

Lessons From Limerick: What can be learned from the Limerick Coaching Conference

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The recent World Rowing Coaches Conference in [Limerick](#) chose to focus less on the minutia of athlete and boat performance, and more on the overall goals and strategies of different elite programmes from the top rowing nations. Because rowing at such a high level requires not only extreme athletic performance, but also the juggling of personality types, the constant assessment and development of individuals, the boats and the programme as a whole, it requires an understanding of sports psychology, [sports physiology](#) and simple empathy and compassion.

Ambition & Competition

Robin Williams, the coach of the 2012 Olympic gold-medal winning pair of Heather Stanning and Helen Glover talked about what linked the two very different athletes. Both had come late to rowing, learning in university, but Heather was already in the Women's GB squad when Helen was just starting out. What really linked the two was their competitiveness and drive. Both had been athletes in their youth as fast runners and had taken a competitive edge from those sports and transferred it to rowing. Helen Glover effectively went from novice rower to Olympic champion in four years. Their determination to work hard and to put in the training hours pushed the boat ahead of the pack, even though the two were only mid-size athletes initially.

Identification: People, strengths and weaknesses

Though they were only mid-size and mid-height (for rowers), they were both identified through the GB 'Start' talent identification programme. Both had athletic build from their previous sports and from their lifestyles (Heather an Army Officer and Helen a PE teacher) so they had the physical characteristics for elite rowing, but again it was the identification of their personalities that made them stand out as future winners. They worked hard, trained hard and were competitive. Williams also said the two were open to new ideas and receptive to criticism. This is another aspect he identified as important to elite success. Going through the history of their Olympic cycle, he described the strengths and weaknesses through the years leading up to London 2012. For instance, a weakness of their 2010 season was a slow start, even though their base speed was good. By 2011 their start was one of their strengths. Because the two had been willing to accept that they had shortcomings, they used their ability to learn fast to rectify their mistakes ready for the next season.

Control the controllable

Thomas Poulsen, coach of the Danish Men's lightweights listed the ten golden rules of Danish rowing. Considering the incredible success of Danish lightweight rowing, these are rules worth adhering to. One such rule is "Our ambition is based on things we can do something about". The concept of controlling the controllables is paramount in sports psychology and you can hear a variation of it in almost any sport. A sprinter may not run fast in wet conditions so worries about the rain, something which is out of his control. It is better to concentrate on improving wet condition running rather than becoming anxious about vulnerabilities: Control the controllable.

Common Goals

All coaches speaking talked about deciding common goals within the programme, groups and within individual boats. Athletes and coaches have to know they are all on the same page and working towards overall success rather than possibly their own individual success. As hard as it may be on athletes that lose their seats, discussing the concept of the 'boat' winning rather than individual athletes early on helps those cut to understand why they have been sacrificed. This is also about more than the athletes. As [budgets are cut](#) it has to be decided by the coaches and those running the whole programme what is going to take precedence. Running high performance systems costs a lot of money and if athletes and coaches are not performing then it can be hard to justify money for training camps, new equipment, [boat insurance](#) and travel to regattas. Martin McElroy from the Irish HPD talked about how much these problems can effect selection and development in small rowing federations.

Constant challenges

The German coaches Ralf Holtmeyer and Marcus Schwarzrock talked about the use of constant daily challenges in their training regime. Their athletes are always pushed just more than is comfortable so that progression is constant. The increments only have to be small, but each session should be seen as moving forward towards the ultimate goal of winning. This thinking can be incorporated into all training regimes, whether it is water work, erg tests or strength conditioning. The ability to cope with this constant pressure is why selecting the right athletes at the beginning of the programme is so vital, and why coaches have to look beyond physical ability to mental toughness when selecting crews.