



Cheerleader, Zen master, boss: coxswains like Bianca Wiczorek (CAS'11) do it all.

The Hot Seat

Staying the course, and psyching out the competition

THEY'RE UP BEFORE dawn. They spend countless raw and rainy Saturdays with their crewmates on the Charles. They sit nearly motionless in the shell's stern while their hulking teammates work up a sweat pulling oars through the water. And what do they get for guiding their boat to victory?

Tossed in the drink.

No, life ain't easy for a coxswain — an athlete who hardly flexes a muscle, who's half the size of his or her crewmates, and whose complex role is a mystery to the uninitiated. Coxswains do more than shout stroke commands; they steer, serve as an onboard coach, and psych out opponents.

"We're the eyes of the boat, the cheerleader, the parent, and the boss," says Maria Escallon (SHA'10), a cox on the men's varsity eight. "We're the first to get blamed and the last to be thanked. It's a humbling position."

But Escallon loves the camaraderie. "These are my twenty-six older brothers," she says. "Of course, racing is a big part of it. That's a huge adrenaline rush."

And yes, she says, "I've been

thrown in the river several times. It's tradition."

The list of a cox's responsibilities is as long as an oarsman's is short, from correcting technique to whip-cracking to ego-boosting. Shrinking violets need not apply. David Padgett (SAR'99, SED'08), men's varsity assistant coach, describes the role as an extension of the coach and says confidence, even cockiness, goes a long way. "Napoleon complex gets thrown around a lot," he says. "It's a little stereotypical, but you do have to be of that mentality."

The primary duty is steering. With thumbs and forefingers, coxes pull and push a thin cable connected to the rudder, making adjustments at precise moments during the stroke to cause the least disruption and loss of speed. All the while, they cajole a wall of grimacing rowers and keep an eye out for buoys, bridges, and other shells (safety is their first concern).

On race day, they lead stretching exercises, try to intimidate other coxswains from behind pitiless dark sunglasses, and get the shell to the starting line on time, all the

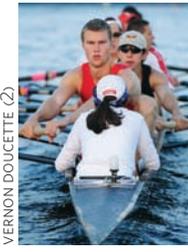
while exuding Zen-like calm. "If I sound tense or nervous in the boat, the rowers will feel the same way," Terrier cox Bianca Wiczorek (CAS'11) says.

During competition, they dictate the race plan while keeping the oarsmen abreast of their speed, the distance to the finish line, when to make a move, and the location of other crews. Coxswains used to have to shout through a megaphone; now, there's the Cox Box, a microphone and mini-PA system (speakers are mounted along the shell) that also displays stroke rate and time.

During a recent practice, Escallon calls out stroke commands, then drops her voice into a deep, almost demonic growl. The rowers respond to her change in tone, and the boat picks up speed. Water slaps at the sides as eight blades slice and feather above the river's surface, now streaked gold by the first rays of the sun rising above the Prudential.

Later, Escallon tells Padgett the light is out on her boat. It's clear who's responsible for that, too: "Make sure you get it checked out, Maria," he says.

CALEB DANILOFF



VERNON DOUGETTE (2)

WEB EXTRA
Watch a slide show of coxswains at work on the Charles at www.bu.edu/bostonia.