18 June 2015

An extended reply to paddlechica’s blog

Love your blog paddlechica! Thank you for writing such a great article on a very valuable topic. It is a good reminder to everyone in a team that all roles in a boat have an important and equal part to play.

I particularly like how you have summed up the roles of the drummer and sweep.
"Unifiers of the team. Controllers of energy. Conveyors of information. Catastrophe prevention team." It should be on a t-shirt and given to all your trainee drummers and sweeps.

A previous team captain has also described the drummer as encapsulating the heart and spirit of the team, with the sweep being the eyes and the mind.

I am proud to have been a drummer and sweep for my team. Learning to drum and sweep has been one of the most challenging things that I have done and I am all the better paddler for it. They are skills that have given me the highest sense of accomplishment personally and of course there is always more to learn as I’ve only done it for a few seasons.

I started off writing this reply with the intention to share a few comments and thoughts about the question someone posted about recruiting and retaining drummers and its turned into a bit of an essay length reply. For anyone reading this reply, some of the following might seem obvious and your team may already be doing it so high five to you. So perhaps this is really more for new or inexperienced teams to read and consider. I just
wanted to share my thoughts from my perspective and experiences as a drummer to encourage others to give it a go.

In my team’s experience, rotating experienced paddlers into the drummer seat has worked the best. They will have race experience and a better understanding of what it feels like when the boat lags or energy drops or needs a drive. So first identify those paddlers who have a bit of race experience under their belt and has demonstrated leadership qualities to approach about taking on the extra skill set of drumming.

**MINDSET**

It is true that quite often there is resistance from paddlers to drum because they want to paddle, there can be the same problem with sweeps too, and I believe that part of the solution is in the mindset of how the role of the drummer is perceived by the drummers themselves and by the rest of the team. It has to be seen and valued and respected as an equal role, one that other new team members can aspire to. It is an opportunity to add to your skill set, to be more than a paddler. When a coach or captain is putting together the boat formations, it makes their life a little bit easier when they have increased flexibility due to multi-skilled team members - those who can paddle and drum, paddle and sweep, paddle in the front or the back, paddle ambidextrous etc. (I know this might not apply to some competitions where you might have your positions for drummer and sweep fixed and locked in place.) The other thing to remember relates to another one of paddlechica’s posts about how there is no I in Team. As a team member you do whatever is asked of you for the team – the coach or captain is putting together the best possible team for a winning boat and that includes the drummer and sweep’s position.

As a drummer it’s also an opportunity to provide critical feedback to your team, you will notice things in technique and you may then reflect upon your own technique as a paddler. And of course, you get to see all the race action from a different perspective! (The best seat in the house provided that your team is out in front!)
DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT
As paddlechica has also pointed out its usually an inexperienced team that will find the lightest team member to drum, but in saying that, don’t always rely on the same people to be the drummer all the time. (My team is lucky in that we have a variety of sizes and adequate team numbers to be able to train up several paddlers to be drummers as well. This means on race day usually everyone will get to paddle in one race category and drum in another) If your plan is to start approaching experienced paddlers to consider drumming, don’t just do it a few weeks before a race. Just like your paddlers and sweep, drummers also require an introduction to the basics, development, experience and refinement. During your training session, get your trainee drummers up in the seat for short periods of time (coach can sit elsewhere in the boat or on land if possible) or if you are lucky to have two boats out, coach on one and drummer on the other. It gives the drummer the opportunity to practice their drumming, things to watch for in the team, use their drummer voice (side note: teach your sweeps and drummers how to project their voice. So they can be heard, du’h but also so that they protect their voice, you CAN do damage after a long race day - believe me - i lost my voice for almost a week. And another tip for female drummers or sweeps that may have naturally higher pitched voices, focus on calling with a deeper voice – it will carry further and clearer for your team).

And most teams would already be doing this in the lead up to a race, practice your boat formations with the same drummer and sweep pairing so that your paddlers get used to what voices they should be hearing from and responding to.

There are little nuances to pick up - drumming lightly when the sweep’s call is to lightly paddle, how to sit and position yourself so that you don’t fall off the seat in the surge of the starts, how not to get your toes sliced by the stroke’s paddles, how to drum so you don’t end up with mammoth bruises on your thighs, how to hold your drum stick/s at the start – too high and the starter/race caller will think there is a problem with your team…etc. On race day, your coach will not be with you in the boat, so the drummer and sweep are
taking on the leadership of the boat. Being the *Unifiers of the team*, the drummer and sweep also help to keep the team together and focused even during marshalling and boat loading.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND REWARD**

During training and race day, give feedback and positive reinforcement to your trainee drummers and sweeps. Leaders need to invest time and energy into the development and support of their drummers, doing so will help drummers feel valued and part of the team.

At your end of season events, aside from awards for the best paddler and most improved, have awards for the best drummers and sweeps too if you don’t already.

If you are a new team or don’t have any experienced drummers yet, don’t be shy, go ask your neighbouring teams for advice on drumming. On race day, look out for stand-out drummers on other teams and approach them for advice. Dragon boat racing is a competitive sport but the community is an open and collaborative one.

I personally love drumming! It mixes up race day. And I get to see the looks of exhaustion and exhilaration on the face of every team member when we cross that finish line together.

Anyone and everyone can paddle, but not everyone will have the right combination to be a drummer or sweep. So if your coach or team leader asks you to consider drumming, take it as a compliment and see it as an opportunity to step up and contribute to your team. Commit to the role just as wholeheartedly and passionately as you would paddling.

Good luck and happy dragon boat racing!

*By Tingles – Melbourne, Australia*
(I’ve been off the water on a break raising my little one – missing it terribly and eager to resume very very soon)

P.S. When I was pregnant, being able to drum also enabled me to stay connected to my team and continue contributing when I wasn’t comfortable paddling anymore. It was conveniently the off season and my team were graciously accommodating to me and my extra weight!