

How I used vision to improve balance – a long time athlete to an older sport

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Nov 2018 my fiancé' took us to sculling camp - Calm Waters Rowing, after my 35th college reunion. The Sunday morning 5 hour drive wasn't bad. Arriving to the camp's lodge early afternoon for a quick meet, greet and a few pointers our group of 7 were off to the Calm Water's lake (yes they have their own lake – Camp Mill Pond).

Calm Waters owners Charlotte and John have world class experience as rowers and coaches. Our group had all levels two couples belong to a club – intermediate level, one fellow with his own shell – collegiate + level, my fiancé' and me - rookies (we did take a summer class in an 8 man scull - 2016) . The lake is awesome - set up your shell, launch go to the big bush take a left, get to the second fallen tree dog leg right. Get to the lilly pads turn around and return. The rule of the lake was pretty simple pretend there is a dividing line and always stay to the right (just like driving a car) and don't get too close to the natural shoreline (branches and fallen trees tend to grab your and / or your shell).

I always heard - both sculls (oars) perpendicular to the shell and resting on the water you are the most stable – confirmed statement by this author. The start to row position is legs bent arms extended – very unstable before the first stroke. I go by the philosophy the faster you ski, snow board, row the easier it is to balance – just like riding a bike. My preference of working out to maintain strength, coordination and balance (anti-gravity) is fixed gear mountain biking.

My sculling started slow and steady. Initially I was using what little muscle memory I had developed from the previous stroke. Needless to say a few slow strokes after setting up (by 'what felt right') then extending through to the finish. Occasionally what felt like a near capsized / panic – then steady the shell, come to almost a complete stop and repeat. First day on the lake - success two trips

around Camp Mill Pond and still dry. Went back to the Calm Water's lodge for a excellent catered meal and some coaching.

The next morning we were up before the sun, to the lake, instruction, set the shells and sculling soon after sun up. Again, I was relying on the muscle memory that I had just developed the previous afternoon. As I got more comfortable I would row a little faster and harder yet I realized I kept gliding to the left. I would pull a little harder with the left scull (oar) to compensate. After five or six strokes turn around and check what is ahead. We were instructed once heading straight down the lane to pick a distance aiming point to make sure of straight steering. Second time on the water, success, two trips around the lake and still dry. Back to the lodge for another awesome catered breakfast, some indoor instruction, a few minutes to relax then back to the lake.

Third session went well but I knew I could do better and muscle memory needed some help. I asked myself 'I'm a developmental optometrist, how can my visual system help?' PERIPHERAL VISION ! As I lay down for a mid day nap my goal was no longer to stay dry during each session my goal changed to improving my stroke using my visual system. First I changed my focal point no longer the distant aiming point (big pine, birds nest etc.) way off in the distance, I lowered my focus to the stern of the boat now I could use my peripheral vision for a lot of information. In my start position (legs bent arms out stretched) I could see my hands in relation to the gunnels (sides of the boat) – were they the same distance and level? Yes. Start the stroke / extension. I could watch my hands move towards the stern – nesting as they came together (left over right) then keeping the same height and speed thru the stroke. At the finish I would see my hands feather the sculls and recover to the start position I would again use peripheral vision to make sure my hand recovered to the distance from the gunnels. By watching my hands to make sure they kept the same speed my number of strokes increased between looks and stability improved. I also used my peripheral eyesight to be aware of the shore and fallen trees as reference points as to my location on the lake.

During one session Coach Charlotte told me my hands weren't starting evenly that is why I kept steering to the left – so I paid more attention to the EXACT placement of my hands in the starting position (height and location by the gunnels before beginning my extension / push to the rear – helped a lot.

Hopefully this article helps coaches, scullers, sweep rowers to use their visual system even more than I did to improve their stroke. It helped mine.