

THE SCIENCE OF RETENTION: VARSITY RETENTION

INTRODUCTION: SUCCESS IS AN ACCUMULATION OF CORRECT DECISIONS

In the fall of 2010 I conducted tryouts for my varsity squad because essentially we had more men who want to row than we have resources to handle their presence. I do not have to do this every year, and in the previous 19 seasons at Michigan I had done this 3 other times. We finished in the spring of 2010 with a roster that could have had 63 rowers and 8 coxswains return that fall. Even with a cut of freshman the fall of 2009, we finished the spring of 2011 with a roster of 68 rowers and 12 coxswains, which totals 8 ½ eights for just our men's team. In 2011 we had 4 ½ eights of varsity men and 4 eights of freshman. Sometimes we are bursting at the seams with athletes, and it stretches our equipment to the max. Our annual dues and fund-raising for 2010-11 for a varsity member totaled \$2315. I turned away athletes who wanted to pay and fund-raise \$2315 because we didn't have enough room on our roster for them. People want to be a part of our organization. And thank goodness for that, because without question there is strength in numbers in rowing clubs and the program benefits from it in numerous ways.

Now, some people reading this may be philosophically opposed to denying the opportunity to row to someone who wants to row. But our indoor training room is only so large, we have only so many ergs, and our time in it is limited. Our boathouse can hold only so many boats – that past spring we nearly emptied our two-bay pole barn every practice. Our river is only so big and it is crowded during our practice time with rowers from other programs. Additionally, I have only so many coaches to work the various practice groups, and we are allowed only so many launches on our water at once. At some point the situation becomes unmanageable to the point of being unsafe and I have determined 8 to 8 ½ eights is our max, and that is probably an eight too large to be honest. There just aren't many quality races for the 4th freshman.

I also know some may envy us reading this and wish they were in similar position with their programs. I can assure you that we have not always been in this position, nor will we always in the future - it is a rarity in general. For whatever reason things run in cycles, even in a situation where the head coach has been there a long time and been a constant. There have been years like 2006 where I have as few as 2 ½ Varsity eights, and years like 2011 when I finished the year with 4 ½ eights. I have been through seasons, especially early on in my career, when figuring out this puzzle of retention I have been left asking the question, "What happened? Why did they all quit?" Over time it eventually changed to be, "Why did this one particular guy quit?" Now I don't ask any questions because I think at this point I have a pretty thorough understanding of the athletes' motives, and have seen behavior consistently exhibited in similar ways by athletes years apart on the all-time roster of people who I have coached. In the end, human behavior, as complicated a subject as it is, is pretty consistent and predictable as it relates to our sport. The reasons people stick with it or quit in the present are basically the same as it always has been.

I have spent a lot of time discussing freshman retention, and I will emphasize its importance again here, because ultimately the number of freshmen you finish with at the end of their freshman year will affect

the number of available athletes you could retain into their sophomore year, which will influence the maximum retention you will have with a graduating class at the end of four years. The attrition is pretty amazing if you think about it. We start with 120+ people checking us out in the initial weeks of the fall, and 3 years and 9 months later only 6-16 of them will graduate having rowed four years. Whether that number is 6 or 16 depends on a lot of things. And the difference is pretty significant if the three graduating classes on the varsity squad are 6 people each (18 total varsity athletes) or 16 (48 total) – that is a \$70,000 difference in our budget based on our dues levels in 2013! Since a club is predominately comprised of walk-ons (our statistic is 85-90% walk-on), having four-year rowers is desirable, particularly from a competitive standpoint because a walk-on often doesn't start making good technique progress until their 2nd and 3rd years of rowing. Coaching a squad with a lot of 2nd year rowers is a much different dynamic to coach, as opposed to a group of mostly 3rd and 4th year rowers, and especially of athletes in their 6th, 7th, and 8th years of rowing as some of our varsity counterparts usually have. So keeping a large number of guys rowing for four years is desirable for many reasons, most importantly because it will impact your team's competitive performance.

FACTORS OF VARSITY RETENTION

The reasons a person continues to row in college can be slightly different than the reason they first decided to try rowing as a freshman or a novice. Most college rowing teams are conventionally divided into two squads – a varsity squad and a freshman squad. This is especially the case for clubs, whose memberships are almost entirely walk-ons with no prior experience. People are at different stages of development in their first year of rowing, so it made sense that things evolved this way.

Whether someone sticks with it and continues to row on varsity or give up rowing will depend on many factors. If you offer an attractive product, they will choose to continue to invest in it. Freshman retention is critical, but varsity retention is a necessity of life for a team. If freshmen come onto the team and see dozens and dozens of other freshman on the team discovering the sport with them and look around and see there are only eight guys rowing on the varsity squad they figure out real quick that there is a culture of quitting on the team. Many will take the first opportunity to quit and not look back.

Athletes will stick with rowing beyond their freshman year for the same basic reason they stuck with it as freshmen– it is fun. But varsity members must see that there are sound business practices in place from an administrative stand point, that it is affordable, and that there is some fun stuff happening on the varsity team. They are inspired by the possibilities of success, and those possibilities are greatly influenced if they view their teammates as “winners” and think of them as talented, committed, and trustworthy. Ultimately, though, they need to be inclined to buy into the coaching methods – all the other stuff doesn't matter as much.

Top 5 Reasons Varsity Members Quit

- 1) Loss of motivation: they are burned out, don't like it anymore or lack a feeling of possible success
- 2) Disagreed with selection methods or selection priorities
- 3) Teammates or coaches behavior turned them off or became unbearable
- 4) Money and they disagreed with team administrative practices
- 5) Personal priorities have shifted

Of these five reasons, only the last reason is one you don't have some influence over. The other four reasons listed your coaching methods can have a degree of influence over the rower's interest in

sticking with your program. *Retaining varsity members is more about eliminating the reasons for quitting than giving them reasons to stay.* If you have people quitting varsity in droves you need to be asking yourself why. Don't be afraid to ask them directly why they quit (the real reasons why), and accept what they offer you. Then look in the mirror and start asking yourself if your coaching methods and practices are working. Ask yourself the following questions:

- ❖ Do you do things that engage the athletes?
- ❖ Are you fair?
- ❖ Are you charismatic?
- ❖ Have you structured things on the calendar well? (the rhythm of the season must compliment the academic calendar your institution has)
- ❖ Do the athletes feel like they are improving? (Whether or not they actually are improving is irrelevant, they need to feel like they are)
- ❖ Have you set up a team structure that gets people working hard?
- ❖ Do you create situations where the best athletes can shine?
- ❖ Do you give the athletes consistent feedback and tell them how they can improve?
- ❖ Do they feel like the team situation (equipment, facilities, coaching) is improving? (even if it is not where it should be, is it improving?)
- ❖ Does the university community care about what you are doing?
- ❖ Do you give the athletes enough information far enough in advance that they can plan their lives around rowing?
- ❖ Are you consistent?
- ❖ Do you do what you say you are going to do?
- ❖ Are you doing things that give many different people opportunities to win things or be successful?
- ❖ Are you feeding their thirst for competition as well as you can?
- ❖ Are you scheduling big name opponents to challenge them as well as opponents that they have a realistic shot at defeating? (winning helps retention without question)
- ❖ Do you make the right decisions? (putting the right people in the right places at the right time)
- ❖ Do you tend to do things for spite or stick to your plan out of stubbornness when it is widely unpopular?
- ❖ Can you admit when you are wrong to the athletes?
- ❖ Do you set up situations where they can determine their own destiny?
- ❖ Do you assure their efforts will go down in team history?

This list could go on and on really. These are a sampling of questions I would have asked of myself at the very beginning of my coaching career, if I knew then what I know now. The bottom line is your coaching is one of the main reason athletes quit or stay. **Success is an accumulation of correct decisions.**

OUR STATISTICS

I have presented some data in the previous section on Freshman Retention regarding how we retain numbers of athletes through the course of their freshman year. I am going to end this introduction with an analysis of the classes that the data was based on, so you can see how each group ended up at the end of their four years.

MICHIGAN MEN'S ROWING CLASS BREAKDOWN OF YEAR TO YEAR RETENTION, 2002-date

End of Year:	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
Class of 2014	33	15	15	14

Class of 2013	33	11	10	9
Class of 2012	32	22	19	15
Class of 2011	24	9	9	9
Class of 2010	20	10	10	10
Class of 2009	25	14	9	8
Class of 2008	26	7	6	7
Class of 2007	29	13	11	10
Class of 2006	26	13	8	6
Class of 2005	33	17	15	8
Class of 2004	30	10	4	5
Class of 2003	32	20	16	13
Class of 2002	31	15	13	12
Thirteen Class Average:	28	14	11	9

A FEW NOTES ABOUT THIS TABLE

- I do have data that goes all the way back to the year I started coaching at Michigan in 1992, but chose these years as it is more representative and consistent data. I was trying a lot of different things the first several years I coached and we hadn't settled into consistent team performance.
- What this table does not show is who coached each freshman class, and that is a huge factor of retention. In 2002 our freshman won the silver medal at the IRA in the Frosh 8 with almost an entire walk-on crew. Their coach was Mike Guerrieri, who coached our freshman from 1999-2002 and his three classes were the classes of 2003, 2004, and 2005. Mike was a stellar and engaging coach, who possessed a lot of energy, and is a big, athletic guy. The guys stuck with it because of him and his end of the year numbers showed. My 2011-2012 varsity team was all coached by Christian Youngs, who incidentally was in that 2002 Freshmen eight coached by Guerrieri. Youngs is very similar to Guerrieri – fiery and engaging and the guys are drawn to be on the team he coaches. And again, the numbers show. Both men focused on the process of improvement with their squads and performance, were enthusiastic and obvious for their love of the sport and winning and having fun while learning. They did not focus on retention itself; retention was the result of their efforts. Guys liked what they were doing and that is why they stayed – even when they were unsure if they even liked rowing. This again demonstrates just how important the freshman coach is to retention.
- The class of 2008 saw a steep drop off from their freshman year (2005) to their sophomore year. I attribute this to the horrible weather we experienced in the spring of their freshman year. It is funny how such a phenomenon can play a role in retention, but it does. That spring we had four races canceled due to poor weather. They simply didn't have a great experience.
- We generally return half of the class between the freshman and sophomore year. Through the course of their freshman year I do talk a fair bit to the freshman about quitting and how they may be thinking about it from time to time. It is normal to consider quitting, and this feeling especially hits them during more challenging academic times. I tell them that quitting is something many people consider and to not freak out when they get those feelings. I tell them to not assess whether or not they like the sport until the end of the year, which in this day and age is the ACRA. I talk to them about guys who I have known who have gone on to make the national team and loved rowing, who cited that they really didn't know if they liked the sport until they raced at the IRA, or the ACRA. But the environment at those races secured their like of the sport, and then they rowed four years and went on to make the U.S. team. And this happens every year, it truly does.
- The big drop-off you see between the freshman and sophomore years are the athletes who were thinking of quitting and decided to stick it out their entire freshman year finally throwing

in the towel. The summer break allowed them to assess and then determine it was not for them and they can go try some other things in college their remaining three years. So be it. They did give it a shot, and to their credit did what was asked and stuck with it through their freshman year. It is important to not alienate those guys, even though you may be disappointed with their decision. Some of our biggest alumni contributions have come from guys who rowed less than four years. Whenever I encounter these students on campus I always say hello or have a conversation with them. It is nobody's fault that rowing didn't do it for them.

This is pretty good – one eight per class at the end of four years. Each one of those guys will have paid nearly \$10,000 in dues and fund-raising in that time, \$85,000 as a class, taken a few million strokes, and in the process invested themselves personally at a very high level. It adds up, and the end result will be endearment. And the more endearment, the better for the future of your program and its support because you need to learn how to stand on your own two feet as a club team and rely on yourselves to get things done administratively. More on this subject will be written in future chapters.

Ideally, however, you get many people to return, and the most athletic guys. It is crucial to return a lot of guys from the Freshman Eight, as they are your most talented guys and future talent – most people reading this understand that. I use the summer to paint the new team a vision of how it can be. It is this vision of hope that is responsible for 13 of them coming back instead of 10 (or less). Many club teams have this phenomenon happen each year where they retain a decent number of freshmen through the year, but then they all quit their sophomore year. A lot happens over the summer and people who ended the year enthusiastic and with intentions of returning have a change of heart and everyone is shocked when they aren't at the first team meeting in the fall. They need a vision of what their future can look like, goals, and what they need to do. The vision will be the difference between getting 7 guys to come back, versus 12. That vision will be the subject of near future pieces of writing . . .

INSPIRE THE KIDS: DEVELOP A NATIONAL FOCUS

My team took off in the late 1990s when I set concrete goals for them, and a raw framework on what is needed to do to achieve them. The carrot that I dangled in front of them at that time was performance at the IRA. Good athletes want to be challenged and good athletes want to compete with the best. When our program focus turned to competing at the highest level the recreational-types quit off and were replaced with competitive-types. It was also at this point I truly started to enjoy coaching because I was working with people nearly as motivated as I was.

I will eventually write an entire section on how to gradually and methodically change the culture of the program to get the athletes to commit more, but will mention here that setting goals very high for them will not only increase their commitment, but also will help retain more people. The excitement of pushing for a national finish will draw more people into the program. It is the carrot needed to keep a lot of kids around, after initially losing some because the current membership may not be willing to commit to staying a few weeks longer to attend the ACRA.

This is why attending ACRA is important for retaining more and the best athletes in your program. The carrot I refer to used to be the IRA for my program. You could take anyone to the IRA and race in the national championship. The structure of the IRA prior to 2008 was one of inclusion – as long as you

were eligible and willing, you could come to the IRA, throw your hat in the ring, and race for the national championship. Performing there became the heart of what we did. While at first it was difficult to get kids to stay three more weeks, eventually I had more kids wanting to go to the IRA than we had spots for, despite staying 5 or 6 weeks beyond the end of our classes. That is what the ACRA does for us now, and it is what it can do for your program.

Now, you may read this and think that a race like the Dad Vail or the ECAC NIRC or SIRA, or even Eastern Sprints can do that. I think you can definitely develop some enthusiasm in your program around those races, but you will likely not retain large numbers if those races are your season's culmination. It all comes back to recruiting freshmen walk-ons for club programs. Since a club programs' lifeblood is walk-on novice athletes and you are competing for their interest, your program must have some mass appeal to them. Newcomers to the sport simply do not understand what it means to win the Dad Vail. But they do understand what it means to win a national championship. This is the initial carrot that the athletes in our program are presented, and it is the foundation for what the Michigan program is about. At one point this used to be the IRA for us, but in recent years that has shifted to ACRA out of necessity. I have more kids interested in rowing for Michigan than ever with the shift from the IRA to the ACRA. I have had to leave a few guys behind because we don't have enough racing opportunities at ACRA for them. They will be disappointed and some of them will be quite angry that they have invested so much into the program and feel entitled to the same experience their teammates are experiencing.

This is because the opportunity to race for a national championship means a lot to them. It means more than any other race. If our situation were that we could only attend one race it would be ACRA, simply to sell freshmen on the sport. If it were two races I would add the Dad Vail – they will understand how fun rowing can be after a weekend of competing in Philly. In my opinion, attending the ACRA is more important than attending the Dad Vail. You need to get your freshmen to the national championship, and those freshmen need to see your varsity team pushing to win it. The varsity guys will in turn come to value their leadership role in that effort. This will further hook them on the sport. Attending the ACRA national championship will help retain more athletes across your entire team.

When putting the finishing touches on the coming year's budget and making plans, tell your kids now by email, or at the first meeting of the year, that they need to plan their season to end at the ACRA in late May. It may be after their classes end, and they shouldn't plan to start any summer jobs or travel until after that date. It is a REQUIREMENT to be on the team, it is not optional. If they cannot commit to that, then they should not even start the year – and I literally told the athletes that when I was first trying to make this cultural shift in our program. Explain to them it is your team's mission to place as high as you possibly can at the ACRA and they need to buy into that mission now. If they cannot bring themselves to do that then don't even start. Giving your team the national championship as their mission will attract more competitive people, and retain more kids. You will lose some people at first, as you filter out the non-committed (mostly that first year). Don't be afraid to trim some fat from the program. Your organization will eventually put on some lean muscle and retain it.

HANDLING QUITTERS AND THOSE WHO WANT TO QUIT

We dread seeing that email come to our inbox titled "(no subject)" or "LEAVING THE TEAM" (Notice how people will rarely ever say they are quitting?). Or maybe they show up to practice in street clothes and say "Coach, can I talk to you for a minute?" And of course you know what is coming, as the rest of the

team is gathered around chatting before practice watching the exchange from 20 feet away between you and the soon-to-be quitter, and then look to the coach for your reaction because they all knew it was coming, as they always hear the news before the coach does. Hey, at least the quitter had the guts to do it in person rather than send an email or just not show up anymore without word. That person will always have my respect and will depart with a handshake and a “good luck to you”.

When I was a less experienced coach someone quitting and using what I felt a poor excuse would sometimes draw a snarky remark from me, as the last words he would hear from my mouth. On a few occasions my disappointment and frustration got the better of my emotions and I said to a quitter as I shook his hand, “Good luck to you. Because if you quit everything in life when it gets tough like you just quit rowing you will need all the luck you can get.” Words like that come from frustration, of course, and if you have coached a collegiate club rowing team you have undoubtedly experienced the frustration of having athletes quit on you. You know you shouldn’t take it personally, yet you do. You have invested a lot into your team and love our sport, and seeing a person walk away from it and rejecting what you feel is a great experience that you have worked hard to make appealing is hard to take sometimes. So, I say that you should take it personally, to a degree, but realize also you won’t retain everyone. Only once in my entire career have we finished the year with the exact same group that we started with in the previous fall – not a single guy quit. People will quit, but what you need to pay attention to are the reasons and if the quitting happened in mass amounts or droves due to a particular circumstance.

How you handle those who quit is important, especially if the athlete is one of the best athletes. Sometimes kids quit for attention, and want it to be a big scene. Realize, no one is THAT important to the team, especially one who quits and wants it to be dramatic. Let them go. I rarely ever try to talk an athlete out of quitting. By the time they get to you they have already made up their mind. They stopped loving rowing a long time before the words were uttered. However, once in a blue moon I do, but only when I sense that the athlete truly does not want to quit and that they are quitting only because they see it as the only possible option given their situation. I will sit down with them and go over their situation and try and make them see alternate solutions. And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t.

Usually I have identified guys who are on the fence well before they tell me they quit. They usually aren’t keeping up. The pace is too rich for them. Their erg scores fail to progress with everyone else. Their effort in practice is lackluster because they aren’t enjoying themselves. Do I try and speak to those guys and see what is going on? Sometimes, yes. Assume they want to be there. It could be something else, you just don’t know unless you ask. The athlete could just be going through a tough time academically or personally with a girlfriend or a teammate or with family at home. The earlier it is addressed the better chance you have of retaining them. Sometimes they need to see that it is a rough period they are going through, and once through it the rowing aspect will be more fun. That is, assuming of course, you are creating a fun environment for them to look forward to.

I rarely – very, very rarely – let an athlete on the fence take “time off”. And they will request it. “If I just had two weeks to get through these exams and catch up on sleep I know I would be better coach.” This will especially be the case on a team where commitment is less in general, and where there is less competition for seats. If you do this you will have all sorts of athletes requesting time off. It WILL become epidemic. It WILL burst a dam. On my team since 1997 I have only allowed “time off” on 2 occasions. Incidentally both of them eventually dropped out, and both times some of their teammates

also asked to take time off. What you are telling the rest of the team is that it is OK to take a break. You are giving permission to stop working hard. Prior to 1997 I would allow it and we had a problem with commitment. Then I cracked down (“cracking down” usually means they don’t race a certain number of times), yes a few people dropped out because of it, and especially when I was challenged in the immediate following years and stuck to my guns, they might quit, too. But the team culture shifted, and nowadays people wouldn’t think about asking to take “time off”, mostly for fear they would lose their seat. My position is you are either on the team or not - you do what the team does.

CHANGING TEAM CULTURE NEEDS TO HAPPEN SLOWLY

It is common for inexperienced and young coaches (under age 26) with a lot of passion to be coaching club teams, often as head coaches, thrust into the role because the club simply needs them and they are willing and enthusiastic. Sometimes they are the last resort taken on the eve of the season because no one else wants the job. Many are there to just run practices and will not take any administrative leadership duties. They often have little experience running a program and certainly they will learn by making some mistakes. The unfortunate thing about making mistakes as a club is that it will have greater consequences. Clubs are very fragile. At any moment the wrong decision can cause the situation to implode. Remember, **success is an accumulation of correct decisions**. Failure can be the result of a single incorrect decision.

Now, varsity programs are also fragile, especially good programs, and there have been many implosions on varsity teams over the years. At the 2003 IRA in Camden I was watching the Varsity eight heats and reps. I had a very good crew that year which would eventually make the petite final. In an exciting repechage where the top two advanced we sprinted past Temple and Dartmouth to win by a few feet. Dartmouth, the eastern sprints bronze medalist, was third to Dad Vail gold medalist Temple by a few feet. I had ridden my bike and watched the race, and then after the exciting finish I rode up to watch the rep after ours, full of glee. In that rep a struggling Princeton crew, which was dominant in years prior, was relegated to the C/D Semi-finals. They rowed like a crew in conflict and that lacked confidence. As I rode back to the docks I peddled next to Curtis Jordan, the very good and successful Princeton coach for two decades. I asked him what he felt happened to his crew that year. He said, “It is like a virus.” Wanting to know how a guy I considered to be a great coach would handle the situation I asked what he could do to fix things. He responded, “Nothing really. Right now the virus is running rampant and it just needs to run its course.” He went on to say that the athletes lacked confidence in each other, the situation, and him. There was a lot of in-fighting. People lost hope. These were symptoms of the virus. The cause of the virus was a lack of trust. Curtis felt the group had to experience failure together and hit rock bottom and learn from it. For Princeton in 2003, hitting rock bottom was to not make the petite final.

While a virus can attack a varsity program, and those implosions can result in athletes quitting in droves and poor results, realize a varsity program has a better immune system, has inoculations in place, and their losses will be minimal when you compare it to what can happen to a club program. Varsity programs generally have better health care and can seek treatment from the athletic department. When a virus attacks a club program it can kill it. Years of work can be ruined in a few weeks, and it can take years to build it back up to the beginning level. A spoiled chemistry between the athletes and coaches can result in athletes quitting in droves, and as a result, a tremendous loss in income. As

coaches we are left hoping the athletes decide to return the next year after an unsatisfying finish to the season. A varsity program by the nature of its financial situation and *where the money comes from* is a stronger network. Clubs have no safety net and low immunity.

To prevent these implosions and an even more weakened immune system than you already have, you need to make any changes small ones. This is especially true if you are a coach in the first year of the program. People hate change, and too much change will cause them to quit. My advice to the new coach is to sit down and individually talk with your athletes about the team – what they like and what they don't. It can help steer your decisions and allow you to develop a course of action towards improvement that makes sense. Don't try to do too much too soon. Realize what you can simply demand be the situation in a varsity program will need to have a long, tedious time-consuming sales job to kids younger and less experienced than you, who sometimes feel they know more. A culture change you can implement in one or two years in a varsity program can take four to six years in a club program. Sometimes you need to wait for certain kids to graduate and get out of the program for your coaching philosophy to be more embraced by the team.

COACHING BEHAVIOR AND DECISIONS DRAMATICALLY AFFECTS RETENTION

If your goal is to simply show up, coach a few drills, set some workouts, and tweak rigging a few days a week you will not draw kids in on what you are doing. You won't retain the right type of athletes. Good and competitive athletes have high standards and aspirations, and identify with competitive goals – even if they are paying dues. If you aren't on a mission to compete as a coach, you are likely just drinking beer and splashing around in the water and socializing. Competitive teams don't have people on the team who are satisfied with that. If you do, you need to slowly and systematically get rid of them, all the while meeting your annual budget. It is tricky to do this, but start with emphasizing winning, and emphasize it often. Weave images and reference winning and competing into your coaching talks and especially during practices themselves. Those who want to win will be drawn in, and those who don't will go join the tiddlywinks club.

The athletes pay money and thus feel a sense of ownership. This can be a good thing and can work in your favor – it is one of the few advantages I feel that club programs have over varsity programs. We all know what “pride of ownership” means - the owner takes care of their own property better. However, what the club athletes lack is expertise. Some of them will feel they have expertise simply because they own the program. People want to be in charge of their own belongings and destiny and make the decisions that will directly affect them. Often the student-athletes are empowered with a lot of responsibility and relish in having it.

What I am touching on here is a subject I will eventually write about in great detail, and that is the appropriate roles of the coaches and officers. The decisions made will impact retention, and retention is a key to success. You need many, many bodies in a club program to account for the inevitable attrition that happens. You need to be left with competitive athletes after the attrition takes place, so you need to start with twice as many as you need, because half of them will quit. Often times, officers make decisions that lack long-term vision, or they simply don't have enough time to implement their ideas to fruition. They graduate and are gone in a few years and with them the will to follow through on those

ideas. Not that it matters, because the next year will find a new set of officers with their own agendas. And so the wheel is reinvented again, and again, and again.

What I am writing about here – power and authority - is the single most contentious issue when coaching a club, and one that is the source of great frustration for many club coaches. Even after 20 years of coaching clubs it can still at times be frustrating for me. Ambitious student-officers who have their own agenda and some authority to go with it can be hard to deal with, especially if they are power hungry. If they have the university recreational sports department on their side, whose policy is to only deal with students because it is a “student-run” organization, well, you may feel pretty darn powerless in a situation where to get better you need authority. Who makes what decision is the source of great contention in nearly every single club out there. Not just rowing clubs, but clubs of all sorts face this dilemma.

Because of this, how you deal with people is more important than what drills you use or your training plan – your conduct will have lasting effects and will build relationships. Young coaches often ramrod their ideas and demand that things be a certain way simply because they said so. They often demand respect because they have been hired into a position of authority, and forget that you need to earn respect. They are more likely to respect a coach and accept their coaching if the coach respects them, and respects the fact that they own their program. You need to explain and provide reasoning for what you do. This is much different than what a varsity coach has to deal with. Young club coaches often rowed in a varsity program as a college athlete where the varsity coach gave orders and the athletes did it without question. These coaches are often frustrated, offended and infuriated when club athletes question their methods, don't accept the change, and in some cases do the opposite for spite. They never would have thought to challenge their coach when they were an athlete in the varsity program.

Sometimes what the young coach lacks is grey hair. College student-athletes are more likely to respect age. They are more likely to respect a coach who is older *and* has a proven track record. I can tell you that my coaching effectiveness comes easier than it did when I was in my 20's because the athletes know that the program is successful and I have been in charge of that success. My presence in challenging and pivotal moments that you encounter through a season usually has a calming influence. They know I will be there to make sure everything turns out OK. You WILL encounter these moments every year where decisions need to be made and a course of action set. Those challenges are inevitable, even with the best team and situation you could ask for. The right decision will result in every-day operations improving, or at least continuing on normally. The wrong decision may result in droves of people quitting. **Success is the accumulation of correct decisions.**

Know your stuff coach – tell them why you do what you and your goals for having them do it. This applies to rowing technique, drill-work, training methodology, racing strategy, selection, administrative roles, travel policies – all of it. It is your job to educate them, so tell them why you do what you do. They will buy into it much easier. If you can't provide them a reason you need to ask yourself, “Why am I doing this?” There is no guarantee, of course, that even with the best explanations you can give that they will embrace your methods. They may even push back. My advice is to genuinely listen to what the officer wants; at the very least it will make him feel better that you are listening. And perhaps you pull the key issue out through your discussions, which will lead you to gain an understanding of them, and perhaps lead you to a better way to get them on board with your plans and goals. You must be open to communication.

Club athletes thrive in an environment where things are predictable and known. As a coach of a club you should provide the athletes with a lot of information. Explain why you do something before the question is asked. This makes them feel like you know what the plan is, and that it is well thought out. By at least appearing to know where you are going and how you want to get there people are more likely to follow you (even if you don't know *exactly* where you are going). A "man on a mission" is an interesting person who people will be drawn to. Let your mission be known to them and many will follow you.

For example, I provide my guys with the training plan for each phase we enter. They get to prepare themselves for what lies ahead that day and they get to see you have a plan and that you have thought it out. It helps them attack it more. This is helpful for the club athlete because when they invest, attack, and have a return on the investment in the form of improvement they feel successful. Feeling successful will help retain them. Another example is that I produce a handbook, given to them at the beginning of the year. The handbook details the calendar of our year, noting every little thing we do, it lays out the training schedule, team rules, team records, selection procedures, and most importantly our dues and fund-raising plans, payment schedule, and our team policies (dues, fundraising, travel, etc.). They know what they are getting for their money this way, and shows them we have a plan.

THE SELECTION STRUCTURE OF YOUR TEAM IS CRITICAL TO RETENTION

Whether you have 10 athletes or 40 athletes, how you structure your team into lineups for competition will have an impact on retention. One of the things that most appeals to competitive people is team camaraderie. If you ask the athletes on my team what they enjoy about being on the team most will say they enjoy competing against their teammates almost as much as they like intercollegiate competition. Like it is in all programs that focus on a varsity eight, it is an honor to make the varsity eight at Michigan. Competitive people want to be the best. So the competition within our team to make the varsity eight, or the second varsity eight, and sometimes even the third varsity eight, is pretty intense. The possibility of making the boat they have their sights set on keeps them engaged all year long. There is more to this of course, as how you set things up in practice on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis will compliment this or not, but intra-squad competition plays a huge role in keeping the athletes engaged. Engaged athletes are more likely to stay and competition definitely engages them.

Some examples of things the guys like about what I do:

- Early in October I have a pairs matrix to determine who gets to go to the Head of the Charles. It is a heats-semifinals-finals competition done in pairs, and the winners get their names on a nice perpetual trophy. I also do similar things in fours through a fours matrix.
- Monthly testing of 10K, 6K, or 2K keeps things goal oriented and competitive. Be sure to weight adjust scores!
- I run a tournament for 500meter pieces in February on the erg, with a playoff system used. The winner gets their name on a plaque.
- I publish seat racing results so they see how they have performed.
- I am a big believer of rowing even lineups in practice during the fall, especially for steady state. I award points DAILY using a scoring system so each practice has a meaning to it. They get updated on points every week. This points contest keeps guys working hard in practice, because every practice counts. It keeps things competitive, which you want.

There is always something going on, always a way for them to compete, and always some competitive event within our own team to look forward to. This moves them through an entire school year feeding the craving that brought them to us - competition. Additionally, and the main reason I do these things, is that all of this information gathered through these intra-squad competitions assists you in making selection decisions. They always have their next shot to impress. It is critical you keep these competitions open and fair for the athletes to value these intra-squad competitions, because if they do they will be constantly engaged. Engaged athletes are more likely to be retained. By the time you get to the spring they are battle tested and since there were all these things to engage them, more guys have stayed the course. Additionally, you will be more likely to keep the BEST athletes, as they will be near the top of the results more often. RETENTION has been helped by feeding their desire to compete.

I contrast the experience I oversee with my team with my own experience as an athlete at Grand Valley State University in the late 1980s. I learned a lot about how NOT to do things at GVSU. Grand Valley's rowing team in the late 80's was a very "clubby" club. It is not the ultra-competitive club team that it is today. We students ran it, and we often did things to serve our own agendas. We had a coach who came to practices when he could, but due to work and family obligations he couldn't be there all the time and we were left to do most of the administrative tasks. We also sorted ourselves into lineups, self-determined lineup priorities, and formed a race schedule based on where we thought we could do best. We completely avoided the varsity eight because it was very competitive, and instead focused on fours and lightweights. Having a heavyweight four and a lightweight four or lightweight eight was pretty typical. My Associate Head Coach Charley Sullivan calls this the "My Butt, My Seat, My Boat, This Year Syndrome". It is completely short-sighted, self-focused and self-serving, with the desires of few placed ahead of many that usually come at the expense of others in the program. As a result, those left on the outside – which will be many - end up quitting. An athlete-run situation is horrible for retention. The competition and selection structure of the club needs to be in the hands of a professional and not the students.

What we needed at GVSU in the late 1980s was someone to intervene and show us a different way to go about it. When we resisted – and we would have - shown us why it was good for the program in the long-run and present us some different carrots to feed our egos. And then if we continued to resist, thrown tantrums, and perhaps even formed a coup d'état, just did it anyway (with a very tempered sales job). Control over selection and competitive focus needs to be given to a coach, and not interfered with for the most part by the athletes. When writing this section I assume the coach does have this authority, and I also assume club officers are willing to give the coach that authority, and not interfere or meddle. If that is not the case, it needs to become the case.

ROWING EIGHTS vs. FOURS

It is common for coaches to be seduced by potential success in the four (or fours) and base selection around that. Many will cite that the program races to win, and if you can win in the four then that is good and will send a good message to the team. Many also feel that this is the best way to appeal to the best athletes – if they have a good competitive experience then they are likely to stick with it. And since keeping those athletes engaged and inspired is necessary for retention, you could argue it is a good thing. And in some cases – where circumstances make rowing eights difficult – it may make sense

to prioritize the four. But those cases are the exception rather than the rule. My main message here is: row the eight.

I have a theory that only so many guys are going to accept being placed in the last boat. These athletes are behind the others in strength and/or skill. They are the guys who really like to row and compete but aren't as athletic. Some of them lack the tenacity to work hard all the time. Many are extremely under-sized or extremely over-sized. They love being on the team and representing their university and are willing to accept their place near the bottom of the depth chart. Anyone who has coached for a length of time knows the type of guy I just described. These guys are important, and actually have a value to a club. Someone has to occupy the bottom of the depth chart, and if you have a sufficient number of them it will help anchor (literally, unfortunately, at times) the competitiveness of the guys above them. These guys are sort of a "plug" at the bottom, that prevent athletes above them who would not tolerate being at the bottom of the depth chart from draining out. If the guys above them are in eights, you can keep more guys.

I also believe that rowing an eight over a four doubles the opportunity it provides people to row in the top boat. If you coach your team right and structure things to foster intra-squad competition, the competition for seats will keep everyone honest and working hard. People will want to make the top boat because rowing with the best guys is a more pleasurable experience and it is an honor. When there are eight seats available there, that is 2-3 times the number of athletes who realistically can vie for it. The top four of athletes on a team is generally pretty clear, so selecting a four is easier in most cases. You might be lucky to have 6-8 athletes vie for the top four. An eight is generally a little more difficult, as selecting a combination of eight can be more challenging because there are more possibilities. I have had teams where over two eights of guys could have found themselves in the varsity eight depending on how combinations worked out. If they view themselves as a contender, then they will invest more and more. More available seats in the top boat allows for more athletes to do this. This is ideal for retaining athletes and retention is the name of the game for successful club teams. If you retain more people not only are more people vying for seats and working hard, but more people are paying dues.

The varsity eight event gets far more attention than any other event in collegiate rowing, and it always will. It has the most competitive, deepest field by far and therefore more difficult to make an impression in. When you choose to avoid that event you send a bad message to the athletes, and one that will have a negative impact on retention of the right kind of guys. The message is "We're chicken". No athlete with high standards wants to be viewed as cowardly. So while they may attack the four that you give them because they are competitors, the move into the four is something many will not want to be associated with. Seeing this, the freshman on the team could view cowardliness as an option, and it could weave cowardliness into the culture of your team.

Now, for very small schools of under 3,000 undergraduates, focusing on the four may make sense for a rowing club. But even a small university club can field a top eight with the right approach. Bucknell University, for example, has a student body of 3,500 undergraduates and has won numerous medals at ACRA in eights events. They carry 2 ½ to 4 eights of guys into the spring most every year. The kids are talented, enthused and focused on competing in the varsity eight. It hasn't always been this way, but was built to be this way by good coaching, student-athlete effort, and sound rec sport department policies. It can be done at a school this small.

So go for the eight over the four. It is more competitive, and without a doubt more difficult to do well, but things can be built over time. Especially if you set their target as placing as high as you can at ACRA and get a national finish, they can set target goals for the future. Goals are engaging, and if they are engaged the athletes are more likely to be retained. I have some advice as to how to get athletes to commit to the eight in a few sections.

.....To be continued

Part IV

THE LIGHTWEIGHT ISSUE

I write this as a former collegiate lightweight oarsmen (to look at me today you would never know it). I also write it as a coach who has boated lightweight crews, and had them win and medal in some prestigious lightweight races over the years. I also write it as a coach who has put men of lightweight stature in his varsity eight on a regular basis in my years as a head coach and won races with “lightweightish” men in those crews. One of those “lightweightish” guys made the Athens Olympic Team as a lightweight. I cite this to clarify I have nothing against lightweights or having a lightweight category. I am all for a guy who pulls his own weight and more, and sometimes the guys who weigh less than 160lbs do it better than their heavier teammates. As someone who has benefitted from lightweight rowing, I am not against it. But I am against having a lightweight team in a situation that comes at the expense of everyone, and this is unfortunately usually the case.

When you choose to designate men on your club team as lightweights you are in most cases choosing to set up a situation of competitive mediocrity with your club team, unless you choose to select a varsity eight to be comprised of the very best athletes on the team, regardless of their weight. If you choose to “gut” the varsity eight of some athletes because you are seduced by potential success in the much less competitive lightweight events, you are choosing a path that will turn-off heavyweight athletes AND likely some lightweight athletes, as some lightweight guys truly don’t want to cut weight and prefer to row with the fastest guys on the team. The best guys instinctively want to row with each other, so use this sentiment to help improve your retention of them. Remember, you NEED TO RETAIN bodies in your program. You NEED to. Retention is a necessity of existence, as you need a certain number of people to pay dues for funds to operate the team, in addition to making you more competitive.

Your team’s competitive success will be built on good athletes, and they come in all shapes and sizes. Usually many of them will be heavier than 160lbs, but some will be less than 160lbs also. If you are a heavyweight athlete and you see a teammate who you trust and know could help you go faster, yet that teammate is placed in a lightweight crew and instead a slower heavyweight teammate brought in (regardless if he is good or not, the best athletes will know there are better and faster possibilities), what is your incentive to stick with it? Your coach has demonstrated through selection that you are not a priority. When you select a lightweight crew over a varsity eight the message is clear – lightweights matter to you more. If I am the heavy guy who is a good athlete, has high standards, and wants to compete I start looking elsewhere for my competitive outlet. Playing intramural walleyball with my buddies starts looking a lot more attractive. Prioritizing a lightweight crew over a heavyweight crew will drive away heavyweight oarsmen without question, and you need to RETAIN heavyweight oarsmen to

be good as there are simply more of them available to you in a given population. You are placing limits on your program with a lightweight team.

It seems counter-intuitive at first, I know. You would think that having a category that people of smaller stature and lesser physiological capacities could prosper would help retain more guys by creating MORE opportunity instead of reducing opportunity. You should carefully examine whether having a lightweight crew makes sense for your program or not. In most cases it does not. If you are coaching at a school that has a student-body population of more than 5,000 people, and your program doesn't carry 3 or more eights annually, it is a mistake having a lightweight crew, in my opinion. If you have a team population where after you have selected a varsity eight and second varsity eight REGARDLESS OF PHYSICAL STATURE and still have men of lightweight stature left over after that, then having a lightweight crew or squad can provide more opportunities, but too many coaches have a lightweight crew at the expense of their heavyweight team. There is speed to be gained by having a second varsity pushing the varsity in practice, not to mention the competition to make the varsity eight will exist among the guys all year. It can keep the top guys from getting complacent, for fear they could lose their seat.

CHEMISTRY

Chemistry is an important part of having a good team, and I have seen chemistry often spoiled through having a lightweight team or crew. Selection is already a hot-button issue. It is prone to divide a team if you get selection wrong or mishandle the process. Having a lightweight crew can further complicate things. It can cause unnecessary debate over various matters administratively also, and this can bleed down into the entire team. It is about priorities. Who gets what equipment? Who gets the new boat? Who gets the new oars? Who gets more attention from the best coach? Who gets the best vans in travel? Who gets the first shift on the ergs? These are a sampling of questions that can arise with having a lightweight squad. The decision you make with any one item can cause great debate and unrest. And if some of the officers are lightweight oarsmen, and some are heavyweight oarsmen, and they have a lot of control over decisions in your program (hopefully they do not, for your sake) then it can be one big mess of in-fighting. Worse yet, the freshmen/novice team either witnesses or is affected by all the politics and it is unattractive and they end up quitting because of the overall unprofessionalism on display. I was part of such a team in college myself, and I can tell you it is not a good way to run a program.

I caution against being seduced by the possibility of success in lightweight events and prioritizing any lightweight crew over a heavyweight crew. If your goal is to retain a lot of people, as it NEEDS to be, until you have at least three eights of varsity men having a separate lightweight crew hurts retention, it doesn't help it. VARSITY RETENTION is the name of the game in club rowing. Stick to the simplicity of selecting a top crew, and then the next fastest, and forget about lightweights until you have three or more eights of varsity athletes.

HOW YOU CONDUCT SELECTION IS CRITICAL

You need to turn over every stone and you need to make every guy earn his seat. You need to use the information you gather from the various trials you put the athletes through to help you form the best

lineup you can. Use science to help you do this: erg scores, seat racing results, weight adjustment, combination times on the water, and observations you make on team chemistry. And then, when you have gathered all the scientific data you need, subjectively name it as you see it, very professionally and directly without a whole lot of drama. Yet it can't be impersonal because it most definitely is personal to them. Keep it matter-of-fact and honest. You also need to own the fact it is your call based on your hunches, and your athletes need to be told this before any of that starts. I tell my athletes this, almost verbatim, at the beginning of every year: "All the tests and trials we do through this year are selection tools. It helps me make up my mind about selection as we go. All of it is remembered, and particularly the things we do the closest to racing season will influence me."

It is a mistake to use any one piece of criteria to select your crew. I would never, ever, EVER use a single erg test or seat race to give a guy his seat. I caution against telling your team anything to the effect of "If you pull x:xx on your erg score" or "the top eight ergs get the 1V" or "the winner of this seat race gets the seat". Speaking from experience, you can really back yourself into a hole by saying something like that. And sometimes what you say is not what was heard. So be clear and precise with what comes out of your mouth so you don't set up any false expectations or assumptions in the minds of the athletes.

I have spent a bit of time writing this because in a college rowing club selection can be a make or break issue. In a varsity program there can be unrest surrounding selection, but the athletes are less likely to quit if there is controversy. Certainly if the varsity program coach mishandles matters athletes can leave the program, but usually the kids stick with it and aren't competitive because the lack of trust within the team eats the team alive from the inside out. In a club program it can nearly destroy the team with people quitting in droves and never coming back.

There is a lot more to Varsity Retention, and I cover more about this in future chapters. How you conduct business administratively, work the team culture, how the university treats you, and what external support you get also play a critical role. We will talk more about those things, next.