

SECTION I: THE ART OF RECRUITING

GETTING THE RIGHT PEOPLE FOR THE JOB

This section will talk about attracting novice walk-on athletes, specifically freshmen, to give rowing a try, and the process of “hooking” them in their freshman fall. For collegiate club rowing teams novice walk-on athletes are our lifeblood. While some collegiate club programs get a few recruits, there is not a single club program I know of that has experienced recruited athletes as the majority of their team. All of us teach people new to the sport how to row from scratch.

BUILDING A GOOD TEAM STARTS WITH ONE CLASS; BUILDING A PROGRAM REQUIRES MORE THAN ONE

We have all been part of or seen a team that produces that fantastic novice eight in a given year. It is part of college athletics – getting that good class of athletes that does something special and makes a name for their program. For whatever reason the planets aligned themselves for that team that year and the group had a great chemistry, athletic base, and desire to win. Teams will have their cycles like this, we all do.

But there is a difference between having a good team and having a good program. By my definition, a team is measured by a snapshot of one year. And of course, that good class I referred to above can be the source of speed and performance for a few teams while they are in college. But does that make it a good program? No. A program is a broad look at how the program performs under a coach over time. You will find good programs at the top of the standings more often than not. And of course programs can have off-years from time to time, when a particular team has a rough spot.

We want to be coaching good programs and win races and place as high as we can at whatever race we attend. To do this requires athletic people with a determined mindset. Finding athletic people is only one challenge, and then to find within that group who wants to COMPETE, and then actually work hard to compete as high as they can, well, that is a bit more challenging. We all know what it takes, what I have said here is not surprising to anyone reading this. To do well in this sport you need big, strong athletes, who move well, have good awareness of their movements, have a high VO2 max, can work together, and want to work hard towards winning races. Getting the right body *and mind* types is critical to your success. The *MIND* part of the equation is usually the more critical aspect to success. I have seen a lot of 6’5” cream puffs in my day. This message talks about how we recruit the non-cream puffs onto our team.

Here are some average statistics for our freshman team at Michigan:
Undergraduate Population at Michigan: 26,500 (third smallest Big Ten school)
Incoming Freshman Class-Males: 2,900-3,000 annually
Initial Freshman/Novice Turnout (simply checking us out): 100-150 people
Initial Practices: 60-90
Tryout (2 weeks into season): 45-65
After Tryout: Self-imposed limit of 40-45 through a cut
End of Fall on-water: 35-40
End of Fall Semester: 30-35
End of Winter Training: 25-30
Spring Racing Season: 20-30

FIRST STEP: BE READY TO COMPETE ON YOUR OWN CAMPUS

The first year of coaching at Michigan ('92-'93) our budget for recruiting was about \$750. We took out an ad in the school newspaper, made a few thousand flyers (in black and white), and did a few events around campus. There was no specific targeted audience; the approach basically was to get many people to the mass meetings (sometimes referred to as "call-out" or "informational" meetings at schools) as we could possibly get there. And when it was a co-ed club the first 4 years I was at Michigan did we ever get the people there. It was not uncommon to get 300 people at the first meeting. But a very small percentage of them were good athletes.

Fast forward to 2010-2011: This year we have budgeted \$7,000 for recruiting. I will eventually break this down as to what it all goes for, but the reason for the growth is that over the last 18 years we have been pushed to extend our efforts further by competition. And I am not referring to competition from the other collegiate men's rowing programs that compete directly against us on the water, but the other student organizations on campus. Since the fall of 1992 I have seen more and more organizations pop-up on campus and there simply are more things to do for students. There are a lot of choices now, and thus we have more competition for membership. That 6'4", 200lb stud may be just as likely to go play tuba in the Michigan Pops Student Orchestra as he is to row. Unless, of course, you get to him first and convince him he needs to be pursuing the sport of rowing and representing Michigan in intercollegiate athletics.

The other thing that has happened is that the other student organizations have been producing sharper looking recruiting materials, all designed to grab the attention of prospects. The age of the internet has allowed people to expand their efforts and become more organized. So we have had to make our stuff as or more appealing than they do. One of my first points of business when I became the head coach was to make our materials look more professional. So in the fall of 1994 we began producing a 4-color brochure that cost \$1k to produce, and another \$250 to distribute when the kids got to campus in the fall. We were the first campus organization to do this that I know of. This was really the only major improvement our budget could handle at the time, but it was important. But by 4-5 years later it had become the norm - all the other clubs did it. We began sending our letter in the first weeks of class and having the mass meetings before the annual campus "Festifall", which I believe every university likely has the first week of the school year. This is often referred to as "Welcome Week" at many places. At this event all the various student organizations promote their club and recruit membership.

Over 200 student organizations are competing for membership at Michigan. It extends well beyond the other club sports to academic clubs, musical clubs, language and ethnic clubs, Greek organizations, games clubs, adventure clubs, you name it clubs. And somehow we need to stand out, and get the big strong bodies who want to win. Within a few years most of these clubs were doing the same and bombarding the kids the moment they get on campus. And that same trend has continued over time - whenever we employ an effective recruiting technique, other clubs follow our lead and do the same. People on our campus COMPETE for membership. The competition for membership on our own campus is the first competition of the year we have, really. It is the same way at all of these colleges that collegiate club programs exist.

YOU MUST SPEND MONEY TO MAKE MONEY: YOU MUST LOOK "VARSITY-LIKE".

Professional, sharp looking materials will give the student-body considering joining the impression that the TEAM (not club, refer to yourselves as a team, ALWAYS) is a professional, serious organization. It draws a different type of person. Good athletes have high standards, and the more you can make yourself look like a varsity program, the higher caliber of athlete you will draw. You MUST spend the money in this area. And if you do not currently, if you ever hope to draw varsity-caliber athletes you need to find a way to increase this area of

your budget. If you scribble chalk messages on sidewalks, or use cheap materials, the impression will be “clubby”, or in other words, “not very serious”.

Materials Produced and costs

- 1) Letter, on team letterhead (color). \$300. Sent to all freshmen when they move-in.
- 2) Brochure - \$1,000. Four color, snappy design, this is the heart of our “sell”. We get 4,000 copies, every freshman gets one when they move-in and we pass them out at events.
- 3) Post Card - \$1,000. Sent in the summer to incoming prospects. Four color.
- 4) Poster - \$1,500 for 500 copies. Each spring we produce a poster, usually designed by an athlete on the team. It promotes both our current team, and we have already set the recruiting calendar for the following fall, so those events are noted on there.

I will eventually address the team’s annual budget in another email, but it is worth noting here that these materials evolved in terms of expense over years. They are listed here in the order in which they were introduced over time, as the competition on our own campus increased. So the budget on these items grew over time, and the quality improved on each item also, so the overall budget could grow gradually and absorb the increased expense better.

MESSAGE CONTENT

You need to advertise for what you are looking for: Tall, strong athletes who want to compete. While the approach of just getting as many bodies to come out for your team has its merits, take the strategy of drawing the types of people you want in your program to you. A few paragraphs ago I identified who they are: big, strong athletes, who move well, have good awareness of their movements, have a high VO2 max, can work together, and want to work hard towards winning races.

The first year I was the head coach I tailored the content to advertise for these types of people. I received a lot of resistance from a few team officers. Now, at the same time I also eliminated lightweight rowing from the program, and the smaller guys on the team were already sort of stinging from that move. One of those guys was president of the team and he took offense to my strategy. The letter was headlined with “TALL, STRONG ATHLETES WANTED”. He argued that it would discourage smaller guys like him from trying rowing. He was saddened by the thought of some of his teammates and friends never having found the sport because we only wanted big people. I thought that for every small guy who was discouraged from that message that it would encourage a bigger guy. And I was correct.

Now, additionally with this message is also coupled this message: “OR GUYS TOUGH ENOUGH TO MAKE UP THE DIFFERENCE”. This puts up a challenge to those smaller guys who like to compete. It draws the MINDSET you are looking for. You really do want competitors. The ones who want to make the sacrifices to win are going to carry your program to a different level. The greater numbers of these types of people are on your team, the more they will draw people like themselves to the team. It is the “snowball effect” at work. People who come out for the team who simply want to do the sport because it looks cool, or they want the challenge of “mastering the craft”, or just want to be part of a team and to be able to put crew on their resume will not lift the program to the next level unless they desire to compete, and compete at the highest level. Those who want to compete at the highest level will make the sacrifices needed to take the program to a new level of competitiveness. There is value in having these types of people on your team, regardless of size.

All the truly tall guys on our campus have been approached by team members numerous times. People on our campus know we want them. Some of them get sick of it and tell us to bug off, but again, the ones who get the

initial seed planted will make their way to you. Yet, at the same time, you never know what sort of package a true talent will come in. Matt Hughes, a 2008 Olympian, was only 6' tall and 190 lbs, not a giant. But he was ultra competitive and had a big set of lungs. I have had some smaller guys of lightweight stature go on to make my 1V because they row well and pull a good score for their weight and they earn the trust of their teammates. We look at anyone who wants to throw their hat in the ring. And if they possess that metal you are looking for, they won't be deterred at all by an advertisement encouraging tall, strong athletes to try out.

The result of this revamped and targeted message was that our initial turnouts were just a little lower, but the number of tall, athletic men increased pretty dramatically. Some years it is better than others, depending on how hard the varsity men and the freshman coach work at it, but all in all we get several eights of men to check us out each fall who all stand over 6'2". Realize, some will drop out early, many won't end up possessing the determination, will, and guts to make it as the best athletes to make the Freshman 8, but the ones that do are the ones who will make a big impact on team success.

AN OUTLINE OF OUR ANNUAL RECRUITING CAMPAIGN

Michigan High School ADs mailing - March or April

We identify the top 50 or so in-state feeder schools to the University of Michigan and each April send them a few posters, a handful of brochures, and a letter asking the Athletic Director to hang the poster in locker rooms, and to identify any athletes from their school who they know are going to be coming to Michigan in the fall. This past year we had a coach actually attend the MHSAA athletic director conference and make some personal contacts. Again, this is to get seeds planted in minds and get to anyone we can as early as possible, and more importantly before the other student organizations. Besides the costs of the materials, this expense is another \$250.

Campus Billboards – all summer

Freshmen are all required to attend a summer orientation of 2-3 days the summer before their freshman matriculation. We would love to speak to them directly, but the university keeps them busy and imprisoned and limits their contact with organizations during this time. However, all freshmen are escorted across campus numerous times during this trip and we can advertise on the 3ft x 4ft billboards around main campus. We make professional looking billboards so they all get to see it. Another \$400 cost to do this for the summer.

Postcards sent to homes - 2nd Week of August

By this point 90% of the incoming freshmen have attended orientations and registered for classes. This allows us to acquire their home addresses. We produce a 4-color postcard directing them to our website where they can fill out an information form, as well as makes them aware of our open boathouses. They get this postcard the week prior to moving to Ann Arbor – perfect timing. Outside of the cost to produce the postcard, the mailing will cost \$600. There is another plus to having this list – we can cross reference the names we have with the various MHSAA state championships (swimming, track, cross country, etc.) to see if any of those athletes are coming to Michigan in the fall so we can target them.

Move-In Events

Maize Craze

Move-in occurs Tuesday through Thursday before Labor Day weekend, and then on Friday there is a large event to welcome freshmen called Maize Craze. We have our guys present and pass out brochures and approach all the tall, athletic guys. We also schedule an open boathouse that evening, since there is nothing else going on on-campus, and take them right from Maize Craze to a bus waiting nearby to take them to the boathouse.

Rec Sports Day

This is held on Sunday of Labor Day weekend by our Rec Sports Department. This is not a huge event, but again it is right before an open boathouse, and we take people directly from it to the boathouse. Immediacy is the key. We must have a presence here.

Open Boathouses

We started doing these open boathouses 4 years ago and it has paid off big. Over Labor Day weekend we hold five of these events where we bus kids to our boathouse from the major dorms on our campus. An hour before the bus leaves from that dorm a group of our most athletic looking guys go around that dorm and recruit them to take the bus down. Our boathouse is only a mile and a quarter from central campus, but we try to make it as easy as possible for them to get to us. When they get there we have three stations. The first station is at a boat set up in slings and we talk about the equipment and racing and is basically a “juice up” station. The second station we go into the boathouse, and we talk about team obligations – I am going to come back to this. The final station is on an erg with instruction, and then they pull a 250 meter test at the end of it. It is ugly, yes, and guys fall off the machine from poor technique, but it creates a stir and an energy that is good. At the end of the station the top five scores win a t-shirt. This already has the top athletes identified and encouraged, and it has already inspired those who want to be the top athletes but didn’t get a shirt.

Back to the second station: this is a critical, critical aspect in your initial direct communication to recruits at recruiting events– you need to address the two biggest concerns recruits have: time and money. You **MUST** address this in your initial talk, whenever and wherever that may be at your institution. They have all heard it takes a lot of time, and that it costs money. I weave this into the middle of my discussion and answer their question before they ask it. You don’t want them to ask in front of everyone, “Exactly how much does this cost”. Instead, I say it this way (nearly verbatim):

“I will first address money. The first two weeks during the tryout period will cost you nothing, you can try-out for free. If you make the team the first dues payment will be \$150. That will get you your first race and 4 more weeks of rowing, at which time we will require another \$150. Also in that time you will have to purchase a certain amount of apparel and gear. In November you will have to do 2 or 3 rent-a-rowers, which is a community based service project we do. That is it for the fall semester. Next semester you will have to cover your spring break training trip of about \$350, raise some money in a pledge drive, and then spring dues will be about \$200. I also will point out that we have a team of 75 people, so it is affordable. You just have to plan for it. As for time, good grades come from good study habits. Our team GPA is 3.3 and these guys are pre-med, pre-law, business, engineering – real students. You will be around people like you who know how to study and this can work out well for you. We keep the time low to begin with at an hour a day so you can adjust. But you will find if you did nothing you would probably waste time sitting around in your dorm room playing video games and procrastinating. This will help you manage your time better by keeping you slightly busy and getting you away from campus for a short time each day. Because of this I believe it will enhance your academic performance and not hinder it. In the end, I truly believe that the only thing limiting you from rowing for Michigan is desire, and you just don’t know if you like it right now or not. So give it a try and see if you like it.”

If you don’t address time and money you will appear to be avoiding the question. This will turn them off more than hearing it spun in a less painful way as I do above. Notice on the subject of money how I never say the full amount added up as a total – that is a scary number to hear. If you say, “Well, all totaled between dues and fund-raising you need to cover about \$1500” that will be a huge turn-off. Instead, with the way I have presented it they have to do math, which most of them won’t bother to do. By breaking it into smaller chunks verbally it is more palatable. If you weave those subjects into a larger speech about the facility, the place you row and a little history of the team it may just get lost in their memory altogether. And notice this station falls in the middle of the session, hoping to have what many perceive to be the negatives – time and money – just get lost in the excitement of learning about racing, and learning how to do it on an erg.

The open boathouses cost us about \$750 to do, when you figure bus rental and food that we give them to snack on at the end. The best thing about the open boathouses is that it is interactive – they are doing and seeing something, as opposed to sitting in a room watching a video and hearing someone talk about how great of a sport rowing is.

Festifall

This is held on main campus grounds one day in the first week of the fall semester. Over 200 organizations have a table and people walk by and members can talk to them. We arrange to have a mass meeting that evening that people can attend. This is just another “impulse” to help get our message out.

Boat on the Diag

The Diag is the center point of Michigan’s campus and where a lot of foot traffic walks. We set a boat out there for a day and talk to people as they walk by. We do this either the day before or after Festifall, and again plan to have a mass meeting that evening.

Mass Meetings

We have two or three of these meetings during the first full week of school. At one time these were the bread and butter recruiting events we had, but the open boathouses have now become that. We use these meetings to catch anyone who did not make it to an open boathouse. We are lucky to get 20 people to one of them. They learn of the meetings via the letter we send them that arrived when they moved in. That letter also had a brochure in it and every freshman male gets one. We show some video and talk about the sport, and have some varsity members there to interact with. We essentially give them the same information as we do at the open boathouse, except minus the erg test and the visuals. The mass meetings are the last thing we do.

EFFECTIVENESS OF WORD OF MOUTH

This is the number one recruiting tool you have – your own athletes. How your athletes approach prospective teammates is very important. Each time a contact is made it is a first impression of the team. We encourage the team members to wear their Stevenson jackets, and other Michigan apparel all over campus during this time. This is usually not a difficult thing for sophomores, who just received their new jackets as a “rite of passage” when they come up to the varsity squad, and are very proud to be seen in them. It could be 85 degrees out and they walk around roasting in these jackets at that stage. And you would be surprised how many kids come out initially because they think the jacket looks cool.

I especially encourage the taller, athletic looking guys on the varsity squad to be aggressive and approach tall, athletic looking men. I talk to the tall, athletic varsity men individually and make them realize that they are going to be more effective at recruiting big guys. It is not that I discourage smaller guys from recruiting, but that future 6’6” five seat will be more impressed with an upperclassman who looks him eye to eye. And by the time 3-4 of our guys who look him eye to eye have talked to him about rowing he starts to think, “Hey, this is where big guys like me go to compete”.

In the week before school I coach my varsity athletes on the best way to approach a recruit face-to-face. I have used this opening line for years, and it seems to work. I start by asking, “Are you a student-athlete at Michigan?” (sometimes they are actually) They are immediately flattered that they have been perhaps confused with a student-athlete. If they say no then I follow up with “the spiel”. “Well, you look like you could be a good athlete, which is why I approach you. I would invite you to check out the rowing team. (hand them a brochure) We are recruiting athletic men to compete for Michigan in intercollegiate rowing. You don’t need

experience, in fact, only about 10% of our team did before coming to college. If you like to compete, you have the body type that could do really well in this sport.” And that is about it. They may have some questions, which is fine, but you don’t have to stand there and chat it up with them. Most people want to keep moving and are uncomfortable with being approached face-to-face to begin with, so say your piece, be friendly, flattering, and inviting, then be on your way.

IT’S ABOUT THE “IMPULSES”

I have gone into some excruciating detail in this message, but you need to realize that it is the details on this stuff that is the difference maker. You need to send a series of “impulses” to the student-body. They need to be attractive and inviting. It needs to look cool and honorable. And it needs to come in a series. By the time our initial recruiting is wrapping up, the varsity guys report that most people they approach have gotten our stuff and have been approached numerous times. Some of them are getting sick of us, honestly. This is exactly what I want to hear. I would rather them be sick of us, than not hear of us at all. By the time the fourth person mentions to that 6’4” stud who could be the difference maker on your team and they have blown off the three previous, they start to think, “You know, they keep telling me just how good I can be at this, maybe I should check this out.” That is the exact mindset you want them in. There is not one “impulse” given that sells – it is a series of impulses that draws their interest, and you just have to keep sending them out in the weeks leading up to and in the first few weeks of school. You may look at this schedule, too, and think it sounds like a lot of work, and I can tell you that for me the first two weeks of school are the most exhausting of the year. The days are busy and long and tiring. You must work your ass off in this time period. You must compete with the other student groups for members – you need to outwork them.

Nowadays at our events we have a higher percentage of good athletes, and more of them are serious about competition from the beginning. And the best thing that happens now is that all of them have heard of us, and have been approached several times. Half will not come down after their first practice, and half of those will quit through the fall. The strategy is to get so damn many big guys that when half of them quit you are still left with a large group of good athletes. Of course, what you do can dramatically affect if they stay or not, which I address in the next section.