

The 9th Seat: What Coxswains Need to Know to Level Up

Presented by Hayley Verbunt (Coxswain of the 2023 AUS W8+)

A little bit about me

- **Mercantile Rowing Club**, Melbourne
- Firbank Grammar School (2020)
- **Senior Aus Team 2023** (W8+)
 - Bronze at World Champs
 - NTC Member 2023/24
- **U21 Aus Team 2022**
- **Queens Cup 2023**
- **Vic Youth 8s (W8+ 2021, M8+ 2022)**
- Y9 & Y10 Rowing Coach/Co-ordinator

How to Level Up as a Coxswain

Overview of today's session

- **Off the water**
 - Tools & rigging
 - Strength & weight management
 - Learning to coach
- **On the water**
 - Running sessions effectively
 - Being the "coach in the boat"
 - Steering & calls
 - Receiving feedback
- **General tips**
 - Goal setting
 - Coxswain identity
 - Nominations & making teams

Off the water

Half the coxswains job

***The reality of any “high level”
rowing program is that a lot of
time is spent in small boats.***

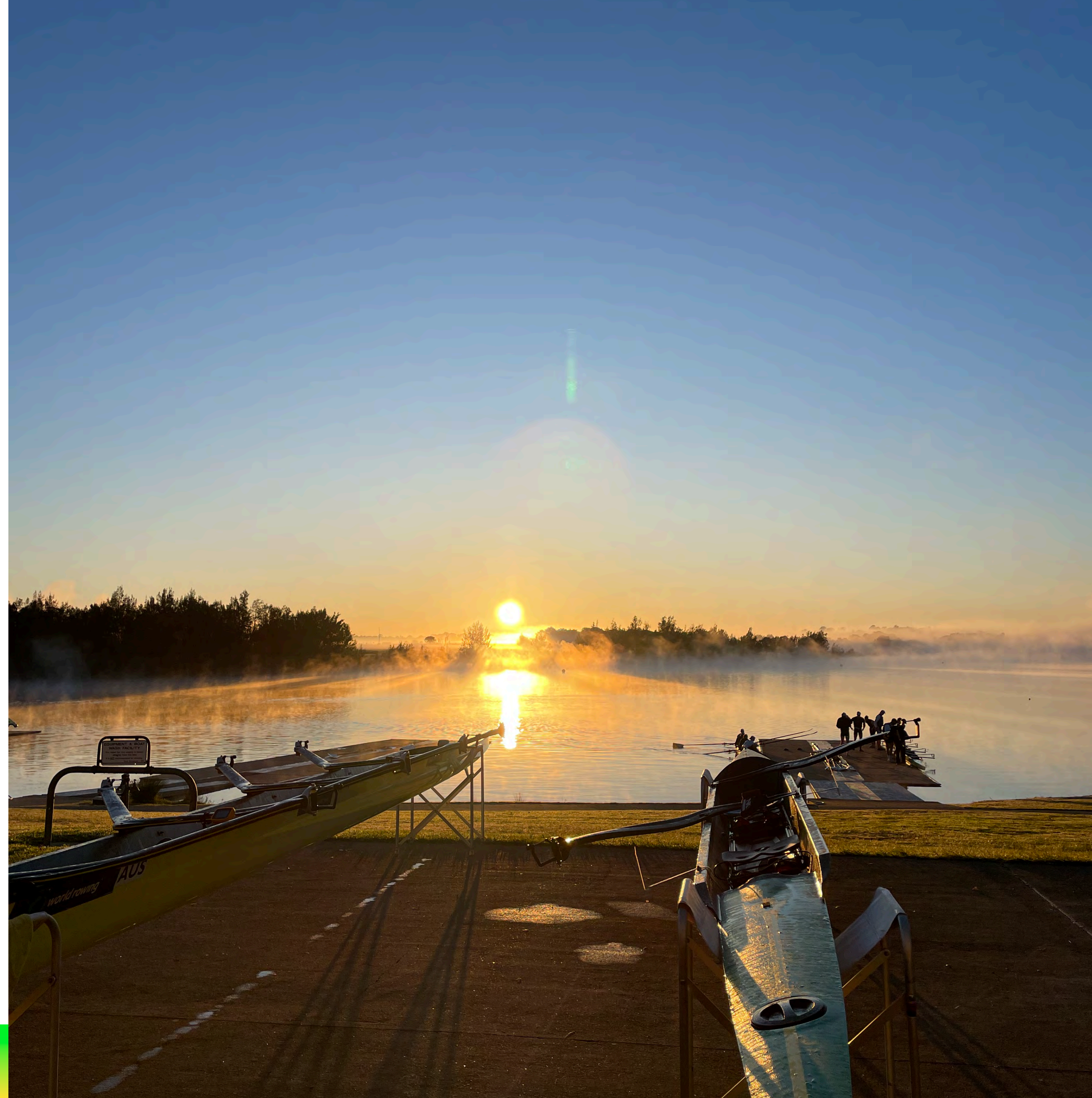
**What does this mean for a
coxswain?**



Provides opportunity for you to contribute to your team in different ways

- **"Assistant coach":**

- Helping with rigging/getting boats set up
- Provide coaching
- Helping set up and pack up sheds
- Help with timing/data collection
- Record footage
- Ensure athletes know their workouts/focuses
- The list is endless !



Tools & rigging

Every good coxswain is well equipped with their own set of tools

This should include :

- 10mm & 13mm spanners
- Flat head screwdriver & Philips head screw driver
- Star tool/Concept tool (personal fav)
- Measuring tape
- Allen key
- Shifter/wrench

Other useful items :

- Duct tape / gaffer tape
- Spare nuts/bolts/washers
- Medical tape
- Lipbalm (you'd be suprised how often people ask for this on the water)

Bonus tip : colour code your tools!



Invest time in learning the basics of rigging

Its immensely helpful to rowers & coaches if you're able to provide instant assistance to get a boat/oars ready



Strength & weight management

Weight management

Disclaimers

- The requirement to make a weight limit should **only be considered by coxswains who are over 18 years**
- Managing your weight can be a stressful process for some coxes and also **potentially damaging to your long term mental and physical health if not done in a safe manner**
 - Recommend seeking advice and support from qualified professionals if you're in a position to do so to assist in this process, such as a dietician or nutritionist.
 - Read up on the guides published by Rowing Australia in regards to helping with weight management
- Additionally **coaches** should be inherently aware of the pressures you're placing on coxes around weight requirements.
 - If you're unsure as to how best to support your coxes with weight management I suggest you also **refer them to professional support, or read up on the guidelines published by Rowing Australia** in regards to weight management

How to best manage your weight

Take a long term approach!

- **Set out a long term plan which allows you to make gradual changes over time rather than drastic steps**
 - This may include adding in additional exercise, making swaps in your diet or looking to build muscle mass
 - Again speak to a registered professional or refer to the RA or your states rowing website for more specific advice
- **Remember that your brain is also a muscle that needs fuel**
 - If you're drastically under-fuelling its highly unlikely you'll be coxing well on the water as your brain won't be able to function properly
 - Drastically under-fuelling also impacts your mood
 - Rowers and coaches won't appreciate being around a cox who is constantly hungry and struggles to control their emotions
- **Understand your body weight may need to fluctuate**
 - For some individuals its not healthy or realistic to sit at 55kgs all the time and that is okay
 - Again set a longterm plan up for yourself to see when you need to be on weight and what periods you dont
- **Weight management will look different for everyone**
 - There is no "right" way to manage your weight, only healthy and unhealthy ways
 - Always ensure you're aiming to be healthy in your processes, as these are what will make you the best coxswain you can be in the long run

Strength as a coxswain

- **Having stronger muscles allows a cox to properly brace themselves within the boat and eliminate additional movements**
 - As well as have better connection to the boat and enhance boat feel
- I've generally found a strong core and strong leg muscles help to best brace yourself within a boat
- **Easy way to improve this is circuit work**
 - Most HP rowing programs will include strength & conditioning sessions and core workouts
 - Join in with your rowers so you can also get the benefits of being stronger
 - Alter programs as you need, maybe only using your bodyweight or lower weights



Learning to coach

A coxswain is essentially a “coach in the boat” so any opportunity you have to observe rowing from outside of the boat and gain a better understanding of its technical elements will be beneficial to your development

On the water

How to be the best for your crew & your coach

How to run an effective session

How to best aid your coaches in organising your boat to get through warm up, drills, workload, navigating your water ways and moving with other training boats, so that your coach can just focus on giving feedback to you and the rowers rather than micromanaging

- **Know your warm up, know your session plan**

- Discuss with your coach BEFORE you get on the water what they want you to be doing and when/where
 - When in doubt, ask and confirm to avoid confusion when on the water where communication with your coach may be harder

- **Know your coach's preference on your training group**

- Does your coach want you to stay with your other boats or are they happy for you to split up?
 - If you need to stay together, make sure you take initiative and put drills in as required (ie pauses or checks)
 - Its extremely frustrating as a coach to have to micromanage a group of boats staying together

- **Know your crew's technical focuses**

- What is your crew working on currently? What is the technical framework your coach is looking to implement?
- This isn't too say you shouldn't pick up on other technical elements based on what you're seeing/feeling in the boat, but where possible try and incorporate these into what your coach is looking for and ensuring you're translating a super clear framework to your rowers which they can look to replicate

Running an effective session

Getting the most out of your designated drills/workload

- **Aim to have a good chunk of continuous paddling in between doing different drills** to allow your crew time to implement the technical changes the drill is focusing on into their continuous work before moving onto your next drill
 - For example, say your coach has 4 pauses they want you to do over 2kms, space them out every 500m with paddling in between, rather than just going one after the other
- In terms of workload, your ability to effectively run through designated pieces can have a massive impact on how well your crew is able to execute their session
 - **Know your workload before you get on the water**, including any rates/distances/timing/target speeds etc
- **Be really clear with your intensions throughout the piece**
 - For example if you've got step rates or 19 minute pyramids, what are your focuses for those different steps?
 - Each time you're changing rates or speeds you want to be really clear in how those changes are being made, when they're being made, and providing feedback as to whether they've been done effectively
 - Its also really useful to break pieces down to keep your crews engaged and maintain specific focuses for set periods
 - Itt also makes it easier to evaluate how your crew is performing on the fly and in between pieces if you're providing specific focuses
 - Eg if you decide to focus on stillness for 500m, after that 500m, has a change been made? If not, why and do you need to try again? If yes, great now lets look to maintain that, and dont be afraid if in 3km you need to do another 500m to refocus on it



Steering & calls

Fundamentals of coxing

Steering : this may sound counterintuitive but the best coxswains steer the least

- **Having a proper grip on the strings** : make sure you've got a firm grasp of the strings and are stabilising your hands by grabbing onto the gunnel of the boat. Ensuring your gripping the side of the boat means you won't accidentally move the strings and you're more likely to make small movements because you need to loosen your grip to turn
- **Fixating on a point in the distance** : picking a landmark on the horizon give you a clear point to aim towards and ensure you keep on the same line. Trees, powerlines, corners in bends or buildings are all good examples.
- **Take time to analyse your steering** : steering can often become subconscious and you complete it without really thinking about what you're doing. If you're aiming to improve your steering, ensure you're actively focusing on what you're doing (Whether thats focusing in on your line for a series of pieces, or checking your grip on the string though training)



**Another crucial
element is the ability
to understand why
your boat may not be
going straight ...**



- Uneven pressures/timings on blades from your crew will impact your boats ability to run a straight line, particularly when going from a standing start
- Take note of which way your boat naturally turns when the rudder isn't on and communicate to your crew what is happening and what should change
 - ie if you're getting pulled around to one side out of a start; is it off the catch? Is it at the finish? How many strokes does it last for?
- Use this information to provide technical advice to your crew as to how to best change it

Calling

Unique to every coxswain & crew

- **If it works for your crew, reuse it. If it doesn't, ditch it**

- Different calls will work for different crews, so don't assume that because something works for one crew doesn't mean it will work for yours. This advice should be applied in particular when listening to coxswain recordings, while they can be an excellent tool don't assume everything you hear will work effectively in your own crew

- **Give an appropriate amount of reaction time**

- Depending on how you structure a call will impact this
 - Sometimes you want a quick response, so make sure you coordinate the "Now" or call to action with enough time for them to process (ie on the recovery so they know what to do at the catch)
 - For other changes that need more explanation, I'll sometimes give them a count in, ie "in 1, now", or ask them to make the change over a few strokes "over 3, now"
- The better you're able to coordinate a crew all making a change together, the more effective the change will be
 - This applies for racing and training, in racing however you also need to consider that you have limited time so you can't be taking forever to call changes, this is where ensuring you're clear and concise is super important

- **Silence can be just as useful as making calls sometimes**

- Periods of silence allows your rowers time to process what the boat is doing and what they're feeling, as well as giving you time to process the same information
- It also allows their brains time to rest from focusing on your calls, meaning they're more tuned in when you start speaking again

Boat feel

What is it?

- *The ability to translate what physical sensations you're receiving from the boat, and what is happening in regards to the crews technique and power application.*
- For example, if the boat is feeling jolty at the catch and you feel your back smacking into the back of the coxswains seat; what is that telling you about what the boat is doing?
- Boat feel is an area of coxswain development that primarily can only be really lead by the coxswain, you need to spend conscious effort trying to interpret the feedback the boat is giving you.



Boat feel

How to work on it?

- **Choose specific areas of the stroke to practice analysing first.**
 - The easiest of these are probably the catch, through the drive, and the finish.
- **Pick one and spend sessions taking note of what you feel**
 - Is it smooth? Are you staying central or moving side to side? Is it one movement or little jolts?
- **Once you have a clear understanding of what it is you're feeling, start trying to apply your understanding of the rowing stroke and what your crew is doing**
 - Talk to your coach and use the visual information you receive when in the boat. Does your crew have the tendency to swipe at the water at the catch? Has your coach been working a lot on their connection at the front end?
- **From this you can start piecing all these bits of information together to start coaching to what you're feeling**
 - If you're feeling jolt at the catch, it can mean your crew is missing a clean connection out front; so what calls then do you know work for your boat to fix that?



Receiving feedback

Feedback is a crucial part of improving and developing in any area of life, and for coxing in particular it is an area that coxes should pay particular attention to

- When receiving feedback make sure you keep an open mind and understand this isn't anyone launching a personal attack at you but rather an opportunity for you to get better
- Make sure you ask questions if you don't understand the feedback you're receiving. Its pointless to listen to feedback if you're then unable to apply it because you don't understand it
- Follow up with any changes you make
 - Ask if you've made the right changes/are improving, and if you're not seek more guidance as to why





General tips & tricks

How to be the best version of you as a coxswain

Set “stepping stone” goals

The more important goals to set are the smaller ones that will help you reach your end goal



 		ROWING AUSTRALIA/VPP/Mercantile INDIVIDUAL LEARNING & PERFORMANCE PLAN				 	
	Athlete Name	Hayley Verbunt			Date	9/8/23	
	Category	Coxswain			DOB	18/12/2002	20.98 AGE
	Coach	Al Matthews			Occupation/Studying	Bachelor of Commerce, University of Melbourne	
	Athlete Categorisation	Emerging			SIS/SAS DTE	VIS	
Target Benchmark Event (BME e.g. World Championships/Olympic Games)				PAST RESULTS			
EVENT eg World Champs, Olympics etc	TEAM	Target Boat/Category eg LW sweep, M4- etc	BME Target Result	International Results	National Results	Ergometer Results	
U23 World Champs	Under 23	4+/8+	Podium	2022 Trans Tasman U21 Competition winners (M8+/M4+), HRR competitor 2022	IMY8+ 3rd (2022), U21M4+ 2nd (2022), IWMY8+ 2nd (2021), U21W4+ 1st (2021), U23W8+ 3rd (2021)	NA	
Overview of current status		Current first year U23 coxswain. Made U21 Aus Team in 2022 following two years in both a mens and women Victorian Youth 8+. Competed overseas at Henley Royal Regatta in 2022 and have been an attendee of U23 Aus team camps/trials in past seasons.					
PERFORMANCE KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIs)							
PLANNED				REVIEWS			
KPIs for Success in Season				Comment		Status	
Make a 2023 Aus team (whether senior, U23 or para)						Below Expectation	
Make KC/QC						Meeting Expectation	
Make Senior Aus trials						Exceeding Expectation	
PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS - TARGETS & MEASURES							
EXPECTATIONS					REVIEWS		
Year	Benchmark Event	Medal	4th-6th	7th-12th	Other Result	Other Result / Comment	Status
2023	Compete at a World Championship (whether para or senior)	Podium				Can be domestic, international to show thought about and realistic progression	Below Expectation
2024	Make trials for Paris team (para or senior)						Meeting Expectation
2025	Compete at a Senior World Championships	Podium					Exceeding Expectation
COXING FOCUS AND MEASURES / ONGOING REVIEWS							
PLAN				REVIEWS			
Performance objective	Gap analysis	Process/strategy to close gap		Comments / Evaluation			
Expand coxing vocabulary	Tendency to stick to same phrasing to describe technical focuses	Continue to spend time working with a variety of coaches to be exposed to different articulations of technical points, be consistent then in reviewing these sessions and selecting wording/explanations that stand out to me					
Quality on water sessions to combat lack of quantity	Shifting to U23s less opportunities to get on water	Take initiative to create opportunities to spend time in higher level crews wherever possible, and set specific personal objectives when in random crews/random					

Know your nomination requirements

- If you're applying to cox a state or AUS team, there are certain requirements you need to fulfil
 - Such as putting your nomination in on time, sending in a coxswain CV, competing at certain regattas and sending in recordings
- **Actively seek out these requirements**
 - Failure to meet requirements makes you ineligible in most cases
- **My advice with submitting recordings:** try and not overthink it, pretty much every recording you'll have you'll wish certain elements were better
 - Its unrealistic to have the perfect recording, so rather you should just be looking for one that is "good enough"
 - Good enough to show the selectors your skills, good enough to demonstrate your ability to call a race effectively



Treat other coxes as your friend, not your enemy

***You can help each other out,
share in each others
experiences & ultimately lift a
standard for your team***



***Become a student
of the sport***

Creating a coxswain identity

When someone asks you what kind of cox are you, you should be actively behaving and performing in a manner that you know exactly how to answer

- Are you a coxswain who is super kind off the water but super serious on the water?
 - Are you a coxswain who is known for always bringing positive vibes?
 - Are you a coxswain who is absolutely ruthless when it comes to training speeds?
 - What are your trademark calls?
 - What is your go to way of calling drills?
 - How will you always ask the rowers to get ready to go?
- **Predictably is essential to rowing.** Ultimately the sport is the same movements repeated over and over and over. The more predictable you are, the easier it is for others to follow
 - If you know what your predictable traits are, its easier for you to work on changing small elements here and there, rather than having no clear starting or end point It also keeps your rowers calmer if they understand what to expect from you, both on and off the water
 - **Keeping areas consistent and understanding what it is you're keeping predictable allows you to form an identity, something which is easier to then mould and change once you understand it**
 - This identity will also inevitably include some areas of your coxing you want to improve, and thats okay
 - Being able to identify them means you're aware of them and thus can change them



Any questions?

*Thank you for
listening!*