MEMORANDUM

on the Conibeare style of Rowing and Training taken from notes made by C. F. Porter of R.A.F. Benson, together with a note of its practical application by Staines B.C. in the season 1953-4.

Introductory Remarks

Many English crews have used the more orthodox styles of rowing in the past with success, notably Leander and the Senior Tideway Clubs, but during the past few years it has been noticed that in competition with foreign crews who at least use a type of rowing based on a style similar to Conibeare the orthodox crews are so often gallant losers in the true British tradition when possibly by the adoption of American methods of training—particularly the latter—they could have been gallant winners.

In my opinion sport, particularly international sport, is perhaps becoming of exaggerated importance, and these notes are written to help some of the smaller and less fashionable clubs who have only a nucleus of a dozen or so really keen members. This was the situation of Staines B.C. in October 1953. For two years the club had won no Challenge Cup of any importance and after the adoption of the methods outlined below, by the end of the season twelve oarsmen in various orders had entered for seven principal Regattas, had appeared in the final of every one of the seven, and had won cups at five. Of these Staines oarsmen, the stroke man had never rowed in his life before November 1953, two others had only rowed in Maiden Fours for two months at the end of the previous season, four had never won their Juniors and three had won their Juniors. Two of the latter dropped out of the crew early in the season and the other, Brian Griffin, came in later when the crew had qualified to row in the Junior Senior events

As much stress is to be made hereafter on fitness I would add that during the time Griffin was rowing in the crew he also won sculling events at three Regattas.

Conibeare depends on **fitness** but I have met many oarsmen of the orthodox school who maintains that their clubs could do as well as Conibeare crews, and in fact better, if they applied the Conibeare requirements as to fitness to the training of their own orthodox crews. Putting aside the temptation to ask "Well, why don't you then" ? I would say that I have no patience with this kind of argument which can never be proved anyhow. I think a better argument is to point to proved success (e.g., the winning of Thames Cup and Wyfolds by R.A.F. Benson in 1953 and in a humble measure, the success of Staines B.C. in 1953-4.

If the orthodox claim—"We could have done it too" or "You could have done as well if you had rowed orthodox"—is valid, may I ask what happened to the crews beaten by R.A.F. at Henley in 1953 and to those—some two dozen orthodox crews beaten by Staines in 1953-4 ? Was this a coincidence ? Why did it happen when R.A.F. and Staines took up Conibeare for the first time with no well known oarsmen in them ?

It is true that most oarsmen row hard in practice and in races —it may be however that all Conibeare oarsmen test their bodies and minds **to the very limit of exhaustion because that is what they are trained to do.** That, I think, is the answer.

My reasons for adopting Conibeare

(a) In view of the lack of substantial success in previous seasons I was determined to take a risk and "be blowed to everything." This, I thought would have psychological value."

(b) Two members of the 1953 R.A.F. crew rejoined the club and though, because of their Senior status, they could not row in the crew, they provided first hand information about the new style.

(c) I received great encouragement and almost a correspondence course in coaching from Colin Porter of R.A.F.

(d) During the so-called "debate" on Conibeare held at Maidenhead in the winter of 1953, all the experts on the platform without exception, though ridiculing Conibeare to the great satisfacion of their supporters, invariably ended their speeches by suggesting that orthodox rowing could be improved by doing "so and so." I noticed that "so and so" was always a basic principle of Conibeare.

(e) Lastly, and somewhat illogically, arising out of this "debate" I came away sharing the ordinary persons mistrust of "experts."

As to Coaching

I speak with diffidence at this point. I was only an average College oarsman at Oxford. I had done no coaching for twenty years. My crew were inexperienced, very rough but very keen. I can only put down my own experiences and how I tried to "put Conibeare over." Having said this I would add that my crew would probably have done even better if they had had for their coach someone more up-to-date, younger (I am 50) and of more recent rowing experience than myself. There is no doubt that in my notes below there are matters with which many Conibeare coaches would disagree, **but the thing worked.**

Points to note

1. "Conibeare" consists of two principles—(a) Training for Fitness and (b) Coaching the style.

   80% of your time is concerned with Fitness.
   20% ,, ,, ,, ,, ,, ,, Coaching.

2. An accurate mileage chart **must** be kept and the members told that the first eight names on that chart will be the crew irrespective of past prowess.

3. A log or diary must be kept in which a note of training outside the boat must be made and it will include so far as is possible what the crew did in Running, Tanking, Skipping, Late Nights, Smoking, Drinking, etc.

Training for Fitness consists mainly in mile after mile after mile of paddling and rowing — running in the winter evenings — tanking—bicycling (for the ankles)—skipping etc., (for the shoulder muscles).

For my own part I did not insist on strict training in the winter but I did put up a notice with regard to being sensible about Food, Drink, Smoking, etc. In March we trained strictly for the Head of the River.

Training for Style. Keep strictly to the 20%. Hard work on the water is worth **much** more than shouting from the bank. Crews are usually intelligent and can work out their own problems, and in this respect a Coach should note that some men have longer legs, arms or bodies than others. Don't worry about this—you want **hard workers** irrespective of their shape. Hard work will gradually induce smoothness.

Never be depressed about the look of the crew. No Conibeare crew ever looks "pretty" on the water.

I tried to spend a few minutes before each outing in the Boathouse reminding the crew of the principles of Conibeare rowing; then we would go out and perhaps practice one of those principles for twelve miles. The phrase which I used more than any other from November to July was "COVER YOUR BLADES". It is **vital**.

Mileage must be combined with a high rate. Colin Porter suggests what in practice I found to be an excellent rough and ready formula for a coach.

If "a" = mileage and "b" = rate of striking, then before strict training begins "a" mulitiplied by "b" should be at least 15,000. That is to say you should aim at say 500 miles at an **average** rate of 30. (500 x 30 = 15,000)

Great emphasis is laid on high rating by Porter and I think rightly so. It is often argued that a crew which can do the same time for a given course rowing at 34 must be "better" than the one doing the same time for the same course at 40. I never understand this argument. To begin with the 40 crew must be fitter and no doubt they take more out of themselves but why shouldn't they occasionally be able to row a lower rate? I had an example of this in the final of the Junior Eights at Walton. Our opponents, Thames, were a heavy crew and well together. They rowed never more than 34 during the whole course. Staines slipped Thames at the start (rate 42) and held a few feet lead all the way. Thames (clearly a "better" crew than Staines) began to come up. I timed the Staines crew doing 23 strokes in the last half minute of the race and they won by a canvas.

You may be a "better" crew to be able to hold your opponents at a lower rate but are you still a "better" crew if your opponents win by a few feet. Is it not better to **win** than be this kind of "better" crew.

Light Paddling (makes me sick). There should be as little of this as possible. It can be used on two occasions only (a) to avoid easying when there is another practicing crew in the way or (b) I did use it to get balance in a limited manner. We would set off for a mile row. We started literally at 10 strokes per minute and worked up to 40 or 42 before the finish, very gradually.

I doubt whether in their first 500 miles of practice Staines ever did more than 5 miles of light paddling. **Fitness is 80%** and light paddling will not help in this direction.

Generally on Practice. Porter makes the following sound points:—

(a) There must be Mileage plus Rating.

(b) 4 miles without an easy is better than 6 miles with two easies.

(c) Far better to have a rough keen inexperienced crew than a polished crew who do not train properly.

I add two more:

(d) Encourage the crew, use tact, help them in small ways, e.g., carrying in blades—hot water etc.

(e) Cut out all unnecessary stylish "frills" which waste power. All power must be on the blade.

EQUIPMENT

The following changes are necessary:—

1 **Slides** (perhaps 22 ins.) to be put forward of the work at least two inches.

2 Wide **barrel blades.**

3 **Oars shorter inboard.**

4 **Clogs** altered to enable an oarsman to keep his knees together comfortably throughout the stroke and feet parallel. (Staines were unable to alter clogs but looking back on it now I wish we had.)

CONIBEARE THEORY

1 If you sit in a stationary boat (say at the stake boat) and move quickly forward on your slide, the bow of the boat will move forward slightly.

Query. How to make use of this ?

Answer. Get the weight of the crew quickly and smoothly "out of bow" (American expression).

2 On the first stroke from a stake boat the man in the stake boat will feel the Eight "come back" into his hand.

Query. How to minimise this effect?

Answer. By so lessening the slip in the water that if there is a slip it occurs at the point where it matters least.

CONIBEARE STYLE IN PRACTICE

The Hook (or beginning).

The slides are very much forward of the work therefore the blade goes back further and there is more leverage at the beginning of the stroke.

Effective work does not come on at once because at the point where the blade is farthest back (i.e., in the forward position) the blade is "pinching" the boat. If there is any slip therefore the slip comes where it least matters. The full power comes on at the earliest effective opportunity i.e., at the point where the blade of the orthodox oarsman is beginning to slip.

The oarsman is encouraged to imagine that he is hooking his blade round a post in the water. There are rows and rows of posts and he has to hook on to the one farthest away from him.

You cannot overreach for two reasons:—

(a) The middle joint of your back is solid and coupled up.

(b) Your **knees are together** and not wobbling apart and there is a "'cushion of thighs" to **stop** the body going "between" the knees." (See Eton Boating Song unfortunately !) This is most important because you can now get a **direct thrust** from a **pair** of legs rather than two unequal thrusts, one from each leg, one of which may be longer or more powerful than the other.

POSITIONS FOR THE HOOK

1 Backs solid and coupled up at the middle joint.
2 Backs slightly beyond the vertical only.
3 Knees together and feet parallel.
4 Arms outstretched as far as possible.
5 Hands near each other (leverage).
6 Heads up.
7 Slide almost on front stop.
8 Shoulders loose.

The reason for these positions are that owing to the alteration in the work and the size of the blades, if you try to get a hard orthodox beginning you would go backwards off your slide in the effort. You **drop** the blade in by gravity—"hooking round a post" if you like—and apply nothing more than a **hard catch.**

Just before the "hook on" you should feel strain on the ankles (therefore skip and bicycle).

Porter, I think, taught a **"light"** catch but Staines B.C. (perhaps through inexperience) made one or two tremendous last minute spurts using a hard catch. No doubt Staines were much slower at the beginning than R.A.F. Benson.

No power is wasted by trying to swing back. Nor is physical energy expended unnecessarily in so doing. You are now in the strongest position to apply power to the blade and if your back is all one piece you will have all the swing that you require. (Note "finish" below.)

The Great Acceleration or "Crescendo" as we used to call it.

This is the power application which increases more and more through the stroke. **Note.** You have shorter oars **inboard** and therefore for the same arc travelled by the hands a wider sweep is obtained which compensates for the "lie back" which we ignore. All this demands great fitness as the **blades must be completely** covered throughout the stroke.

At the "hook on" drop the blades in sharply and then "shove like blazes". Avoid missing the beginning by getting the "bell-note". This in my opinion is the forlorn "death note" of some clubs.

Draw in the arms all through the stroke so that there is full pressure from all the strong parts of the body and in this respect you can help men with long arms by suggesting a **drawing back** of the shoulder muscles.

Keep the head still. The head is the heaviest part of the body and you expend energy if you jerk it about.

The Finish. The phrase to use in coaching is "all hell let loose at the finish". Keep it as smooth as possible—this may not be practicable with men with arms of different lengths. **The hands come into the chest as the knees go down.**

The Body at the finish is again **slightly past the vertical only** so as to minimise the weight which would otherwise push the bows down — hence the American expression (see "Recovery" later) "Get out of bow".

When the crew practice the finish, the Coach should be up by the bow to see that the boat does not hesitate.

Hands at the finish. The **outside** hand pushes the blade down and away round the turn. The **inside** hand controls the feather Staines B.C. inexperienced in niceties tended to forget this when racing.

Recovery. "Get out of bow" quickly but smoothly. You can do this if you are not lying back too far but **note** the stroke is not ended until the body is right forward and arms outstretched.

When coaching a crew "getting out of bow" I found it useful to do two things. (a) The Cox would watch stroke's slide and shout, "Check" when it was half way forward and (b) I would tell the crew to pretend they were in a car and to jam on their two foot-brakes at the check.

Coming Forward again is part of the Recovery. There are two most important points.

(a) Look up—this tends to keep the blades down near the water.

(b) Turn off the feather **at the last moment** ready for the Hook on.

SUMMARY

This is the summary I used to give in the Boathouse after which we practiced a point at a time.

1. Hook on with knees together and hands together.
2. Great crescendo of power.
3. All hell at the finish.
4. Out of Bow and round the turn.
5. Shove on the brakes.
6. Heads up and feather late.

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