

## Preparing to Cox the Head of the Charles

***Hint: Don't think you can just show up on race day***

(Reprinted from the USRowing Newsletter)

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Seven bridges. A serpentine course. More rowing shells crammed onto one river in a weekend than you'll see at any regatta in the world. Not to mention hundreds of thousands of spectators lining the riverbank over a three-mile stretch. The Head of the Charles is a coxswain's greatest challenge, and a true test of skills under pressure.

Unlike the spring sprint season, you and your crew must be inspired to prevail without immediate feedback. You're racing the clock. And with no other teams alongside (unless you're passing or being passed), it's you and your teammates hanging deceptively sharp corners, avoiding collisions, and holding onto your technique while emptying the tank over the lung-busting course.

Several excellent articles have been written over the years about how to physically steer "The Head." You can find national team cox Geoffrey Knauth's stroke-by-stroke description on the official Head of the Charles website: [www.hocr.org](http://www.hocr.org). You can also listen to tape recordings of world champion coxes Pete Cipollone and Seth Bauer on the Head of the Charles course at [www.row2k.com](http://www.row2k.com). All will provide a good introduction for what it's like to race the course.







But to call a truly exceptional Head of the Charles race, you need to be prepared beyond this. Following is a routine I've used over the years to get ready for my favorite race.

### **In the days before the race:**



-  Row the course at steady state pressure and talk your team through the key areas. (Your race strategy should be determined before this). Allow your rowers to look around and familiarize themselves with the course and various landmarks. Talk them through the strategy: the start, where key attacks will take place, and where the sprint will begin. Tell them each mile marker, the halfway point, and points on the course where you will be on the tiller.
-  Once you see the start list, study the competition and be prepared to handle both positive and negative situations involving teams that you may encounter during your run.
-  Practice using your stroke seat to signal you if anyone is coming up behind you on the course. You'll want to be checking over your shoulder on race day to gauge margins, but your stroke has a good view of who's behind you at all times, and can clue you in if anything dramatic happens in the backfield.

### **Once the course buoys have been set:**




Row the course again; start to finish, if possible. This time, take power 10s and 20s at key points on the course so that you and your team can get a feel for the course at race pace. I'd recommend the following:


-  A practice start-on-the-fly at the BU boathouse
-  A 10 or 20 entering the Power House stretch
-  A 20 through the 90-degree turn to port at Weeks Bridge
-  A 20 through the turn to starboard at Anderson Bridge
-  A 20 through the Eliot Bridge (it's sharper than it appears)
-  A practice sprint

### **The night before:**

-  Do a "race visualization" with your team. Talk again through the strategy you've planned for your piece. Include distance mark locations and talk through the major turns (Weeks, Anderson, Eliot). Having the strategy fully engrained in everyone's minds gives your team a blueprint to stick to in the chaos that always exists at The Head.
-  Your crew should also be prepared for a very loud crowd, extremely high boat traffic during the warm-up, and the possibility that non-racing crews may accidentally row or launch onto the racecourse during your piece.

### **In the race:**

-  Fully evaluate passing situations. Make sure you're in striking distance before initiating a pass, and keep in mind that passing inefficiently will add seconds to your total time, which could adversely affect your placing.
-  Use other boats as bait. When you cross the starting line, give your crew an accurate assessment of the distance between your team and the crews immediately in front of and behind you. You can use "boatlength" or "time" margins. When implementing your strategy and calling out attacks, let your crew know if they are moving on the teams you can see. If there is too much distance between your boat and other teams to accurately gauge, you can still call attacks against rival teams that you can't see (Example: "I know X started 10 spots behind us, but we're not taking any chances. Let's take ten to put another two seconds between us. Let's Go!")
-  Let your team know when you're on the tiller, and give them fair warning if you'll need them to help you out on a sharp corner (Example: starboard pressure on the Weeks Bridge turn).

 This is the big one that often gets neglected in head racing: strategizing for bridges and turns.

- If you believe you can catch the team in front of you before a major turn and/or bridge, give your team the margin between the two boats, and the distance to the mark (Example: “We’re a boatlength behind X, and we’re going to need to start the Weeks bridge turn in the about 400 meters. We need to get through these guys in the next 20 strokes to have a clean shot through the bridge”).
- Then call for the attack, make sure you go for the pass on the inside, and give your team feedback as to how they’re doing.
- Conversely, if you know someone is closing on you, the theme of your call should be to get through the mark before before they catch you. One key point here: If they do catch you, you must allow them to take the inside of the turn (if they try to take it), or you will be penalized if an official sees you. If the passing boat elects to go to the outside, that’s not your problem.

Finally, I’d recommend recording your race for true feedback. You’ll learn even more for next year. See you on the Charles!

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Join Yaz and John Lambert, Director of the Head Of The Charles®, Inc, and Chair of Rules and Appeals Committee for the annual *How to Cox the Perfect Head Race* Clinic. Yaz will share in-depth tips and strategies for head racing, as well as show and critique actual video--shot from the coxswain’s seat--at the Head of the Charles®. John will review the rules and show how penalties are assessed.

For more information, visit [www.COXSWAINation.com](http://www.COXSWAINation.com).