

‘Timely Tips’ for Coxswains Navigating The Head of the Schuylkill Regatta

By John Hartigan, Coxswain

Having participated in many Head of the Schuylkill Regattas, I’ve come to realize that while oarsmen and oarswomen are the engine that drive the boat, the HOS is really “*a coxswains race to win or lose.*”

As a coxswain, I’ve had my share of great moments coupled with some blunders. But, at the same time, I’ve learned how to successfully compete in one of the world’s premier fall rowing regattas. What follows is a checklist which you can use to make sure that your regatta experience is successful. Some of the points made may seem very obvious but it is still good to review them in order to assure you that you and your crew have a successful race experience. So, here goes....

GETTING READY TO RACE:

SAFETY IS KEY: If you’re reading this on race day or earlier--get yourself a laptop and ‘Google’ “The Head of the Schuylkill’ Regatta. The website is filled with useful information that will make your job easier **Check out rules regarding safety and race procedure.** Remember-- as the coxswain, you have primary responsibility for a safe race. It’s important that you know these procedures and what you need to do in an emergency involving your crew.

CHECK YOUR EQUIPMENT: Whether ‘off the trailer’ or ‘off the rack’, always check your equipment. Riggers easily loosen and seats can come off the track-- which can spell race disaster, if not maintained. Before each practice and on race day get your boat on some stretchers and go over it with a diligence.. To keep your team focused and in sight, involve each member of your crew in the maintenance check. It will make your job easier.

TALK TO YOUR CREW: While there is lots to see and enjoy at this regatta, continually stress to your crew the importance of staying together and not ‘wandering off’ on race day. Getting on the water on schedule is critical to preparing your crew to race. Build your coach’s confidence in you by having your entire crew ready to race. If someone wanders off, the whole boat suffers with a rushed warm up and possibly missing your scheduled race.

SCHEDULE A PRE-RACE “CHALK TALK”: Everyone in the crew needs to know times and strategy together so that there is no confusion. The chalk talk before racing must include your coach and boat squad to assure that everyone has the plan. Assume nothing! Say it once—then review it again with your crew so mistakes and misunderstandings once you are on the water can be avoided.

RACE STRATEGY:

PRE-RACE ‘WARM UP’: Fact is--- the race course-- while organized--is going to be filled with hundreds of participating crews. Getting your crew ‘warmed up’ will be a challenge. So, consider having your crew do some on-land warm up prior to boating. For example, a short run or some stretching can be a great help to your crew **before** they get on the water. Once you are “boated” and on the water allow plenty of time to get to the starting line. Most important stay focused. There will be lots of crews in front and in back of you so keep alert as you make your way to the start.

THE START: In the HOS you are basically racing the clock. Typically, head-race crews line up in single file and then are dispatched at intervals usually 10-15 seconds apart. This year the HOSR plans to try something new: sending crews off two at a time, approximately side by side. Regardless of how you start, the object is to successfully pass other crews and race the clock. Pay special attention to the RACE MARSHALS and REFEREES’ directions on when to get into racing mode and start the racing. The referees are your best source for information and will keep you on track. And, ask questions if you do not understand a particular referee or official’s direction to you. Don’t be timid **SPEAK UP RESPECTFULLY!**

KEEP YOUR CREW MOVING:

My experience has always been to keep my boat moving and avoid boat stopping collisions which rob your crew of race momentum and can cause damage and injury. Avoid taking risks that can cause ‘boat stoppers’. For example, if you’re moving on a crew in front of you that will not move over, ‘power’ around them and avoid getting tangled up with them at all costs. In some other cases, it may make sense to ‘power down’ temporarily to avoid a collision with one or more boats such as on the three major turns when one or more boats may be going through the same arch at the same time.

You may have to go a little farther or slower than you planned but you gain when your crew keeps moving. You lose big when you’re forced to stop dead in the water for any reason.

FINALLY, SPORTSMANSHIP MAKES FOR A GREAT RACE

The Head of the Schuylkill Regatta is an exciting premier event that is a great learning experience for coxswains and rowers alike. Coxswains have an awesome responsibility, but the challenge is well worth the effort. Knowing the rules, attention to detail, being observant and communicating with your coach and crew make for a well run race. And, finally being respectful of the effort that every competitor is putting out are the keys to a great race experience for all.

Known for his booming voice, John Hartigan has been coxing on the Schuylkill for decades. A member of the 1968 and 1976 Olympic Rowing Teams, the 1975, 1979 1983 Pan Am teams and the 1974 Lightweight World Champion 8, John is also a member of the University of Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame. John continues to crew up and down the Schuylkill with the Masters Oarsmen of University Barge Club.