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Frederic Graff Jr. Scrapbook, 1854-1857

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6. Russia is the portal to excellence in rowing of all kinds. Its Grand and essential skill in light boats is to jerk, but: beginning with a delicate drop into the water, and without a splash, if possible, the rower should catch hold of the oar with the pow'r of the whole of his arm, to beat off the slightest resistance before the oar is brought close up to the ribs. The feathering is such as to make the blade from the perpendicular to the horizontal direction, by a raising of the knuckles towards the hand of the force of the arm and consequent bending of the wrist; but the oar is said to be "on the feather," from the time that it is thus turned until it re-enters the water.

Although the direction is recovered as quickly as possible after the jerk, there is a pause made from a bystander to a forward motion. It is in this part and in the swing that there is some diversity of opinion: some contend for a very quick feather, some for a very high one, with a sort of horizontal. All are met at the end, and some for a slow feather, without this raised higher.

In the time of the old heavy boats quickness of feather was all important, because they would have to use greater force on their long sweeps; and two boats nearly matched in a race might be seen al-ternating the feathering, according as they were at the moment on, or off, the stroke; consequently the way the oar returning in the air from the stroke was comparatively lost, because the boat was losing her way all the time, and in a very slow stroke was almost stationary; but in the modern narrow boats, speed of feathering is the stroke, is finished, or the "shout," as it is called, continues for a considerable period of time; and, if, while this full velocity lasts, the oars are dropped into the water in a lumber mariner, she may actually be seen to stop, as often, in fact, rowing as a man in a young crew trying to row two faster than they ought. It is therefore found now, that a stroke: which is a great execution in the water, without hanging any great weight upon the quickness of feather, is the most telling one; and that stroke applied in the proper way, to a crew moved by a finished feather into the water, and a clear feather, is the essence of the art. In all quick strokes the feathering is necessarily also quick, and without any attempt at increase of pace in that department is quite enough, and hence there is no necessity for the old canard of the quick feather.

This avoids a great expenditure of power, which formerly was laid out in saving the weight of feathering; again, it is one of the great advantages of these long, light, and narrow boats. If they are handled with skill, and not rowed too deep or jerked, the feather is quite beautiful in their stroke, and it is scarcely possible to detect the slightest alteration in their speed at any moment. If this be so, then, they require that the swing shall not be too far back, because in recovering from this long swing some weight must be thrown upon the oar, and the boat has no power enough to move bodily, from her narrow donors allowing too slight a resistance. A very little beyond the perpendicular is enough to keep the proper swing in most cases; though in some few cases the power of recovery is so completely mastered that, independently of the oar or stall, that the full and long swing of as old, is determined without the help. If it is clearly, therefore, that the swing is not necessarily bad, this makes the greatest skill to combine it with the proper recovery; and hence, in an amateur crew, as it is difficult to change with anything like perfection in all, it is better not to attempt to carry it out to the extreme, but to limit it to only about two-thirds of that amount.

This is a very high authority on the use of straps, as causing the doubling forward of the boat on the oar; but it appears to me a sensible judgment that the modern rowers have concluded the post before the proper oar in their conclusions. Straps and light boats cannot be handled better, and doubling forward came in soon afterwards; and they say that this fatal defect is caused by straps--or a part of it, at least--by some described by the detractors; but I suspect that this unseasonable habit is the result of the want of resisting power which is now felt by the light boats, and that the straps were invented, and not of the straps themselves. In the old heavy boat a man could almost raise himself off his thwart in the pull; and in the Thames wherewith it was common enough to see the waterman actually showing daylight under his seat of honor. But when the light boats were introduced, it was found that it was not only impossible to execute this extreme maneuver; and the same was manifested when we tried to carry out the old dig into the ribs, which at the same time raised the body partly, was attended with a drag of the boat under the water, which was afterwards removed by her progress through it. In order to avoid this difficulty, and to enable the rower to raise his body without bearing on his oar, more than enough to feather it, straps were introduced; but we never saw any one use them while meeting his oar. The bending at this time has nothing to do with the oar, which are the parts steadied by the strap, but it is entirely at the bow where the forward takes place; and so far from requiring a strap to execute it, we have invariably found the resumption of one from the stick of the rower also interfering with the trick. Meeting the oar is a sign of weakness in the back, or of a tendency to sink; the oar being often long, and the other oar being lost after a time. What- ever the cause, it is a habit which is very difficult to cure; and a little weakness in this respect. If this be not power to bring the oar through the same quantity of water in the same time as the stroke, and only another, the oar is allowed to be brought to the latter part of its course by the arms alone; or, in fact, stays too much stationary, and the back meets it so as to be ready for a start beforehand in the feather, and thus to leave the seat in that part of the work as well as in the forward.

Now, it is shown that the back comes forward to meet the oar while its stroke is being finished by the man. It is a well established fact that the arms pull the hand forward, as well as pulling the oar back, and that, consequently, the

7. The Average number of strokes in an eight-oar for padding, for rowing about 42, and for a spirit about 50.

8. The Best Length for the Stroke is that which all in all the boat has and can put into it; and the rower must use the stroke to the utmost of his power, as far as to row, in which all shall stop exactly at the same time; and the crew cannot in all cases give the word, "Easy all," at the end of the stroke, when the stroke is not fairly well wholly recovered from the feather, but should be half- way forward, when the rower has placed the feather at right angles to the boat, so that as soon as the word is given they may spring out on the water, and thus prevent her being unduly pressed by their oars. Stearman is effected by all rowing off at the same moment, because the way of paddling is none the less inclined to the back, and is only a short distance of the utmost reach forward, and that the stroke should be made straight and long one when intending to get quick off. In ordinary cases, it is better to paddle off with the usual steady and slow rowing.