

# Twickenham Rowing Club

## Paul Davis Standing for Captain

### Introduction

The life of a rowing club, any sports club, is cyclical. From time to time the various developments fall out of step with each other and what appear to be rifts between various interest groups start to appear. This is not a result of the actions of a particular captaincy or committee but a normal occurrence.

In the last year I have seen a number of things at the club – decisions, the perceived treatment of some squads – that have suggested we are coming to one of those periods; so, rather than drive from the back seat I thought about this (very) long and hard and concluded I should stand for captain.

I would want to take the opportunity of John standing down to see if these currently small and manageable issues can be resolved for the benefit of the membership.

Hopefully, there will be others also wishing the same and it will not be an uncontested vote. I have some fundamental changes I would like to see, and need a proper mandate from the membership and your full backing and support. Hence this document which is best described as my manifesto!

### Me and Rowing Boats

I have been involved with *Twickenham Rowing Club* since 1990 – although I do recall being plucked off the towpath at a tideway regatta in the seventies having just been knocked out of my school crew's event; a very veteran crew were looking for a cox. I said yes, we raced, we lost (just) – that was a Twickenham crew!

After a short but reasonably successful career coxing for my school (*Tiffin*), *Nottinghamshire County Rowing Association* and *Great Britain* (highlights being competing for *The Grand Challenge Cup* at *Henley Royal Regatta* and the *World Rowing Championships* in Duisburg) I had moved away from the sport completely – apart from a brief stint coaching at *Thames Rowing Club*.

Spike – with whom I won my novice pot at school – persuaded me to return and I coached him and the small group of senior rowers in a pair, four and even a composite eight with *Walton Boat Club* – which picked up a bronze medal at the *National Rowing Championships*.

A pattern formed where I would coach for a few seasons – drop out for a while, come back – it was very informal but we had our moments.

I spent a couple of seasons coaching at *Reading RC* and came back for my last stint coaching Twickenham Seniors in 2005. I have to say that didn't go very well and I dropped out yet again.

I couldn't stay away though and returned to help out with repairing boats, running the Handknapps Winter Sculling Programme\* and cox/coaching the racing vets, which is where I find myself now.

I thought that was a good situation yet somehow managed to get the job of Water Safety Adviser and then onto the committee.

So here we are.

## **So why stand for Captain?**

It didn't take many committee meetings for me to realise that a lot of good and right-minded people contribute a vast amount of their time to the running of this club. Their efforts go largely unrewarded except in them seeing the fruits of their work.

The club has changed a lot since I first joined. There's no doubt that under John's captaincy the club has come a long way – we have larger numbers, fitter squads and a relatively young fleet of boats that most clubs would be envious of. I think as he stands down the club is in a pretty good state.

I asked Martin Francis (Committee Chairman) for a Job Description for the captain, and he sent me a list of duties. I cover these in more detail later on but believe the Captain's job should also encompass the development of a vision for the club.

We recently had a meeting of some of the great and the good at the club. This was to open discussions on such things as Mission Statements and growth plans for the next five years.

Well, we all pretty much agreed on what was required and what we would like to see. I very much liked the vision – best expressed by Spike – of a club teaching sculling and with that bedrock of skills to be able to put out sweep and sculling crew boats at will and with the focus for those crews being on combining rather than basic boatmanship and technique, which I think is where we are now.

I also believe that whatever coaching structure we have in place, it needs to be built from the bottom up – our winners of tomorrow need to be taught the correct technique by skilled and competent coaches today – and to encompass the whole club. Everyone can benefit from a bit of good coaching.

## **The Captain's Duties & Responsibilities**

This is the list as advised to me by Martin, with my thoughts outlined.

### **Vice Captains –**

I would expect to have representatives from each squad or group, and one for the coxes. These would be elected from within each group and would be asked to attend meetings with coaches and others to thrash out and formulate plans.

The input from these individuals is massively important. The members need to take responsibility for their club and these vice-captains can be the conduit through which the different squads and groups can express their concerns, wishes, plans and ideas.

### **Coaching and Coaches –**

I fully support the requirement for a paid head coach but would want to review the scope of work and expectations. This role should cover co-ordinating the coaching team across the whole club and not be concentrated on the senior squads alone.

I have always feared that there is a disconnection between those learning at the beginner and junior level, and those training to race at the top events. We need to agree exactly what is the Twickenham rowing technique.

*Learn To Row* courses need to become sculling focused (Learn to Scull?) Even if the intake is much smaller, and the attrition rate possibly much higher, those that stay and develop will be immediately more relevant to the club and its ambitions.

We will need boats to suit. I love the idea of Eton College's restricted shell single sculling boats (go down to Dorney on a school weekday to see them in action). I think Explore Rowing (ER) could provide something similar to these.

The standard of sculling at the club is such that this move alone would address all groups and levels of rowing member at the club.

Some current rowers have expressed a desire to train as coaches - fantastic, bring them in and get them working with small groups under supervision.

We also need sculling coaches. There are quite a few extremely competent scullers within the ranks already. I'm immediately thinking of Rob Bailey, Jake, Estavo, Spike, Ollie Cobb, Andy Davies, David Stanley, Rachel Woolf, Brian Dorling etc). We need to incentivise these to help, plus we have the BR coach, and our own Head Coach.

Learning good boatmanship has to be the primary driving force behind all water based coaching. The coaching of these skills and techniques must be carried out by those with the experience and capabilities to do so.

Leading off from this "boatmanship" approach to teaching, I would like to see a reduced reliance on land based assessments and for much of the training that currently is done on ergos to be done on the water in smallboats (subject of course to river conditions and individual competence).

I would like to see all squads as one training in singles and doubles and a much greater take up of the Handknapps\*. We might have to run several divisions to accommodate the boat shortage, but simple analysis of the results would show progress, faltering performances, and the quickest movers.

Finally on this subject I would want to accompany coaches out on the water to see how we are doing.

### **All Rowing Matters (including crew selection, regatta entries) –**

My first thought when I saw this was that it is quite a broad and vague item! It follows on from the coaching section above.

I would want the Head Coach to produce a series of training programmes - land and water based.

These training schedules would be (let's say) *bronze*, *silver* and *gold* and be made available across the rowing membership – individuals choose what they can manage given other commitments. Obviously *gold* would be the expectation on those planning for top boats.

This is a key concept that is also covered later on. Although rowing is a team sport there is a huge responsibility placed on each individual to perform and deliver when it matters. That is how it should be and anyone who thinks they are serious about competing at the higher levels should not need cajoling into doing the necessary work, to the necessary standard. But not everyone can make that big commitment due to external pressures – job, family etc. Providing a range of training options addresses this spread of commitment.

Regatta planning is also key. There are a number of regattas where everyone from the juniors up to the vets can all compete. These need to be selected and become fixed in our calendar - "Twickenham on Tour" is a powerful tool and serves to bring the squads closer together socially.

We also need to review our obsession with the Henley Royal & Womens' Regattas. Focussing on these events can be detrimental to the enjoyment of a good season – plus their very structure precludes the wider involvement of the club's squads. We may be better focussing on the National Championships where all groups can compete.

Contrary to popular belief the competitive rowing season does not end with Henley Royal Regatta.

### **Coordinate Junior and adaptive rowing.**

David Stanley is doing a fine job with the Juniors but needs considerable additional support. We need to be looking to get the better juniors in amongst the intermediate and senior squads as often as possible.

I am yet to be convinced that the location and layout of TwRC makes us a suitable venue for adaptive rowing but would take advice on that - there may be something we can do.

### **Boats allocation and Use –**

This has always been a very contentious issue and a problem for which there is no solution to please everyone.

However, I do have a different philosophy from the current one, in that I firmly believe valuable assets should be worked, not held back to depreciate on the racks. Obviously there is a need that they are looked after, and that crews using them are suitably competent. – a judgement that is easily made by any of the coaches or the captain, with the right guidelines.

In order for a freer use of boats to be possible, and not to become a free-for-all, we need to develop the online boat booking scheme and put in place some sensible restrictions. The onus will be on crews and squads to plan their outings better and declare these sooner. Crew members need to take responsibility for committing to an outing/crew and then turning up on time. We are then only left with unavoidable absences to deal with – a much simpler task.

### **Boat Purchase (Subject to Committee Approval) –**

Circumstances are such that this is not really an issue for the next couple of years! I would want to see the newly-formed Boat Sub-Committee complete its work quickly to produce a life plan for every hull so that we do not find ourselves repeating the same mistakes of the past.

We may need to modify some of the fleet to reflect the changed needs of the boatmanship policy. For the foreseeable future boat purchases will have to come from the proceeds of boat sales.

I have a firm belief that the contents of the hull (the crew) are far more important than the shiny newness of the hull itself. So I am not too concerned about the current fleet although we do have some boat mismatches that need to be addressed.

### **Boat Maintenance** (Subject to Committee Approval)-

This is a huge subject and one which goes to the heart of the mindset of the rowing membership.

We are not a business-for-profit organization, we do not have professional boatmen, or cleaners, or bar staff for that matter. Everything is volunteer led and every member of the club must take his or her individual responsibility seriously. Too often boats have been damaged or seats or parts “mislaid” and someone always thinks it is someone else’s problem. In the end a few committed individuals take on the burden left by those who do not contribute. It is unfair and with the best will in the world those individuals cannot keep on top of the growing problems.

This is unacceptable. A proper member of TwRC takes responsibility for the boat, the equipment, the crew, the club.

Crews should be putting boats on slings after outings, fixing breakages and cleaning them, I cannot recall the last time this was routine - yet it needs to be done and is very important given the reduced funds for buying anything new.

With everyone in singles and doubles over the winter we have a great opportunity to sort out the big boat fleet ready for the season. We can also teach people how to rig and set up boats – with this skill they will be less likely to break things and more likely to be able to fix them if they do break.

I sincerely hope James Frater will continue in his role as boat steward. But that should be a role to make sure the boats are on the right racks and we have a good and accessible stock of spares. He should be co-ordinating repairs and refurbishment with the boat builders. He should not have to run around at the last minute looking for a stretcher for a boat that has been left unrepaired by a previous crew.

In time we may have an automated boat usage record so we know which boats are being used and when (the technology exists, it’s just a case of getting a supplier to do it for free and a bit of name-checking). This will be a great help when planning future purchases or outing times.

### **And Finally –**

If my philosophy needed to be summed up in a single phrase it would be that the improved skill (boatmanship), competence and commitment of the individual is the building block of a successful and co-ordinated club. The individual needs to take responsibility.

We have the means to do it – I also think we have the will.

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### **\* The Handknapps**

*Most successful clubs run some kind of competitive long-distance series for small boats in the winter season. We have the Handknapps.*

*This is a competitive sculling ladder run between September and December. Each week the crews (singles, doubles, pairs) are set off line astern on a timed paddle up to Teddington, down to Richmond and back to Twickenham.*

*The times are analysed and the crew order modified so that (theoretically) everyone should cross the line together the next time. They never do, although some close tussles have been known with up to 4 or 5 boats vying for top spot. The process quickly develops boat-fitness and reveals improvements so that anyone who has completed a series of the Handknapps will confirm they are a better sculler with better boatmanship as a result.*

*It has never been fully taken up by the wider rowing membership at Twickenham and I would want to correct this.*