations any number of the prior could be necessary. In everyday conversing and non-emergency situations, waving your hand or tapping on the shoulder are the most widely used and accepted forms of attention getting.

### **Some Signs...**

Here is a site that clearly describes the ASL fingerspelling alphabet:

<http://where.com/scott.net/asl/abc.html>

The following signs have been specifically drawn for rowing. The top sign is for "Drive" – it starts with bent fingers (like knees) then pushing out like the drive of the stroke. The second is for slide. We all know how hard it is to get our athletes to slow down the slide!!! so it is the same hand shape as drive but opposite direction.



### **Final Notes**

Coaching Deaf rowers is something new and can seem a little daunting when dealing with rowers that don't use your language. It takes a coach who is willing to step out of the safety of their coaching style and try something new. Being

patient, flexible and creative will get you a long way. The athletes themselves are more than willing to share their language in return for learning how to row.

Please feel free to contact me regarding anything.  
I am more than willing to interpret or assist in anyway.

Have FUN

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