

SITTING TALL

Robin Williams

Robin coaches the GB women's pair who won silver at the 2011 World Rowing Championships. He coached the lightweight men's four to gold at the 2007 Worlds and to fifth at the 2008 Olympic Games. From 1995 to 2005, Robin was Chief Coach at CUBC, achieving seven wins out of 10 in the Boat Race against Oxford. After learning to row at Monmouth School and then representing the University of London Boat Club, he gained his first GB vest in 1981 when he was selected for the Worlds.



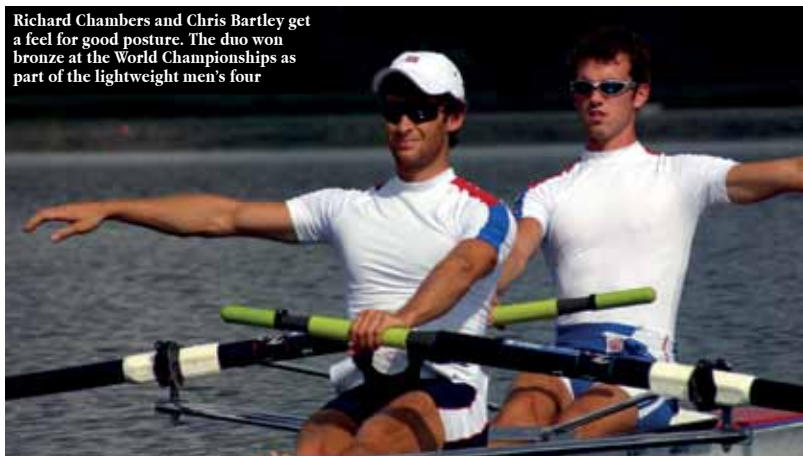
A better trunk means better boat speed. **Robin Williams** explains how to achieve this

Trunk strength is a common enough concept these days, especially as there have been articles in this magazine about land-based exercises you can do, but what about on the water?

Training is most effective when it's specific and functional – i.e. relevant to the sport you are doing. You can do work in the boat to supplement your land sessions, addressing an important area of the muscle chain in the most functional way. The legs need to transfer their power to the handles via the trunk so 'better trunk means more boat speed'!

But there's little point in strength work if your basic posture is bad: all you are doing is making bad posture stronger! So, before anything else, get someone outside the boat to make sure you are sitting correctly in the following three positions: sitting back at the finish, at the rock-over (a quarter slide) and at full compression. Video or still photos, even from a phone, will help give you a record and you can repeat this periodically to compare.

I'm not going in to detail about posture here, but in the simplest sense it means not letting



Richard Chambers and Chris Bartley get a feel for good posture. The duo won bronze at the World Championships as part of the lightweight men's four

your pelvis slump. So, taking the three positions above, try to be aware of sitting tall in the hips and achieving proper forward / backward rotation down there when you row. Once you've made the commitment to do it correctly you can set about training it to be permanent. Posture, then strength, then add endurance so you can keep going.

“Training is most effective when it's specific and functional”



Women's pair silver medallists Helen Glover and Heather Stanning demonstrate good postural control

If you can genuinely improve your sitting position and make it strong, your back will form a much better lever against the push from your legs. Technically it means you can use the first half of the stroke to let the legs build hull speed via the braced trunk and long arms. It preserves all the trunk angle for use in the mid-to-finish part, when your back actively accelerates off the legs so the resulting acceleration is much improved.

At the finish you need good hip position and trunk strength to release well without collapsing and losing rhythm, and in the next issue the follow-on is how to use resistance training to add to this even more.



World and Olympic Champion Zac Purchase rocked over, lifting one ankle and then rocking back

Sit tall in the hips!



Drills

So, how to do it? Darren Whiter, GB Rowing Team Lead Coach for Lightweights, did some excellent work on this a few years back. He developed a whole series of stretches, leading to active control movements, simultaneously challenging posture, balance, and control – so you can build these into your warm-up and put the strength work into the main session...

1 – Good posture

First, sit at back-stops with blades on the water and arms out straight. Then go through some trunk rocking movements to get a feel for good posture. Try holding the sculls with one hand and use the spare one at the base of your back to feel your **hips** move when you rock over, and back, rather than your **spine** curling or slumping.

2 – Centre your hips

Next, hold the rocked-over position and lift one ankle, then the other. This puts a further demand on the stretch. Now try it when the boat is **moving**: easy on the balance, rock over and lift one ankle, then the other. Rock back and take a couple of full strokes, then repeat. You can build a whole repertoire of drills on this – for instance, holding the handles with one hand and moving the other arm out to the side or above your head. Whatever drill you come up with the basic aim is always to hold a good hip position whilst going through the swing, making the lower abdominals and back muscles work to support you. Imagine you are wearing a weight-lifting belt, or corset around your lower waist – these muscles are nature's support belt! Exercises where you move an arm outwards or above head height also help teach you to 'centre' in your hips, which is good for balance and control in rough water.

In the main session a sample workout

might be sets of 10 strokes low rate firm, using trunk and arms with either fixed legs or just an inch of knee break. Focus on levering through the hips against the footboard so they are active even though stationary. You could even do full suspension work with hips an inch off the seat. Short sets done firmly will build strength, longer ones will develop endurance so you can decide which you need most. Later in the year you can even do this drill as a quarter-slide at race rate for several minutes.

3 – For the trunk

Sitting in the catch position, try doing some legs-only sculling. Blades can be on or off the water for this depending on your competence. Start with just the first two to three inches of leg push – this is the vital bit of the stroke where the legs begin and the trunk needs to engage and brace without deforming. Usual faults are clenching with the arms or shoulders as compensation for lack of hip connection, but **try** to leave the arms long and keep your back tall and forward. If you feel you curl under at full slide, do it at three-quarters length instead but keep a good lower back shape! **Pushing** is easy, and so is **pulling** with your back – the bit to really concentrate on is **bracing** firmly in the stomach when you push.

Next, progress to half the leg drive, then all of it. Again, sets of 10 will help build trunk strength here. If your back gets sore, paddle out at full length for a bit and next time brace harder with your stomach muscles. Bracing the stomach more will reduce the strain on your back extensors.

If you want even more of a challenge, try backing the boat down first and then go forward to load. The extra weight in the spoons will give your trunk plenty to do and you can do this exercise either at the front end or back end.

