

Guide to Boat Selection

What are the qualities coaches look for in an athlete?

At Mercer, we try to focus on fostering the experiences that help our athletes learn the best lessons the sport has to offer. Leadership, sportsmanship, perseverance, competitiveness, and compassion are all important qualities in rowing, and we look for our athletes to demonstrate these qualities over the course of the season.

Rowing is an extremely challenging sport, both physically and mentally. We are looking for people who are up to the challenge and are ready to approach the challenge enthusiastically, all the while knowing that even the most talented rowers are often humbled by the sport.

How do you determine who makes the 1st boat and who makes the 4th boat?

Coaches rely on a wide range of data to ensure that the people who make the boat go the fastest end up in the fastest boat. Before we point out the major criteria for selection, we should add that we want our athletes to be good at everything. In other words, having a strong erg score but a bad attitude will probably not get you into the seat that you desire. Likewise having a great attitude and a great erg score but bad technique won't get you there either. **We want our athletes to be complete rowers, and having athletes that strive to succeed in all aspects of the sport will make our boats go fast.**

Criteria for Selection

Erg testing:

“Erg testing is to rowing as the SAT is to college admissions, you have to have a competitive score, but it is only one part of the puzzle.”

Physical testing on the rowing machine allows athletes to demonstrate fitness capacity, power, and mental toughness. Mercer coaches will primarily use distance tests of 5-6 kilometers in the fall, and transition to 2k tests in the spring. These distance tests last anywhere from 19 to 24 minutes.

In the spring athletes will test 2000 meters. A great 2k time for Boys would be 6:15, while a great time for girls would be 7:15. For lightweight boys, a good time for 2k would be 6:30, and for girls around 7:30.

We understand that not everyone is capable of pulling these times right now, but we are always looking for improvement over the course of the athlete's career. Generally an athlete capable of producing one of those scores is a junior or senior who has been athletically competitive in rowing or another endurance sport for 3-5 years. It is important to us that no matter where the athlete starts out, they continually are striving to improve as the training continues.

Technique:

Similar to golf, technique in the boat is critical to being effective. Coaches spend a great deal of practice time working on drills to help athletes understand the best way to move the boat. It is important that the athletes are listening during drilling and other instructional parts of practice so that they can form an understanding of what the coach is looking for. Just like they study math or science, when they are at rowing practice they are students of the sport of rowing, and their coach is their teacher.

With technique, coaches are looking for improvement, “coachability,” and for the athlete to take individual ownership of his or her progress. All athletes will receive feedback on and off the water; however, when an athlete is not responding to that feedback, coaches will eventually move on to athletes who are responding, and selections will be made based on that experience. Practice will include many drills and concepts that athletes can do on an erg on their own. The boathouse is equipped with mirrors to provide immediate feedback for them to make changes, as long as they understand what the coach is looking for.

Seat Racing:

Seat racing is an on-the-water test of one athlete’s boat moving ability versus that of another athlete. Generally seat racing will take place in coxed 4s and will involve a series of intervals at a set time or distance. After one interval, the two athletes will switch boats and race the interval over again. The coach will look for the change in margin between the two intervals to determine which athlete had a greater effect on boat speed and thus makes the boat faster when he or she is in it.

Seat racing can be useful in certain situations, but it is certainly not the sole deciding factor in who makes the boat. Seat racing is used as a final selection procedure, often between two athletes who have performed similarly when all aspects of the selection criteria are taken into account.

Therefore, not everyone is entitled to a seat race for every boat, and due to time constraints it would be impossible to seat race everyone against everyone. The coaches will do their best to determine the depth chart of their team and conduct fair seat races with transparent outcomes when they feel necessary.

Attitude, Work Ethic, Attendance, Competitive Spirit, Enthusiasm:

As we have previously stated, rowing is physically and mentally demanding. Coaches are constantly challenging athletes to be the best they can, and through the response to this challenge athletes gain a level of confidence, determination, strength, and mental toughness that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

We look for athletes who are team players and for those who bring a positive, can-do approach to practice. Furthermore we look for athletes who will handle the competitive nature of the sport with grace and react well to the difficult situations that come with selection and competition. We want athletes to work hard and demonstrate the desire to achieve their best performance through putting forth a relentless level of effort.

Finally, athletes can't show us anything if they are not at practice. While we understand things come up and rowing isn't everything all of the time, attendance at practice is crucial for making progress and contributing to fast boats.

Coaches' Judgment:

We are lucky to have a highly experienced junior coaching staff at Mercer. Our coaches have been successful at the international, national, collegiate, and youth levels both as athletes and coaches. We trust them with all aspects involved with teaching, training, and assembling the fastest crews we can possibly put on the water. In certain circumstances when two athletes are extremely close, they may be forced to make a judgment as to who is a better fit in a particular crew.

Example: Athlete A is just a little smoother and more experienced technically than Athlete B, but A is slower on the erg and narrowly lost a head-to-head seat race versus B. However, Athlete A demonstrates the ability to blend in better with the top lineup of athletes and ultimately makes that boat go faster. In this example Athlete A might allow the other rowers to row technically better, and thus he or she adds an element that is hard to extract through the other parts of the selection process. In this example the coach will have to look at all the data and ultimately make a judgment call about what is better for the crew.