

## THE SCIENCE OF RETENTION – FRESHMAN RETENTION

It is time to get specific with methodology. The psychology of retention starts with freshman and you must get things off to the right start with them. A good team can be built from one good class with the right chemistry; a good program can be built from multiple good classes. As a coach you can guide that chemistry by the things you say and do, and while you don't control it outright, you have a large influence. Always remember that it is your job to *influence* people, and understand that you will never outright control them. I mention this because the lack of control is something that greatly frustrates club coaches. Once you accept that you do not have complete control over the situation, and that your better approach is to try and influence the situation you will have more coaching success. For this reason focusing on building chemistry is important, because as the architect of the group chemistry your *influence* on them will be great.

Chemistry building starts during the freshman year and there is a lot to it so there is a lot to write about. Therefore I am sending the writing about freshman retention challenges and strategies in four parts, because incorporating a number of different general concepts about retention will be beneficial to read about along the way.

### THE KEY PIECE: THE FRESHMAN COACH

As the gatekeeper of your program, the freshman coach in many ways holds the keys to the future success of your program. At Michigan, with what we pay, I hope to get 2-3 years out of a freshman coach. It will likely always be a position for a young coach to get their feet wet. I will make sure they don't make any critical mistakes, and guide them through the more delicate times of how to manage the roster, schedule practice, technical focus. I will teach them the factors of retaining athletes, but at the same time I need to let him develop his own coaching persona. I want my freshman coaches to be tall, athletic, energetic men with a fiery, magnetic personality as this type of person will engage freshmen males more.

It is the Freshman coach's job to make them fall in love with Michigan Rowing. Notice that I did not just say "rowing", but MICHIGAN rowing. He needs to do things that brings the squad together and makes them become friends for life. This process needs to begin as early in the fall as possible. His methods have to be energetic and interesting. He needs to give them material to talk and joke about over dinner in their dorms. He needs to emphasize and support the things the head coach does, and compliment the program culture. You may think the freshman coach's job is to teach novices the sport of rowing and prepare them for competition, which it is, but that is secondary to him preparing the squad to become varsity oarsmen because they love being on the team so much they couldn't imagine not rowing. If he teaches them nothing else, he needs to make them fall in love with Michigan rowing. Make him understand his job before the season begins so he can work on that aspect. He not only needs to "drink the Kool-aid" but he needs to serve it daily in subtle and interesting doses. Pick your freshman coach wisely.

### HAVING A TRYOUT CAN IMPROVE FRESHMAN RETENTION

This seems counter-intuitive, doesn't it? To potentially get rid of people when you are trying to keep as many as you can simply doesn't make sense at first. But there is some psychology at play here, and it is an interesting phenomenon. We first implemented a freshman tryout in the fall of 1998; four years later that class ended up being the largest group that graduated more four-year rowers than any group in the history of the team to that point – 14 of them total. This is excellent. The Class of 2003 had 16 four-year athletes. Since then the number

of four-year oarsmen on our team has averaged nine people – an eight per class. Prior to this, the retention wasn't nearly as good at five per class.

Having a tryout was suggested by my freshman coach at the time, Jon Clark, who was in his second year of coaching. Jon had rowed varsity at Boston University and struggled to adjust to the club situation in his first year. His first group was not athletic overall, and the retention was poor and he struggled with trying to juggle so many bodies initially. He thought that if they felt like they earned something then they would be more likely to stick with it initially. The notion of cutting people scared me to death, mainly for the reason that I thought it would scare people away, and this could cause us to not make our budget. If you haven't figured out by now you will eventually, that the more bodies you have paying dues the better the budget situation is. But after debating, we eventually figured out how many bodies we needed to pay dues through the various stages of the year, built in a bit of a buffer and came up with a starting number of 42-45 oarsmen and 6-8 coxswains (we have no coxswain tryout).

How we do the tryout: we have a 4,000 meter test about two weeks after the freshmen start practice. People straggle in over this time period, and it is a drop-in time period without much scheduling manipulation by the freshman coach. We do tell them we monitor attendance so they realize attendance is important, and we make them sign up for a session each day during the two week time period. We have four sessions every day that are one hour long each in the late afternoon and they attend one per day. Keeping the time low at first is key as I will eventually explain. After two weeks we pull the 4K at 24 spm, and we tell them as soon as they start practicing what day it will be, what the test parameters are, and that we will invite 42-45 oarsmen to continue. The morning after the test we post three things in a few different places on campus: 1) results of the test, 2) list of invitees (and we like to refer to this constantly through the process as an invitation) and 3) a copy of each one of the selected athletes photos on a sheet (we take their photo as part of the tryout, as well as height and weight) so they can start putting faces with names. They must go there and initial that they accept the invitation to the team, and there are always a guy or two that figures out rowing is not for them after doing the test and does not accept the invitation. We do not inform them via email or online which would be easier of course as we want to build the drama by making them walk there and scan the list and see other guys who are there doing the same. Then that night we have a full squad meeting. The chemistry of the freshman squad is already starting to form at this point.

A few things that are important about this time period and test: I believe it is critical you start to form friendships in the group very early. If they identify the team as where their friends are they will choose the team over other clubs they are interested in on campus. Something that forms a bond between people is undergoing a trial together. The 4K does this. They will leave the test feeling they accomplished something. They will talk about it among themselves and how hard it was, nervous they were, and how they executed. Prior to this the freshman coach should start to inform the group about where guys are from by posting an initial roster, where they live on campus so they can buddy up and come to practices together. The 4K also informs you of who the best athletes are. You will see the determined fighters come out, as well as the weak-willed, and those in-between. Remember, they come in all different shapes and sizes, and sometimes the most determined people come in a smaller body, and the lesser determined people in big bodies (which of course is very disappointing when you notice this). You get to see this, and I am also surprised by a number of guys in both directions.

If I were coaching at a smaller school that didn't have as many people turning out for their recruiting meetings I would still consider a tryout. Your walk-on potential is going to be limited by the size of your student-body, obviously. If you have a student population of more than 12,000, or have an incoming class of 1,000 people or more in the gender you coach, in my opinion you should be able to get 3-4 eights of people to turn out, and keep two freshman eights all year if you do things right. But even if I were in a situation where I had 8-20 people turning out initially I would most definitely have an erg test a week or two in. What I did with the results of that test would vary depending on the size of the group, and the athleticism of the last guy or two. If all the athletes

are good I would keep them all. People's perception of what is "good" varies, but what I mean by good are athletes are those have an athletic build and are strong, or they could on the other end of it - weak but at least have body control.

I am inclined to make a list of invites meaningful, however, and cut at least a person or two regardless of the number who tryout. As much as I want to see many people experience the sport as possible, I think you can make things difficult on yourself as a coach and in regards to retention if you have some very non-athletic people in the group. The person who will just never "get it" or ever be a good rower for their body-type or toughness will 1)cause the groups development to be held back and 2)puts a non-athletic image to your team. The truly athletic people will identify non-athletes immediately, because they will simply not be keeping up with the group through the initial days of learning rowing. If after a few weeks they are still hacking away at it that is OK, but if they are really, really out of shape, extremely uncoordinated, or degrees of both, their presences may actually prevent others from getting better. A real athlete would expect a person like that to be cut, because real athletes have standards. They will question if the organization is serious if non-athletes are accepted to the team.

Additionally the athletes you invite onto your team will eventually be the face of your organization. Like it or not, image matters a great deal 18-22 year old people. If they see out-of-shape individuals walking around campus in crew gear it helps create an image of your organization. Word-of-mouth advertisement is powerful. The student-body talks among them. People will talk about what they see and hear, and it will form the image of your team. If word on the street is that the rowing team takes out-of-shape people who want to recreate, then those types of people will be drawn to you. If word on the street is that you need to be in great shape and competitive, those are the people who will be drawn to you.

I will write on the subject of team philosophy and structure eventually, but the previous paragraph cuts to the core of a huge issue for many club teams – are we a club who does this for "fun" and anyone can join and give it a try, or is our club geared towards winning and competing as high as we can, or is the club a hybrid of those attitudes? It is an issue that can rip an organization apart because of the dynamics it can create on the team – people having different missions. So the notion of tryouts may be something you debate and are against initially, and of course usually attrition occurs naturally – those who are not into it will drop out - but in regards to helping *retention* I believe having tryouts actually helps retention, and does not hurt it. The feeling of having earned something – "made the team" – is very powerful.

Since imposing tryouts our retention in the fall semester for freshmen has been excellent. Through most of the fall on the water we lose only a few bodies. We lose 2-4 each year right after Thanksgiving when we come indoors and they realize training for rowing is going to be hard. They stay focused on the December 6K test (to be explained) and we get to the semester break having lost only 6-10 guys total, which is roughly 20% of the beginning group. Then semester break hits and we have our biggest drop-off of the year, and you hope like hell that the best guys have the money to continue, got the necessary grades in the fall semester, have supportive parents, and are enthused about doing well in the spring. If you did things right most of the best ones will return and the drop-off will occur at the bottom of the squad. Now, on to doing things right . . .

## **FOSTER THE FROSH**

In my early years of coaching the club the varsity athletes tended to have an attitude that the frosh had to earn their respect. They needed to prove they were "worthy" of their attention by putting in the time, earning a certain erg score, having a certain social status, paying their dues, etc. This attitude developed before I was even a coach there, passed on from the early days of the club. "Earning upperclassman's respect" is a huge theme in many college organizations, as the seniority pecking order is determined, and upperclassmen are all too willing to abuse underclassmen as a rite of passage. This is a crock and if you hope to be an organization

that draws people to you in this day and age you need to establish a culture of invitation. I repeatedly tell my varsity guys we need to give the freshmen a reason to stay by investing in them.

An early issue on our team was that the number of freshman coming out for the team was so great that people saw it somewhat pointless to learn their names and take note of them because they were likely to quit. It really wasn't until spring break that varsity members even bothered to learn all of their names. The frosh squad trained at separate times through the winter, and there was little intermixing with the varsity. (This has changed too – we now all train indoors together). It took me many years to convince the varsity men that it needed to be the opposite – that we needed to give the frosh a reason to stay.

What I started and still maintain today is a buddy system - a pairing of varsity and freshman athletes to become "buddies". Immediately after the tryout happens and the freshman/novice squad is selected, each varsity member is assigned 1-3 freshmen who they are to assist with a few things outside of practice. They are introduced at a BBQ the varsity hosts the Saturday following the tryout. The varsity member is responsible for contacting their buddy and arranging an introduction. The varsity rower (or coxswain) is to be a resource for the new freshman rower, who can ask questions about how things work on the team. One of the things we have them do is a weekly 10K workout together. The varsity member coordinates a time between the two of them to go do the workout together in our indoor facility. During the workout the varsity member coaches the new rower on how to maintain consistency and execute the workout according to the prescribed format for rate, distance, and to push hard towards a goal. After doing this every week for several weeks a bond of sorts is formed.

I coach the varsity men HEAVILY on how to handle the freshmen, make it clear there is no hazing to be done, and that they need to take ownership over their program by ensuring we have good talent drawn to our program. I also make them aware that I understand that they are essentially recruiting men who will be competing for their seats eventually as varsity oarsmen, but to do it anyway because competition will make them faster and a deeper team and they will benefit from this. Matching the better varsity athletes with the better freshmen athletes is important, because the best varsity athletes will want good teammates in the future to help them win. The best guys will feel less threatened by the rising talent, and will put more effort into this, I have found, and since you want to keep the best freshmen around this is important. I make the effort to do little things like place varsity-frosh buddies into the same vans when traveling to fall competitions. I am fostering a connection that could build into a relationship. Sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn't, but it does get the novice freshmen interacting with the varsity members and helps get them fired up about competing in a sport that they really know very little about. Freshmen begin to think, "well, I don't know if I like it or not yet, but this guy (varsity member) sure does so I am willing to keep giving it a try."

There are many club teams out there that either don't have a coach, or a very part-time coach. The athletes often act as coaches. While this situation is not desirable, sometimes it is this way until a coach either volunteers or one is recruited and paid minimally. If you are in this situation, I advise that to keep the freshman progressing and interested, that the varsity members mix the freshmen into the varsity boats for a few weeks or even a month. Again, they need to be encouraged, and feeling invested in, and actually being taught something will go a long way to helping retain more freshmen.

For retention to happen at a good rate and in the right guys you must be willing to provide a social framework for your team. Now, I am not at all suggesting that you as a coach arrange a party yourself to get the athletes socializing. But, if you charge the officers or team captains with making the freshman feel welcome, and suggest what they might do to help the new frosh identify the team as the place they will make a big place seem smaller, they can take it from there. The first step is making the varsity athletes realize that if the frosh identify it as a place where their friends are very early on you stand a better chance of retaining them. If they feel as if they

earned something, and then are welcomed and nurtured you stand a better chance of retaining them. And at the same time don't come on too strong or you can scare them away.

The relationships on your team between the varsity and freshmen are important and while many things about Greek organizations and the rowing team are similar (they are more similar than rowers want to admit), one thing that has to be different is you need to initially treat them well and give them a reason to stay. Learn their names, for example. I make a point of learning the best guys names immediately, and gradually through the early fall know most of their names. If you can greet a freshman the second time you see him by his first name he will be very impressed, I can assure you. And because having a large number of athletes is desirable, I make an effort to learn all of their names as quickly as I can, so I study the roster sheet with photos (see next section) we assemble at the tryout so the frosh guys know they matter to me as the head coach.

## ENCOURAGING THE RIGHT ATHLETES TO STAY

The basic premise is that if you feel like you are improving you are more likely to stick with something, even if you are not the best. Because of this getting enough coaching is key at first, so get as many volunteers set up to help the frosh as you can. An hour each day is not a lot of time, and when you have four shifts to do you will be moving them through like cows through a milking parlor.

Give your attention and opportunity to the guys who have the most potential. I am not saying you should coddle those individuals, but to put your coaching focus on them while on the water and erg. Sometimes the best athletes need to be told or shown they have potential to be the best. It isn't evident to them at first because things are new, they know nothing about what makes a rower a good rower, and everyone is learning. Erg scores are an obvious way to let people know they are, or have the potential to be, good. We post results of workouts weekly, so everyone can compare themselves and see where they stack up on the squad. It has been my experience that those at the top of the list after the 4K test remain at the top of the list throughout their freshman year, and outside of a few "diamonds in the rough" being the exceptions, the order will remain unchanged. If they see they are near the top of the list on a regular basis, even if they are unsure if they like rowing, they at least like seeing their name at the top of the list. This is one thing you can do to encourage the best athletes. I think most coaches realize that erg scores are an indication of potential, as well as you need to persuade the best to stick with it, and that knowing you are good will help. Make sure you send out or post those results weekly, not just every month. Freshmen will forward results of their erg workouts to their parents, and if the parents think their kid is good then the parent will also support them being on the team - and this can help greatly.

In my experience shorter, yet athletic and coordinated, athletes with smaller physiques pick up rowing technique much quicker than the tall, clunky guys. There is simply less mass to coordinate and they quickly bolt out in front in terms of overall speed value. Make everyone, especially the bigger novice guys, aware of this likely phenomenon. It may be well into the spring before the big guys are actually faster on the water due to differing development curves. This will keep the big guys encouraged; while at the same time won't discredit the good work the smaller athletes have done to get where they are. You may feel this approach can build some excuses in for the big guys, but trust that truly competitive people will not accept this and will always be trying their best. In the end you must select for the fastest lineups, and the team needs to be aware of that, too. At some point if the big guys aren't where you need them to be and their chances have been given, you need to turn your coaching energy to gelling the lineups as selected, size and erg score be damned.

After the tryout we post the results of the 4K as well as a sheet of pictures so the new team members can identify each other more easily. With 45+ athletes on the roster, and four practice shifts done daily, it always happens that we have some guys who never get to interact with each other until we get to a race. Not until the

second semester does everyone practice together at the same time, due to class schedules. The freshman coach, as much as possible, schedules the best athletes in practice together, so they get to interact. A working relationship needs to be established, and the more interaction, the more likely a friendship will be formed early on. Additionally, the actual rowing in this group will be better and they will progress more quickly if they practice together more often. Feeling like you are improving will also make athletes be more inclined to stick with it. If the best athletes in a group begin to identify themselves as a group early on then they will be more likely to stick with it, and since keeping the best athletes is very, very important to success you need to do things like this so that if attrition does occur it comes from the bottom of the roster and not the top.

When the main rushes of quitting occur in late November, through December and over break, in our program it happens mostly from the bottom performers on the roster. After seeing their names at the bottom of the roster on workouts and tests all fall, and then finishing the semester and the academic intensity that goes with it, some guys get discouraged. They decide to pursue something else. And yes, sometimes we do lose a guy from the top of the roster who decides that rowing is not for him. But by and large, the best athletes stay and it is mostly because they are encouraged by the ego boost they have been receiving all fall.

## GIVE THEM PERSPECTIVE

“A light that burns brightly doesn’t burn long” is a saying I am fond of in regards to freshmen. Some will begin the year with such enthusiasm, doing extra workouts, spending a lot of mental energy on rowing, immersing themselves into the team culture, and trying to learn as much as they possibly can about this new sport so they become as good as they can as quickly as they can. These types of guys will be evident immediately, and I caution fueling their fire too much. Persuade them to do only so much, and concentrate on academics. Many of them will quit eventually when their bulbs brightness diminishes and they feel burn-out setting in. It is a long year, and for most people who were athletes in high school this will be their first experience with doing a sport for more than a 13-14 week season as they did in years prior. They have a full academic calendar year to sustain an intensity that must be at a simmer most of the time, and then conclude in a boil. This is a difficult state to keep them in emotionally speaking, but you must to be successful in the spring. I have been fortunate to have 20+ years of coaching behind me to see what makes the boil happen too soon, and what has not taken the temperature high enough. I now know how to manage the introduction of intensity and when to introduce things at the right time. If you pay attention to “intensity regulation” you will learn those things, too. Intensity needs to be managed to finish the year at your fastest. If they finish the year fast and performing their best they are more likely to experience success and thus more likely to stick with it and return the following year. If they finish with their best races of the year – regardless of the overall place - they will begin to believe in the coaching, and this makes all the difference in returning or not to some guys.

To help with this, I counsel against putting a heavy emphasis on fall racing. As I describe to both my freshman and varsity athletes: our most important physiological event in the fall semester is a 6K test that they will do in mid-December on our academic study day. It is a final exam for rowing so to speak. The December 6K is more important than any head race, sprint race, seat race, or practice that we will do in the fall semester. Fall racing is there as something fun to do – a great workout to do against other teams – but it only serves to develop them for spring racing. Fall races have less meaning. This keeps their emotions in check and focuses them more on the spring and as a result it puts the spring’s importance in perspective to the fall.

We never taper or rest up for a fall race, nor do I try and “juice them up” by emphasizing how important fall racing is by trying to beat a certain team. I downplay it, in fact. You risk them feeling like they have accomplished what they set out to do in this sport too early, perhaps making it seem easy to obtain success in the sport, and they lose interest. Or they hit an emotional peak in October when you need them to build towards one in December – where it is more important physiologically speaking, and to finish the fall with their

best performance yet on the 6K test, so they can go home feeling good about what they have achieved in rowing in their first semester of college. I think many coaches want their kids to experience some success in the fall, and may be inclined to paint a different picture of its importance to their athletes. And then they wonder why they all quit in the late fall. What I tell my athletes is that fall rowing is important, fall racing is not.

The day after the tryout 4K test for freshmen we don't have practice and we have a meeting. I speak first, and then the freshman coach finishes up and talks about team rules, how to handle absences, scheduling of practices, and overall expectations. My part of the speech offers perspective. I congratulate them on making the team, and talk about the very things I wrote in the previous paragraph. I talk about the importance of their actions and how they will be now identified as a member of the rowing team and how that identity carries responsibility. They can't do stupid things that make us look bad on campus, etc. Again, I want them sitting there looking around and thinking, "wow, I just made the team and am part of something special".

And I conclude my portion of the speech by writing this on a dry-erase board:

21:00 (1:45) = 6:28 (1:37) = 5:58

In a future piece of writing I will discuss standards of performance, but I go on to explain what these numbers mean to the freshmen who are sitting there listening intently. Remember that just the day before they will have laid it out on a 4K test – the best guys will have averaged in the high 1:40s for their score pulled at a 24 stroke rate. 21:00 is what we need the top eight frosh guys to average on their December 6K test. If that is done it will put us on pace to average 6:28 on our March 2K test, which is our final 2K test of the year. A crew that averages 6:28 on a 2K test has the rough speed potential to go 5:58 on the water later in the season. 5:58 is going to be the speed standard needed for a freshman eight to win the large May championships we attend: the Dad Vail, ECAC, and ACRA. Now whether or not they get these numbers doesn't matter too much – they still have to race obviously. But what it does is *give them perspective*. It gives them something to shoot for and it shows them exactly where we are headed and what we need to do. It is very important to retention because this *perspective* gives them something specific to work towards.

## GIVE THEM AN IDENTITY

What many teams refer to as their novice squad we refer to as our freshman squad, or "frosh". This is a bit more "old school" but there is a reason for this reference – our freshman squad is comprised only of guys who have freshman eligibility. This means sophomores in their first year of rowing are on the squad, but juniors and seniors are not. Grad students are turned away from our team altogether, even though they are technically eligible at some competitions. Any first year juniors and seniors will be absorbed into the varsity squad at some point during the fall or winter, and they are informed of this at the beginning of the fall. There is a very important reason for this, and I have supported this team dynamic since my first year of varsity coach.

If a junior or senior has potential and is one of the stronger rowers of the group he would likely sit in the freshman eight and potentially prevent a freshman from doing the same. If they are a strong athlete they would likely make the 2V or 3V at least and contribute and have a good experience. However, if they take a seat from the freshman and the domino effect is that other freshmen get boated down because of this that is potentially going to discourage kids who could be rowing for you for four years, and at the end of that four years be better than the senior who rowed for only one year.

The other reason is even more important, and that is that it gives the group the identity of being part of a graduating class. Your freshman and novice year of rowing is a special and unforgettable experience that you can only experience once. Discovering the sport with a group of athletes, feeling the independence of being on

your own for the first time, testing your personalities, and experiencing success and failure together is a huge part of the experience that makes you fall in love with being on the team. Even on the varsity squad with all the sophomores, juniors, and seniors each class maintains its identity. It binds them, and this sense of belonging is one of the top reasons someone stays with rowing. This identity will help with retention of a class into their varsity year, and hopefully for four years total. Juniors or Seniors tend to throw the power dynamic off when among the Freshman and Sophomores, and they often automatically become leaders in the group simply because of seniority. And while the Junior or Senior could very well be a great leader for the group, you want to give some freshmen that opportunity to establish the role for their group for ideally four years.

In the opposite situation where a freshman has rowing experience from high school and could make an impact on the varsity squad I would only allow bringing up the experienced freshman if the freshman would make the varsity eight. To date I have never had a freshman who could do that. The experienced freshman on my team stay with their classmates on the freshman squad their freshman year, and experience what they experience and develop that same bond. It is important that the experienced guy can form the same identity as the other frosh in that class, otherwise he can end up a bit of an outcast.

Were I coaching a smaller team, where the team dynamic is different I would still keep the class concept in place and have a freshman (not a novice) squad. Sometimes a situation may arise that may call for a different order, but when assessing personnel placement I would always try to set things up so that freshmen could identify with each other. How you structure your team, and selection of lineups is a critical piece of the retention puzzle. The only issue that is as contentious on a club team is the assignment of administrative power and who gets to make what decision.

## **ADDRESS CHALLENGES BEFORE THEY BECOME PROBLEMS**

Realize that many freshmen are already very apprehensive about doing anything extracurricular. They want to do well in school, and most of them have parental pressure to do so. We immediately address their concerns during the recruiting phase. During the initial part of the semester time seems so plentiful, and it will be 3 weeks until the first set of exams hit. During this time emphasize to them to work ahead academically. And you must mention it to them often – 2-4 times a week during the post practice meeting. It takes repetition for things to sink in. The more times you repeat something, the more they come to view the things you repeat as being important. Doing well enough academically to stay on the team is very, very important if you hope to retain them. Most coaches get this I think, but for many kids in college it will be the first time they ever had to work for a grade in their life. To make them understand how important it is you need to repeat it often.

The toughest time of the year for any rowing athlete academically speaking is December. Tell them this and why it will be this way at the beginning of the semester so they are prepared for it. If a freshman did poorly academically before that point they will be panicking. They will have gone home for Thanksgiving and talked about grades with their parents. If they are behind they quite often will be pressured by their parents to quit rowing. And during that time period the rowing shifts indoors and is mundane. Remember, this is their first go 'round with an intercollegiate sport and freshman athletes will generally not have done a season of more than 13-14 weeks. In high school it would be about mid-November when the fall sports would wrap up and the winter sports begin. Many are used to concluding fall sports at this time. Many of those who are in this situation at this point in the year quitting rowing looks pretty attractive.

We tell them this, nearly verbatim, in the very beginning of the semester in the first meeting we have after the tryout and we gather them together as a squad for the first time: "You will be feeling academic pressure as the semester builds into December. We need you to avoid a situation where you feel the world is crashing down around you and you need to quit rowing to focus on academics. Developing time management skills through



the entire semester is critical. Late October and November will be busy for us with racing and events and this will add to the pressure. You should never, ever feel like you have time to just sit around and play video games or do something to just kill time. If you find yourself just sitting there doing nothing in particular that needs to trigger a question in you – what can I be doing to make better use of this time right now? Realize that you are now a student-athlete and with that comes responsibility. It is tougher on you than other students here because you are representing Michigan in intercollegiate athletics. You can do it, you just need to approach it like you are pressed for time, all the time, even if it seems like you aren't, because eventually you will be." Repeat this often, a few times every week and you will have less panic and more preparedness in December.

## EASE THEM INTO COMMITMENT THROUGH THE YEAR

When I first arrived at Michigan I was the freshman coach for a year. I vividly remember the officers and varsity members talking about "The Big Lie". It was common for the varsity during freshman recruiting and through the semester to intentionally be very vague towards the freshmen in regards to the commitments that came along with being on the team. When asked about time the answer would be "Oh, it doesn't take much time, just an hour a day for 3-4 days a week" or about money it would be "oh, not much, just \$50 to begin". They would never really mention that it would eventually be 2 ½ hours a day, 6 days a week and cost them over a thousand dollars (in 1992). As we went through the season and questions were asked, vague answers were given, and since I was new I had no idea what to tell them. The next season I was the varsity coach and in talking with the officers and returning varsity I was surprised to learn how jilted they all felt as freshmen. They felt they were intentionally not given the full truth. Yet, they still supported the annual "duping" of freshmen in the fall and felt it was the best way to retain more of them because of course the strategy worked on them. They understood the reasoning, but nevertheless some hard feelings remained. And they wondered why many people did not return for the varsity years.

What I gradually began changing was how information was given to the freshmen, and I developed a methodology for gradually working up their level of commitment through the academic year. They are informed of what the requirements will be at the beginning of the year, in the first meeting after the tryout is complete. They are given a handout outlining our team officer roles, what fund-raising they will be responsible for, what dues will cost and when they will be due, and what it covers. The language I specifically use is "we will be building into a varsity-like commitment". The idea here is to gradually "suck them in". Realize that during the fall semester that the freshmen are in a mode of feeling out the situation. You are trying to lure a skittish animal over to eat from your hands. They are curious and think they want to take some bites of what you are offering, but if you make big, sudden movements you will scare them away. For this reason how they are brought into the fold is an important consideration. We let them know the process of what will happen first thing and answer the big questions, and then little is mentioned about it after that. The method is to gradually increase the dues, time commitment, and intensity of the training, over the course of the fall semester.

### THE TWO BIG CONCERNS: TIME AND MONEY

Time is going to be their biggest concern initially, and you need to not dance around the issue. To help quell this fear we actually keep the time they spend in practice low at first and stress they get off to a good academic start. This will make them feel better about starting up with the team, I have found. For the first 6-8 weeks or so our frosh practices are an hour a day and we follow that closely. They are given an erg workout to do each week on their own with their varsity buddy that I mentioned before. Keep in mind they will spend some time traveling to and from practice, and this adds up. We have said to them in the recruiting period, "It's only an hour a day for the first few months" and you need to stick to your word. If rowing seems too overbearing they will be turned off and quit. Remember, at the same time they are checking out many other things to do on campus and are debating which ones they want to invest in. Make yours the most fun, most return for the investment, and they will stay with it. Ease them into it so you don't scare them away.

The other main challenge is money. They don't want to invest a lot of money into something they are unsure if they like or not. So we structure our dues to coincide with the stages, and explain to them that with each stage comes more investment in time and in money. By design, we ease them into all aspects of the sport, even dues, and we make them aware of it. I will note here that our freshman pay much less in dues than our varsity members. In 2010-2011 the freshman will pay dues and do fund-raising totaling \$1,625. As a comparison, our varsity members have packages totaling \$2,500 each. We do this intentionally to ease the freshmen into the financial commitment. I will eventually cover specifics of our entire dues and administration aspect in another section, but note it here for reference on what lies ahead. We do something different for the freshman so that the most negative aspects of joining our club are more painless their first year, giving us a better chance of "infecting" them with the rowing virus.

## THE CALENDAR OF COMMITMENT

This leads me to explain how I assign dues/fund-raising and time to the freshmen through the year in the "Calendar of Commitment". There are important considerations you need to take into account when laying out the calendar, what the freshmen are feeling regarding school, being on the team, and other things in life, and how it plays into their building internal commitment to the team. As the saying goes, "it's all in the timing". I present this to them in stages, and explain to them with each stage comes a little more time, money, and actual physical effort. HOW THINGS ARE INTRODUCED THROUGH THE YEAR IS CRITICAL. Where you position fundraisers on the calendar and the type of fund-raiser is important, and where you place dues and their values are important. First, I will outline the calendar and its basics.

**Table 1: University of Michigan Men's Rowing Calendar of Commitment**

Stage	Duration	Time Period	Dues Amount	Fund-raising quota	Time Spent in Practice
1 <sup>st</sup> - Tryout	2 weeks	Middle Two Weeks of September	None	None	1 Hour a Day; M-F
2 <sup>nd</sup> - Through 1 <sup>st</sup> Race	4 weeks	Late Sept.–Late Oct.	\$125	\$150 Gear/T-shirt Package	1 Hour a Day; M-F, Sat is optional, plus one workout on their own.
3 <sup>rd</sup> – Late Oct. until Spring Break	16 weeks	Late Oct.-Mid Feb.	\$150	2 Rent-a-rower Jobs in November (value \$140)	1 ½ hours a day; M-F, Sat optional; M-Sa after break
4 <sup>th</sup> - Spring Break through 1 <sup>st</sup> Race	6 weeks	Mid Feb-Late March	\$400	\$200 in Mock Rock (pledge drive)	2 ½ hours a day; M-Sa
5 <sup>th</sup> – Spring Racing Season	10 weeks	Late March-Late May	\$250	3 rent-a-rower jobs (value \$210)	2 ½ to 4 ½; M-Sa, 2-a-days after class ends

## WHY I DO WHAT I DO – An analysis of the above table

What follows is a synopsis of why I position these things on the calendar where I do, and some notes on things to consider when you do the same. Realize this methodology has been streamlined over the 20+ years I have coached a college club, after learning the psychology of the timing and why people tend to quit. My situation is undoubtedly different than yours (academic calendar, sub-culture or values of the student-body, community the college is in, etc.) however using my reasoning you may be able to better determine changes your organization needs to make.

**STAGE 1 - The Tryout Stage**

It costs them nothing to tryout. It costs them time only, which is limited to an hour of practice a day. It is important the time be limited for reasons I have said earlier. There are generally a lot of people who come down and check it out and may be there for a day or two and then not heard from again. It is common for us to have 120-150 guys come through. There is no practice schedule assigned – they sign up each day.

Table 2: University of Michigan Men’s Rowing Freshman Retention Table by Month				
This table shows how we retain our freshman numbers through the year, and when attrition occurs				
MONTH	Roster Count	Number of athletes lost		
September	<b>53</b>	--	100%	0%
October	<b>49</b>	4	92%	8%
November	<b>45</b>	4	84%	8%
December	<b>37</b>	8	70%	16%
January	<b>32</b>	5	60%	10%
February	<b>29</b>	3	55%	5%
March	<b>29</b>	1	54%	0%
April	<b>28</b>	0	53%	1%
May	<b>28</b>	0	53%	0%

The above data is based on averages from monthly roster counts on the Univ. of Michigan Men’s Rowing Team from 1999-2011. If you do not keep such data you should consider it.

**STAGE 2 - The First Fun Stage**

They pay us a dues check the day after the tryout at the first frosh squad meeting and they have accepted the invitation to the team. The dues totals are relatively low at \$125, and remember they just made the team and are geeked to be on it. Then a few weeks later during the second week of October, they buy a gear package and t-shirts for \$150 total. They can sell or keep the gear, their choice. It is a combination of Adidas gear which we can purchase from Adidas for wholesale, and tanks, t-shirts, long-sleeve t-shirts and sweatshirts produced at a local screenprinter. This is their first fund-raiser and it is somewhat welcomed, because they are excited to actually look like an athlete walking around campus. They usually *want* to buy the stuff, and usually purchase more than the \$150 required. This is the best fund-raiser to put first because of their eagerness to be on the team, show their pride and they get something for their money. The apparel fund-raiser is a GREAT fund-raiser to place first on the calendar.

**LAYING DOWN THE LAW ON ATTENDING PRACTICE**

One consideration during this time for us is football season. Kids at Big Ten schools love football and it is woven into the fabric of student-life. If I hope to retain a lot of freshman through this stage I cannot do things that are going to prevent them from having that fun. Scheduling a practice or a fund-raiser during a home football game will cause them to not attend, and they may just quit because they figure they are behind. Additionally, homesick freshmen in the fall need to be accommodated. Many will want to go home on Friday when there is not a home football game, or even travel to an away game. As much as this frustrates the coach, the best approach is to allow it, but make them inform you of the conflict in advance, for scheduling purposes. Additionally, set yourself up for the future by telling them that such things are acceptable excuses at this stage, but after the semester break it will not be allowed – just to prepare them for that eventuality. Be clear about this expectation, and inform any athlete who wants to miss a practice that is what will happen in the future. We go over the procedures for informing the coach of an absence, and establish the expectation of attending practice and informing the coach of any conflicts at the first meeting. By doing this you are letting them know the boundaries are going to be moving eventually. It gives them time to adjust mentally to a situation that is building in commitment and be more “varsity-like”.

You may get some kids that skip practice without informing the coach. This rarely happens on our team now, even with freshmen, but it wasn't always like that. The varsity-frosh buddy system I referred to helps the varsity athletes instill in the freshmen what the standard on the team is because the varsity athletes will talk about and demonstrate commitment. Additionally, the tryout immediately gives them the sense that they made something – were selected – so they need to keep up with the standards. But I do remember the days where freshmen would skip out without informing as if it were no big deal. You need to jump on this early or it will become commonplace. They need to ask permission to miss a practice. If they are sick, it is expected they go to University Health Service and get a doctor's note. If they do not, they get a warning. If it happens again they get a second warning. If it happens a third time they are suspended from team activities for a week. If it happens after that they are kicked off the team. Word will spread that you don't skip practice after the third time and they are suspended. If they are kicked off, they will know you mean business. There is nothing wrong with making an example of someone. The last time a freshman was suspended for this on our team was in 2002. Over time, team culture has gradually shifted so that team members know to prioritize rowing over other things. I am going to write a section that discusses commitment specifically and how to build it in your teams, but it needs to be noted that building commitment begins in stage 2. It is critical to establish this in freshmen, even if the varsity members are slouches. You can change team culture with one good class.

Overall this is a fun time for the frosh. They get to know each other, they are making friends, getting to compete, learning something new, being college students and discovering independence. The requirements we have of them are not that great. We usually have 4 guys quit, from the tryout and into October, the most common reason for dropping out is that they simply don't like rowing and feel they are in over their heads.

### STAGE 3 – The Most Difficult Stage - Late Fall, Through Winter

After our first fall race, but before the second race (a one or two week time period), the next dues installment is due, slightly more than the first, of \$150. The time in practice is raised as the schedule shifts and we go out to 1 ½ hours. The frosh are informed of this several weeks before and are prepared for it. Additionally, they each do a few rent-a-rower (RAR) jobs (community service they get donations for – many, many teams do it). RAR requires 4 hours per job in which we are given a \$70 donation. The 8 hours they do for this is not excessive, and it comes during November when the leaves fall. The good thing about RAR is that it costs them no money – there is nothing to pay for or a pledge quota to meet. It is mindless work, really, but they get to meet people from the community, which is a good thing. This is done before we finish our on-water portion of the fall, while interest is still high.

These are the last dues/fund-raising requirements we have of the freshmen for quite some time. The late fall is a delicate time as I have discussed – many are considering quitting anyway for various reasons. You don't want to give them another one. A dues payment or fund-raiser for a freshman novice athlete at that time could be the thing that makes a lot more of them quit. Keep their focus on training for the 6K in December, and making sure their grades are good. Keep time in practices efficient and short and avoid doing things that scare them away, yet don't be so easy on them that they feel it is OK to miss practice to "study". Don't send them home for the dreaded semester break with much else to think about but training. We make a special effort to not tell them much about next semester dues.

### HAVE AFTERNOON PRACTICE IF YOU CAN

We all have different situations, but I highly recommend having afternoon practice if you can. We have afternoon practice, and in my experience about 25% of the guys will prefer morning practice, 50% prefer afternoon practice, and the other 25% are indifferent. The 25% who prefer morning practice won't be bothered terribly by having afternoon practice, but the 50% who prefer afternoon will most definitely not like rising early for morning practice.

Now, some programs need to have morning practice due to their practice water conditions – afternoon water is too rough, perhaps there is a drive to accommodate, facility use schedule, or another reason. But if you have morning practice because it seems to be the only time you can get everyone together, I recommend you consider having afternoon practice. You need to realize that there are most definitely freshmen who quit because they do not want to get up in the morning. You probably don't ever see some of them because they never come out for the team when they discover you have morning practice they eliminate rowing as something they are considering doing. It is one of the top comments we get when we are recruiting: "I hear rowers practice at 5am and I hate getting up. Sorry." Then we tell them we have afternoon practice and it becomes a different matter. If your own stubbornness justifies, "well, if they can't get out of bed then we don't want them anyway", then reconsider your position if you want to retain more kids. College kids, by-and-large, do not like to get up in the morning. Accept this fact, and try to find a way where you can have afternoon practice.

The varsity squad is a different matter, but I think you are truly limiting your retention by having morning practice for the convenience of getting everyone together with your freshmen. In the fall semester we deal with it by practicing in shifts. In the winter or spring semester we have them leave 4-7 open in the afternoon and practice all at once. And sometimes there is a class conflict for an exam, etc. We just deal with it as best as we can. Yes, we do lose some getting exact lineups together due to conflicts, but you will likely have the same situation in the morning with people being sick, or sleeping through alarms, or even class conflicts. Cut your losses and have afternoon practice, and simply emphasize to the athletes to clear their schedules and work very hard to eliminate conflicts. As an overall effect on freshman retention, having afternoon practice will draw MORE kids to you, and the morning lovers will come anyway. Afternoon practice will help with retention, most definitely.

#### HANDLING THE SEMESTER/CHRISTMAS BREAK TIME PERIOD

As you may note in our Freshman Retention Table (Table 2), the biggest attrition happens from November to December and from December to January. It almost always follows Thanksgiving and then of course over the break around Christmas. They go home and they talk with their parents and review what has happened. They anticipate some costs next semester but they haven't been stung big yet. Many are concerned about grades, and many have grown weary of the constant pressure of training and always having to do it. They get a huge sense of relief being home, and enjoy being lazy. They often skip workouts, if not stop training altogether. After skipping enough workouts they begin to enjoy not having that pressure hanging over their heads every day. And some of them feel extremely guilty for skipping workouts and falling behind, and figure that they may as well quit if they are that far behind.

Completing training on your own is an indication of a truly motivated person. Highly motivated people will train individually outside of the team environment and will often do more. And you have tried everything as the coach – holding out what you think are the right carrots, providing incentives, using both positive and negative bits of motivation, whether it is points contests, or an erg test right after the break. And yet still many quit, or fall-off their training regimen. You need to figure out the right carrots. For example, we have an important 6K test in mid-December, so I avoid doing another 6K as I like them leaving for break knowing that bit of hell is over. So I focus them on something unique – it is an hour long test done at low rates that I pull against them myself. If they beat me they get a special T-shirt. For fun and to be different I also have this movie soundtrack quiz based on the music I play during the hour, and they can win prizes for that, and I also give prizes to the top guys who pull their split for the hour closest to their year-best 6K, thus proving they trained over break effectively.

Additionally, over break there are a few interval workouts they are required to report the scores to me by email. I compile the results and send them out to the entire team so they can see how everyone performed from all over the globe. This feeds the competitors you have recruited through your successful recruiting campaign that was designed to get those types of athletes. As for the training, there are two lines of thought here: 1) load

them up high and hope they do even a portion of it; or 2) keep the volume lighter and something that seems more achievable that they can do on their own. I tend to stick to the second line, and just have them do what we have done through the fall and are familiar, just scaled back a bit. Ultimately, the athletes will be inspired to work by having the right carrots dangled in front of them, and more importantly if you have recruited the right people. If you have recruited competitive people – people who want to win and will do what it takes to do that – they will do the work on their own. There is no special trick to keeping people through the semester break – you will lose some who realize that they don't like having hard work hanging over their head all the time, and some will be lost to grades. If you have done things right and let the best guys see they are the best then the attrition should occur mostly at the bottom.

Upon returning from semester break you see what the damage is. You can gain a sense of who is on the fence should they not report the scores over break. We usually lose 7 freshman from November to December, and then another 5 from December to January, which is about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the group we originally started with. Most of the quitters will cite things like not having enough time, needing to focus on grades, or some other excuse. In the end it is pretty simple - they wanted to do other things more than rowing. Occasionally they will be honest and say they just don't think it is for them. Those people get a handshake and a "good luck to you", from me. I think it is a lost cause to try and convince someone to stick with it, to be honest. If I truly feel there are outside reasons affecting them, and they really do want to row, then I may try to convince them otherwise and help them work out the issues. But those cases are pretty rare. In the end, most of the quitters simply did not get out of the sport what they wanted, and want to pursue other things.

The good news after semester break is this: there will be only a few who quit the rest of the way and you pretty much have the group you are going to have until the end of the season.

#### STAGE 4 – Spring Break to the start of the season

This is the stage where the costs start to hit, and it is the biggest financial shock we will lay on the frosh. It has to happen at some point to make our \$180,000 budget, and the most painless way is to put it right before a very fun trip. In actuality, our spring break costs do not total the amount of dues we charge them. Spring break is a great way to mask what is basically just a big dues payment. It is important to note here that we do not charge dues by the race or event, as I know some programs do. In the section I write about administration I will explain why this is, and why it is a mistake to run dues as if it is an ala carte menu. Spring break costs are lumped into the budget with everything else and you simply pay installments to be on the team. For our freshmen, the largest installment comes right before spring break because they will be accepting that there are going to be some costs associated with the trip.

Additionally, coupled with this is a \$200 quota to fund-raiser during our pledge drive, which we call Mock Rock. This event is done by student-athletes at Michigan to raise money for Mott's Children Hospital. Our athletes like to be part of this variety show where skits are performed by all the athletic teams for the kids in the hospital. So, there is some fun to it, and they can get on board with that notion. Some guys reluctantly raise the money, and others attack it. We had one freshman last year raise over \$2,000 for it. We provide them mailing and return envelopes, a form letter and a pledge card, and they do the soliciting. The money comes back to our P.O. Box and we keep the tallies for them. I think many teams do this sort of pledge drive-type fund-raiser, and some kids really attack it, while others do not. If they fund-raise more than the \$200 quota it comes off their spring break dues payment. This provides even more incentive for them to raise money through the pledge drive.

The timing of this payment is right before spring break, and it is one they are expecting, but they are informed the specifics of AFTER semester break. This gives them 6-7 weeks to fund-raise. We don't mention any specifics before semester break at all, outside of listing it in the original document we distribute in late September at the

first meeting of the freshmen. They HAVE been informed of it in the original document and verbally, so we are not pulling anything over on them – but to that point we have chosen to focus them on one thing at a time, as needed. Hearing the amount of dues and fund-raising totaling \$600 right before leaving for semester break would just be one more reason for them to consider quitting when discussing it with their parents during that sensitive time. Save that bit of bad news until after semester break, when they have made the decision to move forward with rowing. No one is going to like hearing they have to come up with \$600 to continue rowing, but they accept spring break will cost some money, and they have an opportunity to lower that by aggressively getting pledges, which some will do. Coupling this huge payment with spring break will make it less painful.

Also, I mention here that spring break is not optional in our program – the athletes are required to go on spring break with us. They do not have the option to go to Cancun and get hammered with other college friends while everyone else on the team is preparing for spring racing. You are setting yourself up for a non-committal program if you allow this sort of thing to happen. In our program, if they choose to go on the other trip they are off the team, pretty simple. We need committed individuals to compete with the best – skipping out on an important training trip does not help us meet our goals. We are better off without them. This is explained to them from the beginning of the year, so it really isn't an issue in our program any more.

#### “WE ARE NOW VARSITY-LIKE”

By this point our practice time has increased to be 2 to 2 ½ hours per day, as we explained to them would happen all fall. Excuses that were accepted for missing practice, such as attending a nephew's baptism, or a grandfather's birthday party, are no longer accepted. Dues have increased to their highest installment, again, as we had prepared them for all fall. Most guys will have slowly come to these terms in their minds because of our preparation. I tell them when we return from semester break, nearly verbatim:

“We are now at ‘varsity-like’ commitment. This means that rowing is a priority in your life. Here is your list of priorities: Mother, God, Country, and you can self-determine the order of those three. Academics is next, and then rowing, and rowing is not far behind academics. This means the only acceptable excuses for missing class is an out-of-class exam, or illness. If you are ill you need to go to a doctor and be treated and bring me a doctor's note. As far as academic excuses, only an exam scheduled during practice time will be an acceptable excuse to miss practice for academic reasons. This means that study groups, group project work, and similar commitments need to be scheduled around our practices. As well, if you are feeling pinched on time and concerned about not doing well so you feel it necessary to skip practice to study, this is not acceptable. Everyone has an academic load to manage, and yours is no more special than others. Welcome to being a student-athlete.”

You need to be very specific with what are acceptable excuses for missing practice. And at some point, you will be challenged and need to be an enforcer. It is a hard thing to do at times, but if you are too accommodating you are going to have a problem with people ditching practice all the time.

#### Stage 5 – The Second Fun Stage, Spring Racing Season

It happens every few years that we have a guy quit in the middle of spring racing, usually due to not liking where they have been selected, but for the most part, when we return from spring break the group is what it will be for the remainder of the year. All the things that came before this stage have led to this one, and there is very little you need to do in terms of “selling” the freshmen. Spring racing will either sell them on the sport, or it won't. If you have a good racing schedule, with some teams on it that they think are big names, and culminating with a great championship, this will help sell them and set them up to come back the next year as varsity oarsmen.

As for dues and fund-raising obligations, we have another large dues payment near the beginning of the racing season. This is good timing because spring racing is upon us, and they expect some costs associated with that. It is better received this way by the athletes. We do another rent-a-rower in late April or early May, after our exams end. While this is not ideal timing in regards to racing preparation, as rent-a-rowers can be physically demanding, it must be this way based on our calendar. Since we are out of classes, and the most fun races are ahead of us, the athletes generally accept it well, and just something we have to do to compete. The spring rent-a-rower is generally the last dues or fund-raising obligation we require, so the last month of the year can be without the negative association of this unpleasant aspect of being a club. Hopefully, they end the year with a warm fuzzy feeling, and feeling they got their money's worth so they are inclined to return the following year.

## SUMMARY OF THIS SECTION

I have covered a lot in this section. Retaining a lot of freshmen through their first year of college rowing has a direct influence on the number of people you will have on your varsity team. Large freshman classes will usually result in a large number of varsity oarsmen. I have ranked the factors of retention of freshmen in the order of importance:

- 1)Your Freshman Coach – he must create a fun, competitive atmosphere that keeps the best athletes engaged.
- 2)Easing them Into Commitment. The timing of dues and fund-raising payments needs to be scheduled at a time where they will be well-received.
- 3)The Varsity Athletes fostering the frosh is critical to them learning and liking the atmosphere on the team.
- 4)Do Things That Encourage the Right Athletes to Stay – address this early in the year
- 5)Have a Tryout or a Method to Earn Their Way on to the Team – feeling like you earned something makes it harder to give that up.
- 6)Address Challenges Before they Become Problems – calm their fears, prepare them for the tough parts and how they will be feeling.
- 7)Give Them Perspective – let them know what it takes to be good so they can work towards that.
- 8)Give Them An Identity – identifying each other as a group, and who their friends are early.

Remember, people quit for various reasons, and the goal is to eliminate some of them. The methodology I employ and detailed in this section makes an impact on this, but not a single method will retain all of them. But it could be the difference between keeping just 2 , 4, or 10 more people through the year. Remember, one person can have a huge impact on the situation – if you keep the right mix then your program can be on its way.